

USC's Viet Thanh Nguyen named MacArthur "Genius"

USC Dornsife Professor Viet Thanh Nguyen was recently named a fellow of the MacArthur Foundation. His debut novel, *The Sympathizer*, received a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. USC has been Professor Nguyen's academic home his entire professional career.

Portions of *The New York Times* story are excerpted below.

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The New York Times

MacArthur Foundation Names 2017 'Genius' Grant Winners

By Jennifer Schuessler

The fellowship, which honors "exceptionally creative people," comes with a no-strings-attached grant of \$625,000, to be awarded over five years. It is known colloquially as the "genius" award, to the sometime annoyance of the foundation.

Cecilia A. Conrad, a managing director of the foundation and the leader of the fellows program, said the goal was to find "people on the precipice," where the award will make a difference, but also to inspire creativity more broadly.

"We hope that when people read about the fellows, it makes them think about how they might be more creative in their own lives," Ms. Conrad said. "It does something for the human spirit."

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The honorees include Nikole Hannah-Jones, 41, a staff writer for *The New York Times Magazine* who writes about the persistence of racial segregation in housing and education. Her work, the foundation wrote, "combines analyses of historical, academic, and policy research with moving personal narratives to bring into sharp



The novelist and professor Viet Thanh Nguyen at his home in Los Angeles. Photo by Oriana Koren for The New York Times.

relief a problem that many are unwilling to acknowledge still exists."

The foundation also honored relatively well-known figures in the arts, like the playwright Annie Baker, 36, who won the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for "The Flick;" the theater artist Taylor Mac, 44, the creator of the 24-hour piece "A 24-Decade History

of Popular Music;" and the writers Jesmyn Ward, 40, and Viet Thanh Nguyen, 46.

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Mr. Nguyen, who won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for his novel "The Sympathizer," said he wanted to use some of the money to hire an editor to oversee the blog he created for the Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network, as recognition to the broader tradition that made his own success possible.

"I think back to the first Asian-American writers," he said. "They were really lonely people back then. They deserve this fellowship, too."

Mr. Nguyen, a professor of English and American studies and ethnicity at the University of Southern California who has toggled between fiction and scholarship, added that the honor came with something paradoxical: a new opportunity to fail.

"I've always been someone who didn't understand why we had these boundaries between disciplines, but when you try something new it can be humiliating," he said. "Hopefully that's something the MacArthur will enable: to continue risking humiliation."

Los Angeles Times

Viet Thanh Nguyen is a 2017 MacArthur fellow for fiction and nonfiction



USC professor and writer Viet Thanh Nguyen has been named a 2017 MacArthur fellow. Photo: AFP/Getty Images

By Agatha French

“The immigrant has always been an ambivalent figure in the United States,” writer Viet Thanh Nguyen told the *Los Angeles Times* last year. “The immigrant has always served as a source of rejuvenation for the country and a source of fear.” Examining that ambivalence is central to his work, across forms and genres.

Nguyen received the Pulitzer Prize in 2016 for his first novel, “The Sympathizer;” his nonfiction book “Nothing Ever Dies” was named a finalist for the National Book Award later that year. This week, Nguyen receives another honor: a MacArthur Fellowship, often called the “genius grant.”

An *L.A. Times* critic at large and a USC professor, Nguyen’s work has been recognized for its powerful exploration of the immigrant experience. He tackles the particular tensions of being both of a place and outside of it.

“Nothing Ever Dies,” probes the conflict that Americans call the Vietnam War and that Vietnamese call the American War, and his nameless protagonist in “The Sympathizer,” a sharp political satire of American involvement in Vietnam, calls himself “a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces.” In an essay for *The Times*, Nguyen explained that “often the outsiders see us better than we on the inside can see ourselves.”

Nguyen came to the United States at age 4. His family settled in San Jose, where his parents opened one of the first Vietnamese grocery stores in the city, a setting which he fictionalized in his most recent book, 2017’s “The Refugees.” In a review for *The Times*, Karen Long wrote that the short-story collection “casts a formidable spell, especially at this political moment when refugees are both a lightning rod and an abstraction.”

Nguyen has said he went through 50 drafts of a single story in “The Refugees,” and over a decade of research went into “Nothing Ever Dies.” As a recipient of the MacArthur Fellowship, he will receive a no-strings-attached \$625,000 grant to help free him to develop future writing. He is currently working on a sequel to “The Sympathizer.”

“I feel a deep sense of humility; because I know there are many other writers in the contemporary moment who deserve this award, and many writers in the past who should have gotten it who didn’t,” Nguyen told *The Times*’ Deb Vankin after learning of the MacArthur Fellowship. “And I think about those writers who came at a time when the award didn’t exist whose work made my own possible. It makes me appreciate this even more.”