

Are you an Easy Writer?

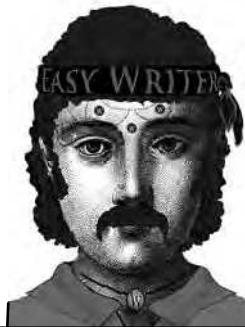
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BOOKS BY SUZI STEFFEN

Empire Falls

Fictional and real consequences of
U.S. foreign policy

THE BOAT, fiction by Nam Le. Knopf, 2008.
Hardcover, \$22.95.

**THE SECRET HISTORY OF THE
AMERICAN EMPIRE:**

The Truth About Economic Hit Men, Jackals,
and How to Change the World, nonfiction by
John Perkins. Plume, 2007. Paperback, \$15.

Without the excesses of the
Truman Doctrine, I daresay
Nam Le's gorgeously crafted
first book never would have entered the
world's consciousness.

Historical digression (skip to the next
paragraph if you know this already): The
Truman Doctrine, laid out in 1947, says
that "it must be the policy of the United
States to support free
peoples who are resisting
attempted subjugation by
armed minorities or by
outside pressures." This
bold statement came at the
start of the Cold War, soon
after Winston Churchill's
"Iron Curtain" speech
set the tone of fear that
communism would rapidly
advance across Europe.
Truman's speech helped the
U.S. justify interventions
and invasions in a variety
of countries, starting with
Greece but hardly limited to Europe — and
clearly including Vietnam.

From that country, Nam Le's family
fled to Australia when he was a child. Le
became a corporate attorney at first but
pursued his writing life at the Iowa Writers'
Workshop. His lovely book of short stories
shows the imprint of that education, which
puts a premium on prose suffused with the
beauty of English, especially at moments of
unspoken emotional crises. In the impressive
opening story "Love and Honor and Pity and
Pride and Compassion and
Sacrifice," the narrator, who
closely resembles but isn't
identical to the author, must
deal with issues that hit
Iowa grad students of color
especially hard: literary
white folks' romance
with, jealousy of and
dismissal of literary work
by people of color. Should
the narrator write stories
about his "ethnic" past?
He tries during a visit from
his father. At a moment of
immense narrative tension,
Le writes, "The river was behind him. The
wind was full of acid. In the slow float of
light I looked away, down at the river. On
the brink of freezing, it gleamed in large,
bulging blisters." Short story readers sense

a neon sign blinking, "Emotional revelation
ahead!"

But then, Le, merely 29 years old, often
succeeds with both the beauty and the
revelations. In five of the six other stories,
he moves the reader through life as a young
girl just before the bombing of Hiroshima;
a 14-year-old kid in the slums of Medellin,
Colombia; an 18-year-old kid in a dying
Australian port town; a young American
woman visiting Tehran; and a successful,
wrecked older artist in New York.
Impressive, no? Except for the Hiroshima
story, so clearly constructed from hours of
research (and so similar to Keiji Nakazawa's
great graphic novels *Barefoot Gen*), these

first- and close third-person
narratives capture glimpses of
intensely felt lives. And the
final story, "Boat," returns to
the issue of "the ethnic writer"
as Le recreates the life of one
Vietnamese refugee trying
to find tenuous threads of
survival, love and community
on the unimaginably horrific
journey.

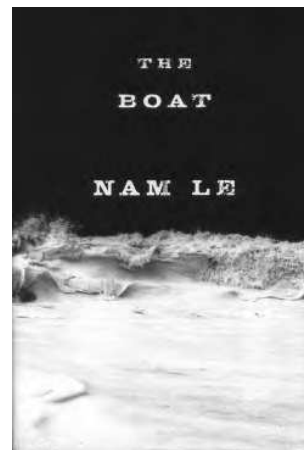
Save for Le's Australia story
(really a novella), his entire
book reflects, in some way, the
consequences of U.S. foreign
policy. And what's the deal

with that policy? Where did it come from;
who carries it out; what don't many of us
know about what the U.S. and corporations
do around the world? John Perkins will tell
you. In *The Secret History of the American
Empire*, Perkins continues the saga he began
in 2004's *Confessions of an Economic Hit
Man*. The information Perkins presents
isn't secret so much as it is cumulatively
terrifying.

"The United States exemplified
democracy and justice for about two hundred
years," he writes "Since the end
of World War II, however, our
position as leader has eroded,
the model we presented to
the world undermined by a
corporatocracy hell-bent on
empire building."

Perkins might be fuzzy on
things that happened before
WWII — slavery, treaty
violations and massacres of
Native peoples or the 1823
Monroe Doctrine, say — but
he has some good points. More
precisely, he has good examples
and tales from Asia, Latin

America, the Middle East and Africa to back
himself up. Read *The Boat* and weep; read
Secret History and fear — and then read the
last chapters and join Perkins and millions
of others in fighting for change. **EW**



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BOOK NOTES

Nam Le reads from *The Boat* at 7:30 pm Thursday, 6/5, at Powell's on Hawthorne in
Portland. **John Perkins** discusses *The Secret History of American Empire* at 7 pm
Thursday 6/5 at Barnes & Noble.