

Shadows of Saigon: Can an Old Veteran Let Go of the Love and Pain He Left Behind

Mark R. Anderson

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In the historical novel Shadows of Saigon, a complicated young man falls in love while serving in the Vietnam War.

In Mark R. Anderson's intriguing novel *Shadows of Saigon*, a man falls in love in war-torn Vietnam.

Grady wakes in a hospital after a heart attack, and is rushed to a different hospital five hours away. While on the ambulance ride, Grady relives his early life, from his days as a high school student in rural Louisiana to his three tours in Vietnam. Prominent in these memories is Tien, a young woman from a wealthy Vietnamese family who became his wife, defying her parents in order to do so.

The early portions of the book move at a meandering pace. The story focuses on Grady's development first, and only some of its early events prove significant later on. Life in a rural community is emphasized. Grady begins as a naïve young man who's prone to jealousy and anger. His parents and his high school girlfriend, Gabby, are a constant presence early on, though their development is limited to how they impact Grady's life. When he's with Gabby, Grady is controlling.

Once Grady arrives at Vietnam, the book's speed increases, and the focus expands to encompass Tien in full, too. But though Tien is credited with helping Grady to mellow, much of their early love story happens off of the page; they are said to engage in conversations to get to know each other, but these are not shared, and their early connection is flat as a result.

By the time Tien and Grady decide to get married, their relationship is heartfelt and involving. Grady learns to be a less controlling partner, and he comes to acknowledge his faults, if sometimes while justifying his past behaviors. Nonetheless, the book's disturbing war scenes hold attention best. They include tangible, emotional descriptions, while also conveying an idealized sense of American leadership and soldiers' paternalistic attitudes toward Vietnamese citizens, which lead to slurs and offensive terms.

But the storytelling leans on exposition too much, including when it comes to Grady's thoughts and feelings, which are detailed to excess. In the end, the characters' stories resonate less than the book's depictions of war's brutality, around which its direct language is a benefit. A final plot twist, which is handled with aplomb, brings the past and present together well. It's a bittersweet concluding note.

In the historical novel *Shadows of Saigon*, a complicated young man falls in love while on a tour of service during the Vietnam War.

CAROLINA CIUCCI (April 5, 2021)

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