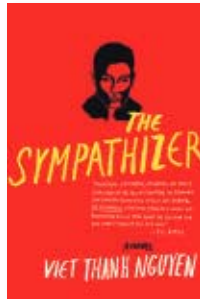


★ The Sympathizer

Viet Thanh Nguyen. Grove, \$26 (384p) ISBN 978-0-8021-2345-9

This astonishing first novel has at its core a lively, wry first-person narrator called the Captain, and his two school friends Bon and Man, as they navigate the fall of Saigon and the establishment of the Communist regime in Vietnam in 1975. The Captain is a half-Vietnamese double agent; he reports to his Communist minder Man who, unbeknownst to Bon, is a Republican assassin. The Captain and Bon make it on to one of the harrowing last flights out of Saigon as the city is overtaken by the Viet Cong. They travel with the Captain's superior, the General, and his family, although Bon's own wife and son are shot making their escape. The Vietnamese exiles settle uncomfortably in an America they believe has abandoned their country, as they are reduced to new roles as janitors, short-order cooks, and deliverymen. The General opens a liquor store, then a restaurant (in which his proud wife cooks the best *pho* outside Vietnam) as a front to raise money for a counter rebellion. In order to protect his identity as a spy, the Captain is forced to incriminate others, and as lines of loyalty and commitment blur, his values are compromised until they are worthless. Nguyen's novel enlivens debate about history and human nature, and his narrator has a poignant, often mirthful voice. *Agent: Nat Sobel, Sobel Weber. (Apr.)*



tale, and coming-of-age story never quite ignites. *(Mar.)*

Mademoiselle Chanel

C.W. Gortner. Morrow, \$26.99 (416p) ISBN 978-0-06-235640-6

The formidable task of telling the rags-to-riches story of fashion doyenne Coco Chanel is almost pulled off in this lengthy book by historical novelist Gortner (*The Tudor Vendetta*). We learn of her father who abandoned his five children, that Gabrielle Chanel's first entry into fashion was as a milliner, how she came to be called "Coco," the birth of the Chanel logo, the origin of her famous perfume—named for test-sample bottle number five; and her creation of the famous "little black dress." Here, too, are the legendary artists and politicians who peopled her fabulous life—Cocteau, Stravinsky, Picasso, Churchill, to name a few—as well as her tumultuous relationships with a handful of financially successful men. And then there is her life during the German occupation of France, living at the Ritz, no less, where she had a liaison with a high-ranking German officer (Hans Gunther von Dincklage) leaving some questions about the nature of her true sympathies during WWII. Despite the colossal amount of facts we have about Chanel's life, we never get a real sense of the woman who turned fashion upside down in the 1920s, whether because the story is told in first person, or because the urgency to cover a voluminous amount of material leaves us with plenty of information but not enough heart and soul to get at the core of who this charismatic woman really was. *(Mar.)*

Seven Days

Sterling Nixon. S&J Publisher, \$9.99 trade paper (360p) ISBN 978-0-9903708-0-2

In Nixon's novel, social ideologies clash

The Unraveling of Mercy Louis

Keija Parssinen. Harper, \$25.99 (336p) ISBN 978-0-06-231909-8

Parssinen follows up *The Ruins of Us*, her debut, a portrait of a Saudia Arabian family in turmoil, with a less-nuanced tale of extremism, this time in Port Sabine, a Gulf Coast town redolent of "swamp rot and refinery gas." Contributing to the miasma-like atmosphere are factors environmental and moral. As Port Sabine's refinery spews noxious fumes into the air, the discovery of a baby's corpse in a dumpster unleashes a pervasive sense of unease. Soon the town finds itself in the grips of religious fundamentalism, witch hunts, misogyny, and a "mass psychogenic disorder" in which girls lose control of their bodies. At the center of it all is Mercy

Louis, a seventh-generation Cajun and star basketball player who was abandoned by her teenaged mother as an infant. She is raised by her grandmother, Maw Maw, a zealot who demands that Mercy, tainted by her supposed "weak blood," be "twice as good as other girls." Enamored of Mercy is Illa Stark, a shy photographer whose mother has never recovered from injuries sustained in a devastating refinery explosion. Mercy's and Illa's respective family dramas and sexual awakenings are nicely drawn, but the surrounding characters—fanatics, slimy energy executives, and poetry-spouting boyfriends—tend to be two-dimensional and the dialogue occasionally melodramatic. Despite some beautifully eerie touches, Parssinen's combustible mix of Bayou gothic, morality

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