



## Return to adventure

My local newspaper in Australia, The Fremantle Herald, used to have a weekly restaurant review that was never anything but positive (especially if the reviewer for that issue was the sports writer and the meals were super-sized). After being seduced by a couple of glowing reviews and visiting the restaurants and eating very ordinary fare, it was obvious that the reviews were advertorials and the meals freebies. So when American author W. Darrell Gertsch sent me an email a few months ago asking me to review his novel, *The Lotus Redemption*, a story of an American veteran returning to Vietnam 30 years after the American troop withdrawal, I was hesitant and told him that I could only write an honest review as I hate being conned and, not being a politician, or a used-car or real-estate salesman, hate conning others. He agreed.

I normally only review books I have enjoyed and throw the dross away. Not much sense in wasting time on turkeys. Occasionally I'll use a mediocre tome as a point of departure into another associated, more interesting, topic. Once I got past the cover of Gertsch's book it proved a challenging, but engrossing, adventure.

I wish that overseas publishers of fiction set in Vietnam would refrain from putting hazy representations of Halong Bay on book jackets, especially if the contents

barely mention it. Once you get past that image on *The Lotus Redemption* and the pastel pinks that make you wonder if you've wandered into the chick-lit section, you realise that you've got an interesting read in your hands.

Gerard, the main protagonist, now a wealthy international energy consultant, was a B-52-bomber pilot during the American war (the author was a navigator). His dissociated bird's eye view of the war is brought into focus as he travels overland through old war zones in the early 2000s and is confronted with the Vietnamese reality of battles desperately fought. The prefacing quote by Tacitus, 'They made it a wasteland and called it peace', perhaps refers to those gods of the sky who rained death and destruction on the Vietnamese people and landscape while tunelessly whistling Dixie and thinking of Mom, apple pie and good old American girls.

Gertsch's thorough research and his intimate knowledge of and friendships with Vietnamese has enabled him to present vignettes of war history through American eyes with the scales of patriotism and mythical MIA heroes peeled off. Any remnants of Gerard's war pride or prejudice is constantly being pricked by his guide during his three week odyssey, a young Vietnamese woman, Le Chi. Chi's father was a renowned general

for Ho Chi Minh in the 30-year struggle for independence, and all her brothers were killed during the battle of Khe Sanh - a battle during which Gerard bombed North Vietnamese positions. The chapter dealing with the visit to the battlefield is poignant.

Because of Le Chi's connections Gerard is given a comprehensive, on the spot overview of the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu and of the defensive tunnels near Saigon that epitomised Viet Cong determination and courage. History and war buffs will appreciate it.

The author takes risks defining Gerard's character and I admire this. Many older male readers will probably empathise with Gerard. Initially, for a lot of women, he could be a bit difficult to come to terms with. His alcohol intake might be a bit off-putting and the author's macho/military drinking terminologies such as 'draining his glass' and 'washing food down with rivers of Tiger beer' might be a little abrasive.

Gerard's opinions on women in roles such as airline cabin staff are pre-Germaine Greer but possibly and accurately reflect the attitudes of a lot of 50-plus Anglo men. He and Chi become temporary lovers though he almost holds back out of respect for his wife of 40 years and his kids and grandkids, who are mostly happily ensconced in bucolic Wyoming. Is he a dirty old philanderer or a sensitive male trapped in circumstances beyond his control? Is Chi an *ao dai* siren or a demure woman struggling to find a role in a strict and unforgiving society? The author sets the scenario and tells us to make our own judgments. She has his child but Gerard doesn't find out until four years later when he returns to Hanoi as a consultant to the government.

Thus Gerard has a dilemma. How to tell his wife - who, we suspect, has qualms about his fidelity! This and the resultant redemption for the Vietnamese son and Gerard's family is the basis for the moving last chapters.

*The Lotus Redemption* would make an interesting book club selection, especially for readers living in Vietnam, though its themes are universal. Apart from being a war veteran the author has been a successful businessman and academic. He has had a decade-long association with energy firms in Vietnam. ■

- Rob Boulden

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