

Food, Money and Sex

The United States eats its young

STEALING BUDDHA'S DINNER, memoir by Bich Minh Nguyen. Viking, 2007. Hardcover, \$24.95 (Paper, \$14, available Feb. 8).

FREE FOOD FOR MILLIONAIRES, fiction by Min Jin Lee. Grand Central Publishing, 2007. Hardcover, \$24.99.

First thing to know: Bich Minh Nguyen's first name is pronounced like the second word in "little bit." Second thing to know: Unlike many Vietnamese refugees who fled the country after the U.S. pulled out of the war, Nguyen isn't Catholic.

But then, that's probably clear from the title of her memoir. And the cover photo shows the kind of dinner she's talking about: American junk food. She was 8 months old when her father grabbed her, her sister, his mother and brothers and left Saigon on one of the last boats to the Philippines. Though her story begins there, it turns, in 1970s Michigan, on a can of Pringles — and on candy cigarettes, Hershey's bars, Kraft macaroni and cheese, Whoppers and buckets of fried chicken.

"White food," Nguyen calls it several times, even as those of us who grew up

with that food might have more interest in her descriptions of her grandmother's cooking and the fresh fruit her grandmother prepared each night. Nguyen's hunger for "white food" matches her hunger for a mother like those of her classmates, mothers who spend their days cleaning the house and baking roasts or cookies.

Where is her own mother? Neither her father nor her eventual Mexican-American stepmother talks about emotions, and neither of them discusses the mother she and her sister know nothing about. As Nguyen grows older and deliberately loses what little Vietnamese she once knew, she can't ask her grandmother about her mother either. Thus the white mothers of Grand Rapids, Mich., become objects of desire through the various episodic chapters as Nguyen grows up.

Grand Rapids might not be the whitest place the Nguyens could have landed, but it's not a cradle of diversity either, and several of the scenes she depicts carry the sting of racism. Mixing the bitter — a humiliating lack of privacy alongside the deliberate adult disrespect that wounds many children — and the sweet, from admiring *Harriet the Spy* to meditating with her grandmother, Nguyen writes beautifully about the abrupt collisions that lie at the heart of any immigration narrative.

The central mystery about her mom comes to an unsatisfactory conclusion, but that's part of the story as well. Bich Minh Nguyen reads from *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* at 7:30 pm Monday, Feb. 4, at Powell's on Burnside, Portland.

Casey Han's life contains both more privilege and more bitterness than Bich Nguyen's experience. Casey, the fictional character at the heart of Min Jin Lee's *Free Food for Millionaires*, can't quite figure out how to fit her upper-class tastes into the world of her parents, Korean immigrants who work for a dry cleaning chain.

Lee writes of the internal lives of a wide cast of characters, but she generally stays focused on Casey's gerbil wheel of a life. Casey's pride makes her resistant to offers of help even when she desperately needs it; she works well but reluctantly in the world of Wall Street. What does she truly want to do other than slip again into life at Princeton, where she had entrée into the world of wealth? She doesn't know. In Lee's not-

so-subtle depiction, Casey loves hats and wears dozens of different ones. *Free Food* depicts several worlds, including different class levels within the Korean American community. But the book mostly provides a voyeuristic look at the high-pressured, hugely privileged, grindingly soul-deadening world of high finance in the 1990s. Casey might escape with her soul intact, or, as she totters under a crushing level of debt, she might just succumb.

Free Food, a sprawling, 19th-century style narrative of money, sex and morality, clearly marks its own ambitions when Casey returns again and again to reading George Eliot. That's a high aim, and this 576-page book misses the mark — but provides compelling characters along the way.



BOOK NOTES

Readin' in the Rain Umbrella Opening with Jon and Jay Bowerman, 5:30 pm, and a talk by Bob Welch, "Four Literary Laps with Kenny Moore: An Analysis of Bowerman and the Men of Oregon," 7 pm 2/1, Downtown Library. **Robin Hobb** reads from *Renegade's Magic*, 7 pm 2/1, Powell's, Beaverton. **William T. Vollman** reads from *Riding Toward Everywhere*, 7:30 pm 2/5, Powell's on Burnside, Portland. **Larry Ferguson** discusses "Blockbuster Q & A," 7 pm 2/7, Baker Building, 10th & High. \$10, \$3 stu.; **Meg Rosoff** reads from *What I Was*, 7 pm 2/7, Powell's, Beaverton. **Michael Pollan** speaks about *In Defense of Food*, 7 pm 2/12, Bagdad Theater, Portland. \$21.95 admission includes a copy of the book.

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