

## Extended Synopsis

*Percival watched her from the balcony, as he did each time she left Chen Hap Sing. The afternoon light was beginning to soften. She wore a simple conical hat, and as it drifted down the street he saw how she wore it low to keep her handsome face out of view. Soon, she disappeared in the crowd, like a cat moving unseen, away from danger. What had wedged between his desire and its fulfillment? Where did regret creep in between the two? Regret at having found love in this way, with this métisse. That's what it was, he might as well admit it to himself. Meanwhile regret at having gone too quickly. At having paid for something priceless? Usually money made things clean. Now it filled him with a sadness for everything else that he wanted from this girl. He should rest, lie down to calm his wild emotions, which were bleeding into his thoughts—a dangerous thing.*  
-from ***The Headmaster's Wager*** by Vincent Lam

Percival Chen is the successful headmaster of the most respected English school in Saigon, well situated in the bustling Chinese district of Cholon. The year is 1966, and the city churns with violence and unpredictability. Though Percival has of late been more frequently obliged to lubricate bureaucratic wheels with thick red packets of money, he feels relatively safe. He is Chinese after all, not Vietnamese, and looks forward to returning to his proud homeland with his nearly-grown son Dai Jai, having amassed a fortune in this land his own father once called the Gold Mountain.

Built by his father as a rice warehouse, Chen Hap Sing is a spacious and comfortable house, well suited to running a language school. Though his father died years ago en route to China, Percival senses his presence at the school often, and frequently prays to him and the other ancestors upon whose hard work he now builds his own success. He and his son lead a good life, though Percival's ex-wife Cecilia, a great beauty from a wealthy Hong Kong family, would have him think otherwise. At times, Percival indulges in gambling and prostitutes—but as long as his luck and cleverness continue to hold, he sees no real harm in these activities. His family's lucky talisman, a raw gold nugget excavated by a long-ago ancestor in a far away land, hangs around his son's neck. Percival knows Dai Jai has inherited his own strong appetites, and he relies on the charm to keep the boy safe.

The family luck is sorely tested, with the arrest of Dai Jai. Percival's resourceful friend Mak, who has secret ties to Saigon influentials, sets to work securing the boy's freedom, as does the well-connected Cecilia. As Percival fills red packets with the money to save his son, he finds comfort in thinking of the lump of gold around Dai Jai's neck. Surely their ancestors will protect the boy.

Set against the charged atmosphere of wartime Vietnam, Vincent Lam's dazzling first novel ***The Headmaster's Wager*** is a compassionate and lushly evocative portrayal of an unforgettable flawed hero, as he faces his life's greatest gamble.

### **Reading Guide Questions**

1. How does Lam bring the world of 1960’s Saigon to life, using the senses of sound, smell, and taste? What passages were most viscerally powerful for you?
2. Lam wrote this novel using third-person limited narration, meaning that although it is not told in Percival’s voice, readers have access to only his thoughts and observations, and not those of other characters. How did this technique affect the experience of reading this story? Could it have been as effectively told in first-person, or using an omniscient narrative that allows insight into other character’s feelings?
3. Early in the novel, Percival instructs Dai Jai to remain invisible, saying that as overseas Chinese, “we are safer when we remain quiet.” (p 26) What do you think of this strategy, as war encroaches on their community? Is it possible? Is it moral?
4. Percival frequently finds ways to justify his bad behaviours, often blaming others. Do you think he always believes his own rationalizations? What is your opinion about the quality of his character? What made him this way? Can he find redemption?
5. Why does Percival agree to go along with Mak’s undercover activities? What is his motivation?
6. What is the significance of the one-eyed monk who begs near the school each day? What does he mean to Percival?
7. Discuss the role of fathers, and the impact of their absences, throughout the novel.
8. After Percival witnesses the immolation of the priest at the zoo, he has a nightmare (p 269). Did you know it was just a dream, or did you think it was real as you read it? Given what happens next, what do you make of this dream?
9. Near the novel’s close, Percival tells Laing Jai “Once you have left a place, you can never go back... the place of your memories will have vanished, and you will have new memories.” (p. 386) What do you think of this statement? Do you agree?
10. Discuss the significance of the title. In your opinion, which is the most significant of the headmaster’s wagers? What has been your own greatest wager in life so far?

**BIO: Vincent Lam**

Vincent Lam is a Canadian writer and medical doctor. Born in London, Ontario and raised in Ottawa, his parents came to Canada from the Chinese expatriate community in Vietnam. An emergency physician, Lam is a lecturer with the Department of Family and Community Medicine at the University of Toronto. He has also worked in international air evacuation and expedition medicine on Arctic and Antarctic ships.

Lam's first two published works, the medical guide **The Flu Pandemic and You** and the short story collection **Bloodletting and Miraculous Cures**, are based on his experiences in medical school. **Bloodletting and Miraculous Cures** won the 2006 Scotiabank Giller Prize and was adapted into a television series for HBO Canada.

Lam's biography of Canadian politician Tommy Douglas was published in 2011 as part of Penguin Canada's Extraordinary Canadians series.

**The Headmaster's Wager** is Lam's first novel. He lives with his wife and children in Toronto.

**Author Interview: Vincent Lam, The Headmaster’s Wager**

- 1. You wrote this novel about the experience of the Chinese community in Saigon. You grew up in Canada, but your parents are of Chinese descent and emigrated from Vietnam. What was the experience like, translating scraps of family stories into a fully realized novel?**

I must preface my answer.

The preface... the central plot of the novel did not derive from any family stories and is fictional. If it feels real, I take that as a great compliment. That said, some of the characters’ back stories, and certain incidents resonate with family stories. Percival Chen, the main character, was heavily inspired by my grandfather. The setting, social dynamics, and historical forces are those of my parents’ and grandparents’ lives in Vietnam.

To write a novel set during a significant time in my family’s history required a variety of types of engagement between myself and the subject. I needed to understand as much as I could about what that era meant to me emotionally, and this has grown over two decades of personal contemplation. I amassed as much sensory and historical information as I could about that time. I wanted to understand the story of Indochina, the mentality of that land, the Vietnam War, the sensations of daily life in Saigon and Cholon, the patterns in which people interacted, and the concerns of the Chinese in Vietnam, with enough detail and depth to write it as if I had lived it. But beyond all that I had to let the story be free and true. I had to allow for its own vitality. It had to inhabit a space of truth where it was not my family stories at all, and it was not a documentation of my historical knowledge, but where it could become its own story.

- 2. How did you conduct the research for this book? Did you spend time in Vietnam?**

I traveled to Vietnam twice – where I saw, smelt, ate, breathed, asked, listened, photographed, and tried to understand as much as I could. I interviewed family members. I pored over old letters and photos. I met with former students and teachers of my grandfather’s school. I turned to roughly a hundred books as source material. Some were novels, some were historical volumes, and some were memoir. I borrowed them from reference libraries, and bought them in used book shops. Sometimes, I found them in cities where I did not live, and weighed my suitcases to capacity, or shipped the books home. I talked to everyone I met who had been in Vietnam in the era I was writing about. For a time, I accumulated what I needed in a somewhat obsessive manner.

- 3. Your first book, *Bloodletting and Miraculous Cures*, was a collection of short stories. How would you compare the experience of writing a short story collection with that of writing a novel?**

It’s hard to generalize in terms of short story collections and novels as a broad category, because I’ve only written one of each. I can speak to my specific experience of each book. In writing ‘Bloodletting and Miraculous Cures’, I had great knowledge of the specificity of setting – this is because it was set in a medical school, in hospitals, and in clinics, and I am a doctor. Writing with this knowledge, I was able to elicit the emotional core of the book and represent it with details that were accessible to me. I could sort of pluck the knowledge of doctors off the shelves of my life to use in my writing. In writing ‘The Headmaster’s Wager’, I began with a deep understanding of the emotional core, and not much else. I knew what the

book should ‘feel’ like. But as it turned out, I didn’t know nearly enough about Vietnam to do it initially, so I had to go out and learn all of that. This initiated my research phase, which I’ve already mentioned.

**4. What do you hope readers will take from this book?**

It is better for me to comment upon that as little about as possible. In this way, the reader can find what the book contains for them in their own unique relationship with it.

**5. This novel is filled with fascinating characters. As the author, do you have a favourite? Who was the most fun to write?**

No, I have no favorites. I don’t know if characters are fun to write. They’re a lot of work, actually. I think meaningful characters are like really good, old friends. It can be fun to be together, but the reason most old, substantial friendships stay together is because of the deeper qualities of communication. It’s like that with myself and my major characters. We understand one another, and for that reason I have deep feelings for all of them.

**6. In addition to your literary career, you are an emergency physician. How do the two vocations overlap? Would you say that your skills in either role are enhanced by the other?**

Both the practices of writing and medicine are, at their very core, concerned with human stories. Both require a range of skills that include intellectual reasoning, emotional intuition, and the ability to blend these seamlessly. Developing skill at either requires the ability to work very hard for a long period of time, the capacity to self-evaluate and self-critique, an understand of one’s own work in the third person, and the capacity to imagine and hope. They have a lot in common.

**7. What question are you never asked in interviews, but wish you were?**

I don’t have any such wishes. Such wishes would imply that there is something I want to say, awaiting only the right question. The truth is, although I’m happy to be asked anything, the most important things I want to say are in my books.

**8. What works of literature have inspired you as a writer?**

In no special order, a random and incomplete conjectural list...

Nick Adams Stories, Ernest Hemingway  
Chronicles of Narnia, CS Lewis  
Handmaid’s Tale, Margaret Atwood  
Running In The Family, Michael Ondaatje  
Gift of Stones, Jim Crace  
Dream Stuff, David Malouf  
Fugitive Pieces, Anne Michaels  
Nine Stories, JD Salinger  
Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Klay, Michael Chabon  
Cloud Atlas, David Mitchell  
The Book of Secrets, MG Vassanji  
Sunstroke and Other Stories, Tessa Hadley

The Reader, Bernhard Schlenk  
The Golden Mean, Annabel Lyon  
Runaway, Alice Munro  
The Sorrow of War, Bao Ninh  
From a Chinese City, Gontran de Poncins  
Blindness, Jose Saramago  
The Lover, Marguerite Duras  
Our Town, Thornton Wilder  
The Fat Man in History, Peter Carey  
Letters to a Young Novelist, Mario Vargas Llosa

**9. What are you working on now?**

There is something... but I cannot say more.