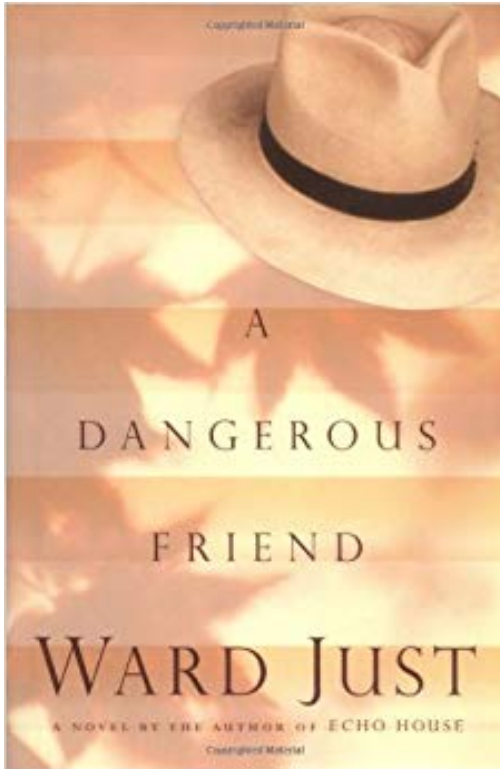


A Dangerous Friend *by* Ward S. Just



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In 1965 Saigon, French planters, American "democratizers," and the Vietnamese become caught up in the growing unrest in Southeast Asia, in a novel that follows political scientist Sydney Parade as he begins to discover the roots of the conflict that is tearing the country apart. 50,000 first printing.



Reviews of the A Dangerous Friend *by* Ward S. Just

Wal

Another winner from Ward Just, who has become one of my favorite authors. A DANGEROUS FRIEND is the eighth (I just checked) Just novel I have read in the past several years, and I have yet to find a clinker. I've enjoyed every one of them.

In A DANGEROUS FRIEND (1999) Just once again visited Vietnam for his setting, which no longer surprises me, since Just spent eighteen months in Vietnam back in the mid-sixties as a young journalist, an experience which has left a mark on him. And although he was not a combatant, he was even wounded during his tour there. His first book was in fact a non-fiction work, TO WHAT END (1968), a collection of essays which questioned the U.S. presence in Vietnam. And his second novel titled STRINGER, was also set in Vietnam. And just a few years ago, another novel, AMERICAN ROMANTIC, turned once again upon a long-ago experience in that same war.

This time young Sydney Parade is a middle manager in an aid organization, the Llewellyn Group, trying to "win hearts and minds" of the Vietnamese people. His volunteering for this assignment has wrecked his marriage and set him adrift in a milieu he has no real grasp on. He befriends a French expatriate rubber plantation boss, married to an American woman - a couple who are trying to "live between the lines" of a quickly escalating war. An army airborne captain is captured by the Viet Cong and Sydney is unwillingly drawn into a dangerous plan to help secure his release. His boss with the aid group is ambitious, unscrupulous and untrustworthy, complicating things further.

As in all of Just's books, characters are key - much more important than plot, in fact, and the characters here are very finely drawn. There are Sydney, Rostok (his boss), Claude (the French rubber planter) and his American wife Dede, and Pablo (an old Asian hand who works with Sydney), along with several secondary characters - all of them key to this tale of intrigue and betrayal in the early years of the Vietnam war.

I am sure Just is a devotee of Graham Greene, and that THE QUIET AMERICAN has been a kind of bible to him. One cannot help but make this connection reading this book. But the fictional world of Ward Just is a country all its own. He is a master at what he does. I've probably already said this about his other books I've read, but here it is again. I loved this book. Very highly recommended.

- Tim Bazzett, author of the memoir, BOOKLOVER

Lcena

Vietnam, 1965. Early days for the U.S. So glad to read a book about that stage of the fiasco. So many books about the conflict's political/military aspects have been written, and those I've read have all been well done; but enough of that. Let's hear it for early days, when we were naïve enough to think we could make a difference in the way the Vietnamese conducted their lives and viewed America - mainly by remaking Vietnam into the image of the U.S. and providing that country material goods and cultural tools to do that. This aspect of the book rates five stars, and should be read by every American politician who thinks we have even a ghost of a chance to change the world through cultural, economic, political, and of course military intervention.

For me, character development rates high as a critical enjoyment factor in any fiction treatment. (In this case, however, the enjoyment is limited to three stars.) The main characters seem to be symbols rather than real people. They represent elements in the toxic stew that was Vietnam in 1965. Sydney is the optimistic do-gooder who hopes the U.S. can get Vietnam going in the "right" direction. Claude (French) and his wife Dede (American) want Vietnam to stay the way it is, so their business can prosper. Pablo and his Vietnamese wife see no possible life outside Vietnam. Then there are the Vietnamese factions - the holdovers from the time of French domination, who want to retain their privileged position; and the VC, committed to revolution. Meanwhile, the American military is a shadowy, still underdeveloped factor in the mixture. That's all well and good, and gives the reader some idea how difficult the U.S. position was at this time. But it doesn't provide much insight into the private lives of the characters, and how those lives relate to the symbols they represent. I know, I know. An author can't please everyone, and some readers wouldn't care so much about character development. I don't feel deprived, but would have rated the book higher if that had been more of a factor.

And who is the "dangerous friend"? Could it be Sydney, a leading character? Or the United States, a symbol?

Tehn

read an author who clearly is writing for readers and not with an eye cocked toward Hollywood. At one point before an important meeting among the main characters, Just goes into pages of description of the location of the meeting, the neighborhood, the house, the landscaping. None of it wasted on this reader, all important and contributing to the sense of what would be said in this meeting. Most writers never learned this lesson. I also think this novel has as much to say to us about Vietnam as it does about the mindsets of those charged with winning (or not) the peace in Iraq. We can't change our thinking to adjust for the context.

I thought it interesting to begin the story with an unnamed narrator who simply starts the ball rolling on this story. I find it effective but I haven't figured out why. Ward Just is like a very good restaurant off the beaten track in a place known for tourist attractions. The locals visit often but the tourists never quite seem to find it.

Darkshaper

One of the exciting things about reading --and I guess this applies to many cultural endeavors, is discovering a new author --as I did when I recently read Ward Just's latest book "Forgetfulness" a book that I enjoyed very much. As a result of that experience I next read "A Dangerous Friend" and was even more impressed with Just's writing style and ability to engage the reader in a most compelling way. This book reminded me somewhat of "The Quiet American" by Graham Greene and several other books (one by a writer named Tyler that had a title like "The Saigon House" and "Rumors of War" by Philip Caputo. In short, I would totally recommend this book and now look forward to reading other earlier books by this author that are available.

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