

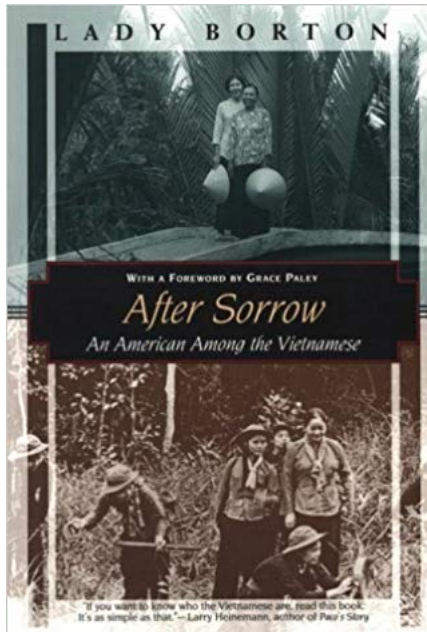
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## VISCERAL TALES FROM WAR-TORN VIETNAM

*Nancy McAllister, For The Dispatch*

Lady Borton's remarkable memoir, *After Sorrow*, reveals the lives of ordinary Vietnamese village women who lived through the Vietnam War. The book gives rise to questions: Who was the enemy? What kind of lives did the women lead? The village women tell Borton their stories. For many, it is the first time they have spoken of their war experiences.

Borton is field director of the American Friends Service Committee in Hanoi. When she is not overseas she lives on a farm in Midfield, Ohio.

In 1989, Borton was granted permission to be the first American since the war to live in a Vietnamese village. Two decades earlier, she had worked at a Quaker Service center where she helped train the Vietnamese to make artificial arms and legs for civilian amputees. She also worked in Malaysia with Vietnamese boat people.

Because of her genuine and generous nature, and the fact that she had learned the language, Borton formed many warm and lasting friendships. She learned to sew thatch for huts, plant and harvest rice, and make pineapple candy for Tet. In return, the women shared their secrets with her.

Their stories are sometimes fascinating, sometimes appalling. They smuggled weapons in vats of fish sauce. People started an uprising by carrying fake rifles, setting off homemade explosives and spreading rumors.

The women remember the raining down of Agent Orange and the ensuing decimation of almost all living things. Painfully, they tell of contamination, stillbirths and babies riddled with unimaginable deformities.

The bombing, though, was the worst. "Mother bombs" were dropped that held 600 "baby bombs," each exploding into 300 ricocheting pellets that maimed the women, their families and their friends.

Borton relates the women's stories with anger and compassion. She writes with the intention of changing the American consciousness and understanding of the war.

She records not only war stories but cultural histories and customs. She educates readers about Vietnamese heroes and heroines of the past. She describes ancient ceremonies and superstitions. This description, and her sense of nature, draws readers into Vietnam.

Through her words, readers can smell the fragrant frangipani blooms that have returned to the earth, feel beneath bare feet the "monkey bridges" made of palm trunks, hear the pitch of the language, taste the pungency of the food and see the green of the rice fields. Borton demonstrates a rare humanity. She imparts a lesson for the future, one she has been learning for more than 25 years and has decided to share. It's a lesson that demonstrates the spirit of extraordinary women plucked out of an ordinary existence.

Columbus writer **Nancy McAllister** is a member of the National Book Critics Circle.