

**The First Two Pages: *The Glass Forest* (2019) by Lisa Lieberman
and *The Quiet American* (1955) by Graham Greene**

An Essay by Lisa Lieberman

I've accompanied Graham Greene on any number of perilous adventures. Revolutionary Mexico in the 1930s, Sierra Leone during World War II, Havana on the eve of Fidel Castro's takeover, Haiti under the regime of Papa Doc Duvalier. Perceptive, knowledgeable about local history and traditions, with that understated sense of humor the British do so well, he's the ideal travel companion, provided you don't mind a reasonable amount of trouble (to quote Humphrey Bogart in *The Maltese Falcon*).

Here's the opening paragraph of *The Quiet American*, my favorite Graham Greene novel:

After dinner I sat and waited for Pyle in my room over the rue Catinat; he had said, "I'll be with you at latest by ten," and when midnight struck I couldn't stay quiet any longer and went down into the street. A lot of old women in black trousers squatted on the landing: it was February and I suppose too hot for them in bed. One trishaw driver pedaled slowly by towards the riverfront and I could see lamps burning where they had disembarked the new American planes. There was no sign of Pyle anywhere in the long street.

A few deft sentences is all it takes to immerse us in an exotic setting, a place where oddly garbed old women are driven out of their apartments by the heat to squat, in unladylike fashion, on the landing. A lone pedicab moves languidly past as we stand with Fowler, Greene's journalist narrator, surveying the scene. We peer after

it, but scarcely have we gotten our bearings when we are confronted with a jarring detail. New American planes: the off-handed mention brings us back to Fowler's unease in the novel's very first sentence. The American, Pyle, has missed his appointment and Fowler is too anxious to sit in his room one minute longer.

The third book in my historical mystery series, *The Glass Forest*, is set in Saigon during the filming of Joseph Mankiewicz's 1957 adaptation of *The Quiet American*. Four years have passed since Greene's story ended. The French are largely gone and Vietnam is divided, under the terms of the Geneva Accords, with Hồ Chí Minh heading the Communist government in the North and the American-backed president Ngô Đình Diệm presiding over the South, but much remains the same. My actress narrator, Cara Walden, is having a cocktail on the terrace at the author's favorite watering hole, the Continental Hotel, where Fowler was in the habit of meeting his young Vietnamese mistress, Phuong:

Although it was not yet dark, the restaurant staff were setting the tables for dinner, laying white cloths, cutlery, wineglasses, crystal vases with sprigs of frangipani—and still Tam hadn't come. Jakub and I were having an apéritif on the terrace with my brother Gray and ordinarily this would have been our signal to finish up. The Continental's French cuisine was so heavy, cream sauces and braised meats unpalatable in the humid climate. We much preferred the Chinese food at the Rainbow. Tam considered the Rainbow a tourist trap, overpriced and too westernized for his liking, but that didn't prevent him from patronizing the upstairs nightclub, where cool jazz could be heard any night of the week.

Cara is anxious because Tam, her brother Gray's young Vietnamese lover, has not shown up for the pre-dinner ritual. Impatient, but not terribly worried about Tam's whereabouts, Gray sets off to track him down:

"I think I'll head over now, if the two of you don't mind," said Gray.
"He's probably in the bar, hounding Murphy for an autograph."

Audie Murphy, the American war hero who went on to star in 1950s Westerns, plays Pyle in the picture and Tam, notwithstanding his avowed dislike of the West, is an aficionado of the genre, as Cara notes:

They'd met in the air-conditioned Majestic Cinema at a late matinee of *The Cimarron Kid*, where my brother (no fan of Audie Murphy) had gone to escape the heat. Tam was watching the picture for the second time, and might have stayed for the seven o'clock showing had the usher not insisted he purchase a new ticket.

Again, I'm mirroring *The Quiet American*, but only to a point. Phuong was "wonderfully ignorant," of world events, in Fowler's words, "and had only the vaguest knowledge of European geography, though about Princess Margaret of course she knew more than I." She has a childlike reverence for the British royal family, and by letting us know this up front, Greene establishes her as someone who needs protecting. Fowler finds her crouched in a doorway when he goes down into the street—"I knew before she had time to tell me that she was waiting for Pyle too"—and urges her to come upstairs with him for her own good.

"You may as well wait upstairs," I said. "He will be coming soon."
"I can wait here."
"Better not. The police might pick you up."

She followed me upstairs.

As a representation of Vietnam under French colonial rule, Phuong has no will of her own. Since leaving Fowler for Pyle, we learn, she has changed her hairstyle in accord with her new protector's wishes:

I saw that she was doing her hair differently, allowing it to fall black and straight over her shoulders. I remembered that Pyle had once criticized the elaborate hairdressing which she thought became the daughter of a mandarin.

But once back in Fowler's apartment, even temporarily, she reverts back to his idea of her, boiling water for tea without even needing to be asked. "I shut my eyes," he tells us,

and she was again the same as she used to be: she was the hiss of steam, the clink of a cup, she was a certain hour of the night and the promise of rest.

This is where Greene and I part company. Tam's love of Westerns, along with his taste for jazz, seem inconsistent with his political opinions, but this inconsistency is central to his character, as Cara understands him. He cannot resist the allure of commercial American culture, and yet he is aware that this new form of colonialism is no less damaging than what Vietnam had experienced under the French. Unlike Phuong, Tam has political opinions, and a strong sense of Vietnamese identity, whereas Phuong, though vain about her mandarin status, is prepared to abandon this last vestige of herself to please the American, Pyle, for whom she has left Fowler. Out with the old colonialists, in with the new. Greene

resents how the Americans are taking over from the French, just as Fowler resents his rival:

“*Tu es troublé,*” Phuong said. [You are troubled.]

“It’s unlike him. He’s such a punctual man. . .”

“He says you are going away soon,” she said.

“Perhaps.”

“He is very fond of you.”

“Thank him for nothing.”

Ignoring this jab, Phuong soothes Fowler. “‘He will not be long,’ she said.” But Fowler cannot put his anxiety away. He knows more than he is letting on about Pyle’s absence. In the course of the story he proceeds to relate, going back to their first encounter and bringing us up to the moment where the book begins, we come to discover the role he played in the American’s death.

There is an American in my story too, a rival for Tam’s affections, but we do not meet him in the first two pages. All I will say about him here is that he meets a fate similar to Pyle’s. And akin to Fowler, Cara knows more than she is telling the others and tries to cover for Tam’s absence, but her husband catches her out.

In the short time we’d been sitting outside, I’d smoked four cigarettes, my vermouth cassis untouched on the table between us. Of course he’d noticed. The pedicab bearing Gray to the Rainbow had barely pulled away from the curb when Jakub reached for my hand.

“*Najdroższa,*” he said, employing the Polish endearment he always used in place of my name. “What’s going on?” I saw the concern in his dark brown eyes and wondered how long I could keep the truth from him. I didn’t used to be good at lying and a part of me wanted to be caught.

“Let’s take a walk,” I suggested.

So begins *The Glass Forest*, a tribute to *The Quiet American* envisioned more as a conversation than a slavish emulation of the book. Although I've taken liberties with Phuong/Tam, in naming my American "Buck," I'd like to think I made Graham Greene smile.

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Lisa Lieberman writes the Cara Walden series of historical mysteries based on old movies and featuring blacklisted Hollywood people on the lam in dangerous international locales. Trained as a modern European cultural and intellectual historian, she has written extensively on postwar Europe and has published essays, translations, and short stories in *Gettysburg Review*, *Raritan*, *Michigan Quarterly*, *Mystery Scene* and various anthologies. She writes film criticism for *Noir City* and is the founder of the classic movie blog deathlessprose.com, where you can find links to *The Glass Forest* along with her other books. After dragging their three children all over Europe while they were growing up, Lisa and her husband are happily settled in Amherst, Massachusetts with their Scottish Terrier, Hume.