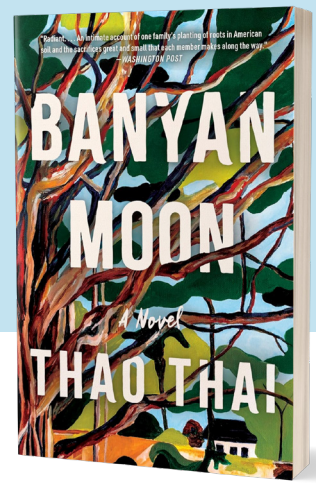


READING GROUP KIT

INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR THAO THAI



1. What originally inspired you to write *Banyan Moon*?

The seed of *Banyan Moon* is the trunk that ends up playing a pivotal role in the novel. My mother used to tell me stories of her brief yet passionate marriage to my father. She'd also talk about a Vietnamese version of the Bluebeard fairy tale, where a nobleman's wife is given a key and permission to explore any trunk she desires—except one golden trunk, which holds his darkest secrets. Of course, she opens the forbidden trunk, unearths his gory secrets, and suffers his wrath. For a long time, I conflated these two stories, thinking that my father was Bluebeard, and that my mother was the ill-fated wife with the key. I was frightened, of course, but also fascinated. I spent years imagining my mother roaming through a giant house, testing all the locks until she found the one she was looking for. To me, love can present itself as a maze of treachery. When I started writing *Banyan Moon*, I drew on this folktale—and many others—to build a world that I hoped would grip readers, the way it did me.

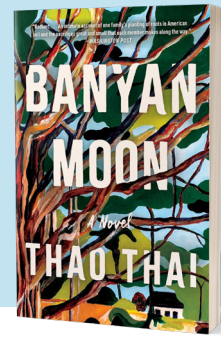
2. *Banyan Moon* takes place largely in a crumbling old Florida mansion full of Gothic sensibility. Why did you choose that setting?

I grew up on the Florida coasts, then spent time up towards the panhandle, near the Georgia state line. During my time in the South, I stumbled across many beautiful houses—some renovated and well-kept, and others falling into disarray, crowded with huge trees that seemed to swallow the houses whole. Every time I saw a house that looked on the verge of collapse, I'd ask myself, How did it get like that? Neglect is its own story—and obviously, presents a very apt setting for a novel that dances lightly with magical realism, as *Banyan Moon* does. I've always loved how in Gothic novels, a house can transform into another character. Within the Southern Gothic genre specifically, I was moved by the ways storytelling could explore the nature of alienation. That's a huge part of what is discussed within the Vietnamese diaspora. Alienation from country, from language, and from family, in some cases. I wanted to transpose the Vietnamese immigrant experience with the transgressive landscape of a deteriorating, centuries-old mansion in order to examine questions of who can own (or inherit) sites of deep-seated heritage.

3. How are the themes of inheritance and family secrets intertwined in *Banyan Moon*?

Secrets are an inheritance in the novel, as much as the Banyan House itself is. The term “family secret” can often feel loaded with toxic connotations (to be sure, they are often disastrous!), because we as humans like to know things. We're a curious, investigative species. We—myself included—aren't always comfortable with mystery or even distance from a story. In *Banyan Moon*, the secrets do come out, in drips and dribbles, but some of them remain locked up. One of the decisions I grappled with in writing this novel is whether secrets can serve the world better when they stay hidden. Is radical transparency the only answer? Or can we allow for uncertainty and distance between people, without necessarily loving

INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR THAO THAI



them any less? Yet, the secrets that are revealed in the novel have the power to shake up a story—a family. They can feel like a gift or a burden, or maybe a mixture of the two. I guess what I mean to say is that secrets may be an inheritance, but they aren't necessarily ones we would wish upon ourselves.

4. How did you develop Minh's character and her earlier years in Vietnam? Why did you choose to continue writing from her perspective after her death?

In my fledgling drafts of the novel, Minh just wouldn't die the way she was supposed to. I mean that while she might not have been there in body, her voice kept pushing through the narrative, insisting on its presence. In my mind, she'd comment on the food served at her funeral or remark on people's clothes. I had the sense that she wished she could continue bossing everyone around in death, as she did in life. It felt true to what I know of many Vietnamese women of an older generation. That stubbornness is exactly why Minh is such a survivor and what endears her to me. It made sense to me that her voice continues to be an echo in the Tran story.

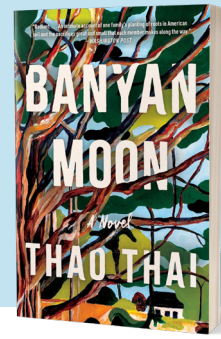
I wanted to know how she came to be the way I imagined, and through my research and (limited) travel in Vietnam, pictured a world in which her youthful idealism would have crashed against a brutal reality. To me, Minh is all things at once—progressive yet staunchly traditional; fierce yet tender; deceptive yet honest in her emotion. I grew up with my family's stories of living through the unceasing wars in the latter half of the twentieth century. They'd laugh one moment, then begin weeping the next. So I suppose Minh's life was informed by that juxtaposition of joy and grief, too. Life is never just one thing; people, even less so. Minh, out of all the characters, isn't able to be neatly pinned down, even after death.

5. Did you set out to focus on the complexities of mother-daughter relationships, or was that something that emerged through the writing process? Why were you drawn to these dynamics?

When I became a mother, I found that my relationship with my daughter began to amplify my own relationship with my mother in unexpected ways. I was parenting in a new mode than generations before, but unlike Minh, my mother made space for me to explore what it meant to inhabit my new identity. I have a very visceral memory of seeing my mother sitting on our couch, a week or so after I gave birth. Her hands were stretched for my daughter and there was an eagerness to her expression—something almost like avarice. She'd talked for years of wanting a granddaughter, and the moment had finally arrived for her. But I hesitated a moment before handing my baby over.

I believe in the power of community, of the village, and yet, I struggled with this almost primal instinct to hold my daughter close to me. I did hand her to my mother, of course, and it was a beautiful moment. But it was complicated. Sometimes, I think our definitions of motherhood can be very narrow or flattened to the most palatable version. There isn't room for nuance. I find that love often resembles the ocean in its moods, varying from moment to moment: sometimes calm and placid, and other times, fearsome and wild. I suppose I hoped that other mothers and daughters might feel seen by representations of love that are complex, yet no less meaningful.

INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR THAO THAI



6. What did you hope to explore through portrayals of strained and failed romantic relationships and marriages?

I've always believed that relationships are both incredibly specific and universal at the same time. We're grappling with many of the same joys and threats of betrayal, yet the way these emotions resonate in our lives—even long after the relationships end—varies widely. The effects of these relationships also ripple through other lives, as we see in *Banyan Moon*, especially with Minh and Binh. When it comes to marriages with fraught endings (taken to the very extreme, of course, with Hương and Vinh), we often remember the conclusion, rather than the genesis, which is usually rooted in hope and an innate urge to connect with another person. I'm always interested in tracing that through-line, from the end of the love story all the way back to its origin. That journey tells me something about the way we love each other, and the way we hurt each other. I used to look askance at the term “conscious uncoupling,” but now I see the need for a term broader than the word “failure” when it comes to marriage. The truth is, we all fail daily in our relationships, though to varying levels, of course. But if we're lucky, those failures can bring us closer to a more honest way of loving each other.

7. You write regularly about family, relationships, food, and other topics for a range of media outlets. How did your experience writing essays inform your fiction?

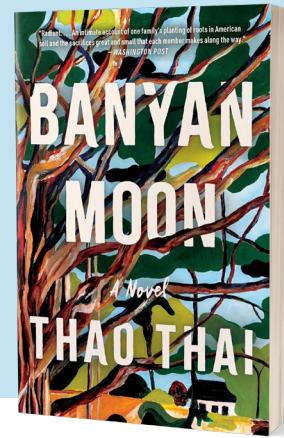
I find I'm still investigating so many of the same themes, in whatever form I write in! Often I talk about the power of memory, as well as the ways those memories are passed down through the generations. I want to honor the way objects and rituals create a fully realized sense of home, whether it's through a bowl of cháo, or a shrine lovingly replenished with fruit. When I write essays, I ask questions on the page. *Banyan Moon* is an extension of so many of those questions about the Vietnamese diaspora and its effects on families.

One thing I've also learned through writing essays is the difference between a literal truth and an emotional truth. There's the thing you saw and the thing you felt; both can feel very disparate sometimes, but that incongruity also offers a kind of understanding. Also, memory can be a slippery thing. We like to think of our lives as fixed narratives, when really, they are a mixture of imagination and emotion, tangled in with the facts. I'm never sure of anything when I'm writing an essay. I try to take that same sense of curiosity (and humility) and apply it to fiction too.

8. What do you hope readers will take away from *Banyan Moon*?

I always say that *Banyan Moon* is an ode to the survivors. I hope the survivors of trauma and heartbreak among us will feel seen by this book, if not in an echo of exact circumstances, then in the idea of learning to free yourself from whatever binds you. No matter their heritage or cultural background, I'd love for readers to see themselves as living testaments of their ancestors' winding paths. Stories are always a gift, even if they are not pretty or neat. In fact, the stories that seem most tangled are often the ones that carry us through the fire, and deliver us in a place of earned gratitude.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. On page 71 Ann says: “What I know is that love is a thousand tiny, useless things saved in a parlor.” Different characters in the book have different methods for memorializing their loved ones—Wes, as an example, has a rubber duck tattoo to keep his son with him, even while they are apart. What are some other ways the characters in *Banyan Moon* retain and honor their memories? What about you and your family members?
2. This book rotates between three narrators—two living and one dead. How does the narration from the afterlife impact the novel? Have you read any other books with non-living or non-human narrators?
3. What does fire symbolize in this story? Does it function mainly as a force of good or evil?
4. As Minh tells the story of her life, we learn about her entanglements with three different men: Binh, Xuân, and finally Việt. How do her feelings about love and sex change over the course of these relationships?
5. What is the significance of the Rolex found outside the Banyan House after the fire?
6. What does it mean for Hương to learn to swim as an adult?
7. How does the Chú Cuội tale change meaning for the characters over the course of the novel? What do you think the message of the story is?
8. Ann has two love interests throughout the book: Noah and Wes. How does *Banyan Moon* subvert the typical love triangle trope?
9. How does Vinh’s murder change the relationship between Hương and Minh?
10. When we first learn the story of Chú Cuội, Minh is using it to distract her kids from the danger and violence of the outside world. How does storytelling happen in your family?



CHÁO CÁ KHO

RICE PORRIDGE WITH CARAMELIZED CATFISH

SERVES 2

A Ladle of Warmth

And a recipe for soul-bolstering rice porridge.

In my novel, Banyan Moon, Hương serves her sick mother, Minh, a bowl of cháo one afternoon, as an attempt to coax Minh into eating. This dish is the ultimate gesture of caretaking in many Vietnamese households—a hot bowl of rice porridge presented to your loved ones in a time of need. In my book, Hương’s cháo is accompanied by salty pork floss. In real life, I like it with my mom’s cá kho, translated to “braised fish.” The sweetness of the caramel sauce plays with a dash of fish sauce, all enveloped by the velvety warmth of porridge. It’s a dance of flavors that speaks to the love simmered through the traditions of Vietnamese home cooking.

For the Cháo:

- 1 cup cooked white rice
(medium or short grain works best)
- 5 cups of water
- Salt to taste

For the Caramelized Fish:

- 2 medium tilapia or catfish filets
- 3 tablespoons fish sauce
- 3 tablespoons sugar, divided
- ¼ teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- ¼ cup coconut water (or regular water)

Optional Garnish:

- 1 green onion, sliced thinly

- 1. Cook the cháo.** Bring rice and water to a boil over high heat. Once boiling, stir and reduce heat to low. Simmer, covered, for 30-40 minutes. Stir every few minutes. You want to break down the rice so it becomes glutinous, like porridge. Add more water if the cháo gets too clumpy. After the cháo is done, add a pinch of salt to taste. You won’t need much, because the fish is boldly flavored and will want a blank palette.
- 2. Marinate the fish.** In a bowl, add the fish filets, 3 tablespoons fish sauce, 1 tablespoon sugar, ¼ teaspoon pepper, and 1 tablespoon vegetable oil. Turn the fish and let it sit for 30 minutes.
- 3. Make the caramel sauce.** Add 2 tablespoons sugar to a pot on medium-high heat, stirring constantly until the sugar melts and creates a golden caramel sauce. Watch this very carefully; caramel sauce can turn on you in a second. Once the caramel sauce is made, lower the heat to medium-low.
- 4. Braise the fish.** Add the fish to the pot, along with any leftover marinade. Add ¼ cup of coconut water (regular water works fine too). Bring the pot to a boil, then turn down the heat to medium-low. Simmer for ten minutes, covered. Gently turn the fish filets and cook for ten more minutes, covered. Add more coconut water if the sauce gets too sticky. The fish should be flaky with a thick golden sauce.
- 5. Serve.** Spoon the cháo into wide-mouthed bowls. Top with the fish and stir everything together, breaking up the fish, so you get a bit of porridge and fish in every bite. Garnish with sliced green onions, if desired.