



Dead Letter Office

Hue

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KIRKUS REVIEW Hue, in his debut memoir, writes about family separation following the Vietnam War. Hue—or Five, as he’s known in the book—was the fifth child in a family that fled Vietnam for the United States shortly before the fall of Saigon. Left behind, however, was Hue’s mother; her uncommon independence and estrangement from his father meant she wasn’t included in the escape. For 20 years, Hue and his siblings pushed their mother’s ghost from their minds, treating her like any other war memory, as distant and uncomfortable as those of the Tet Offensive. “I erased the memories of my mother in a similar manner...deliberately or inadvertently,” he says. “I had purposely tried not to think of her. I lost other memories by not examining them for years.” Then, while Hue’s stern, silent father succumbed to cancer, the letters started to come out—letters written by his mother begging her children for assistance, unanswered and kept by Hue’s father in a pouch in his closet for years. Hue, in his 30s by this point, undertook the process of discovering who his unknown mother truly was and how his native land forever shaped the family’s fortune. His discoveries changed the way he saw his quiet father and the way he saw himself. Hue writes in direct, simple prose, eschewing most overt expressions of emotion for a more tempered, contemplative narrative style. He methodically doles out letters and photographs as evidence of his family’s unspoken history, weaving the different layers of past and present in an artful depiction of a group of lives. Though no earth-shattering mystery looms waiting to be solved by the right combination of documents, there is enough material here—threads of an absent mother, a distant father, a lost country, a future that feels somehow hollow without the past—to keep the reader engrossed. Though some sections would benefit from an edit for concision—the 500-plus pages could fit in 400—the reader can hardly blame Hue for being comprehensive in his search for his parents’ pasts. Indeed, perhaps the best method for combating the deathly silence of history may be to fill the present with pages and pages of words. A haunting, affecting memoir of what’s lost in emigration.

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