Ru. In Vietnamese it means lullaby; in French it is a small stream, but also signifies a flow--of tears, blood, money. Kim Thúy's Ru is literature at its most crystalline: the flow of a life on the tides of unrest and on to more peaceful waters. In vignettes of exquisite clarity, sharp observation and sly wit, we are carried along on an unforgettable journey from a palatial residence in Saigon to a crowded and muddy Malaysian refugee camp, and onward to a new life in Quebec. There, the young girl feels the embrace of a new community, and revels in the chance to be part of the American Dream. As an adult, the waters become rough again: now a mother of two sons, she must learn to shape her love around the younger boy's autism. Moving seamlessly from past to present, from history to memory and back again, Ru is a book that celebrates life in all its wonder: its moments of beauty and sensuality, brutality and sorrow, comfort and comedy.
Ru is the story of Nguyễn An Tinh’s journey from war torn Viet Nam to Quebec in the 1970s. Based on the recollections of the author, Kim Thúy, it is told in sparse, poetic chapters. The novel shifts between her privileged upbringing and the subsequent political persecution of the family in Saigon, to her voyage as a boat person landing in a refugee camp and the early days of her settlement in Quebec.

A recent study showed that reading literary fiction enhances our ability to understand other people. When a reader is asked fill in the gaps of a story, this flexes the same psychological ‘muscles’ that are needed to navigate real relationships. By extension, I think that they are also the same empathetic skills that a person needs to understand political situations that may otherwise feel far removed.

I don’t, however, need my reaction to Ru confirmed by science: The novel made me laugh and cry—and sometimes both at once. It’s beautiful, funny, moving and sad. Long after reading it, I can still feel it lingering inside me.

That is the beauty of Ru. It invites us into an experience through the senses. We can hear, smell, taste and feel how it might have been to be a boat person leaving Viet Nam. Through the main character, we can also cast a new eye on Canada. She shows the value of human rights and what they can mean to us on the most personal level.

—Claire Cameron, author of The Bear, and The Line Painter
**Kim Thúy’s Ru: An Apple for the Reader**

Posted on September 16, 2013 - by Terry Hong

Ah, well . . . better start with true confessions: my words appear on the back cover of the U.S. edition (at least the first printing) of Vietnamese Canadian author Kim Thúy’s debut novel, *Ru*. The blurb is excerpted from my starred review in the August 15, 2012 issue of Library Journal: “This extraordinary first novel unfolds like ethereal poetry . . . [an] intricate, mesmerizing narrative.”

So now, you’re fully aware of my publicly admiring bias for the novel. And clearly, I’m not alone. By the time *Ru* hit U.S. shelves in November 2012 (translated from the original French), it had already earned numerous, important, global accolades for its first-time author. After multiple lives as a refugee, interpreter, translator, lawyer, and restaurateur, Thúy was 41 when she “bloomed” with the initial publication of *Ru* in Canada in October 2009.

Success came quickly and broadly, with editions that appeared in 20 countries: nationally, *Ru* was shortlisted for Canada’s prestigious Scotiabank Giller Prize; internationally, it was longlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize. The original French debut won Canada’s coveted Governor General’s Literary Award for Fiction in 2010, only to reappear two years later on the shortlist for the Governor General’s Literary Award for Translation when the English-language edition, translated by the award-winning Sheila Fischman, appeared in 2012. “This is an exemplary autobiographical novel. Never is there the slightest hint of narcissism or self-pity,” read the Governor General’s Literary Award jury citation upon announcing Ru the 2010 winner. “The major events in the fall of Vietnam are painted in delicate strokes, through the daily existence of a woman who has to reinvent herself elsewhere. A tragic journey described in a keen, sensitive and perfectly understated voice.”

That enigmatic single-word title is as multilayered as the slender novel’s elliptical prose: “*Ru*” means “a small stream and, figuratively, a flow, a discharge—of tears, blood, of money” in French; in Vietnamese, pronounced quite differently but sharing the same spelling, “ru” is a “lullaby, to lull.” “*Ru*” is “the most beautiful word in our [Vietnamese] language,” Thúy told Vinh Nguyễn in an interview for Diacritics, which named *Ru* the first-ever Vietnamese Canadian novel.

“I came into the world during the Tet Offensive, in the early days of the Year of the Monkey. . . . The purpose of my birth was to replace lives that had been lost,” *Ru*’s narrator introduces herself.
My name is Nguyễn An Tịnh, my mother’s name is Nguyễn An Tịnh. My name is simply a variation on hers because a single dot under the i differentiates, distinguishes, disassociates me from her. . . . With these almost interchangeable names, my mother confirmed that I was the sequel to her, that I would continue her story.

The History of Vietnam, written with a capital H, thwarted my mother’s plans. History flung the accents on our names into the water when it took us across the Gulf of Siam thirty years ago. It also stripped us our names of their meaning, reducing them to sounds at once strange. . . . In particular, when I was ten years old it ended my role as an extension of my mother.

In just over 140 spare pages, Thúy constructs an intricate mosaic of vignettes that flow through decades, continents, generations, and cultures. The “Reading Group Guide” available at book’s end explains that Ru is “an autobiographical novel based on the author’s real-life experience as a Vietnamese émigré and how she found her way—and her voice—after immigrating to Quebec.”

Written as a series of prose poems that range from a precise few lines to a fleeting few pages, the emerging narrative charts a young girl’s journey from wealthy privilege in Vietnam; her rebirth as a war refugee in Canada; her return to her native country where the locals consider her “too fat to be Vietnamese”—not because of her stature, but because “the American dream had made me more substantial, heavier, weightier”; and eventually her own overwhelming motherhood.

Like her fictionalized counterpart, Thúy, born in Saigon in 1968, arrived in Canada at age 10, fleeing the Vietnam War via boat, then surviving a stopover in a Malaysian refugee camp. Her immediate family of parents and two brothers remained intact: “[W]e spent only four nights at sea and only four months in a camp, whereas just recently I’ve met one Vietnamese who was in a camp in the Philippines for 12 years. So, we were very lucky,” she told Scott Simon in a 2012 interview for NPR’s Weekend Edition.

“[Y]ou know, when you come from a country at war, again, with men in uniforms and curfews and—we didn’t see blood as such, but still it was on our mind. That was the background of Vietnam,” she recalls of her birth country. “And then afterwards, we were in the refugee camp in Malaysia and we were surrounded by dirt basically and I was going to say the septic tank. But it was not a tank because it was not closed, it was open. So, imagine the colors and all of that.” In utter contrast, when she caught her first glimpse of what would become her new homeland, “[l]t was a new birth really.” It was winter then; snow was everywhere: “[W]hen we got here, it was all white. You know, from the plane, that’s what we saw. And that purity really changed us all, gave us a second birth.”
Settling into the Montreal suburbs, Thúy’s family was “very poor and we had to do many jobs,” even as children. Thúy made extra money by picking vegetables after school, working as a cashier, and sewing clothes at night with other refugees. Telling stories passed the time: “the fact that we did not see each other, you know, we became hypnotized by the movement of the needle, so it was easier almost to talk because we felt like we were just talking to ourselves.”

By 1993, Thúy had two degrees from the Université de Montréal—linguistics and translation in 1990, and law in 1993; she worked as an interpreter, then a lawyer. By then, her languages had tripled: “I speak Vietnamese, of course, but it is the Vietnamese of childhood or cooking. The language in which I think and feel most is French,” she told her alma mater's online magazine. As a citizen of the world, Thúy speaks a slightly accented, careful English, as well, evidenced by multiple interviews available on the Web.

From immersing herself in languages and laws, Thúy next turned to the corporeal, reinventing herself as the chef and proprietor of a Vietnamese restaurant she opened to introduce Montrealites to her native cuisine. When she wasn’t cooking, she parlayed that experience into radio and television appearances as a culinary commentator. The restaurant was called *Ru de Nam*, both a homonymic play on the French world ‘rue’ for street, as well as a prescient echo of her book to come. As she drove home exhausted from the restaurant each night, she often dozed at the red lights. To keep herself awake—and avoid any more fender benders—first she made shopping lists. “And I don’t know what happened,” she told Scott Simon, “maybe it was a longer light or something like that . . . I turned a book over and started writing, and that’s how *Ru* came to be.”

Autobiographical *Ru* may well be, but Thúy insists through laughter in her author video on Random House of Canada’s BookLounge website, “If the book was only about me, it would have lasted maybe only about three pages”; thankfully for readers, her radiant novel continues for a few more than that. From cousin Sao Mai who was Uncle Two’s princess, to a father “who always inspired the greatest, most wonderful happiness,” to Aunt Seven’s mystery son who was raised by Aunt Four, to young cousins and what they innocently did on the streets to survive, Thúy affirms an expansive community of refugees and returnees, immigrants and travelers, of how each “resurfaced like a phoenix reborn from its ashes, like Vietnam from its iron curtain and my parents from the toilet bowls they had to scrub.”

*Ru* has brought Thúy not just international acclaim but a sense of universal community: “I don’t know how come this book could be read by so many different readers and in so many different ways . . . I think *Ru* basically is a book with key words. I just say ‘apple’ and each reader would see a different apple, and they think I have drawn that apple for them, but I think it’s the reader that has given a third dimension to the book.”
Part of our study of this novel will include responding to the following questions:

1. Thúy has chosen to tell her story in short vignettes, often linked by subject rather than chronology. What do you think her reasoning might be for choosing this form over a more traditional narrative arc?

2. The narrator reveals in the first few pages of the book that her name is a variation of her mother’s, that she was supposed to be her mother’s extension and sequel, but that this role ended when she was ten years old (2). Why and how does her relationship with her mother change?

3. The narrator describes herself in childhood as being her cousin Sao Mai’s “shadow” (18). What does she mean? What are some of the other times in her life when she feels like a shadow?

4. About the Communist child inspectors living in her family’s home, the narrator writes: “We no longer knew if they were enemies or victims, if we loved or hated them, if we feared or pitied them. And they no longer knew if they had freed us from the Americans, or, on the contrary, if we had freed them from the jungle of Vietnam” (32). How does the narrator’s up-is-down-and down-is-up war experience continue to colour her views towards her homeland and its people through the course of her life?

5. Constant movement is one of Ru’s themes. At one point, the narrator writes: “I never leave a place with more than one suitcase...Nothing else can become truly mine” (100). Why do you think she believe this? Do you think it is true for her?
6. In Vietnamese, the narrator tells us, there are different words for ways of loving (96). But the narrator says it is her children who define for her what it means simply “to love” (102). How do you think her love for her children is different from what she feels for her parents, relatives, or lovers?

7. The narrator describes an incident at restaurant school in Hanoi when a waiter reminded her that she “no longer had the right to declare that [she] was Vietnamese because [she] no longer had their fragility, their uncertainty, their fears (78). The narrator seems to believe he was right. Do you?

8. Music appears throughout the book in various forms and situations: the music the narrator’s father plays on the piano to corrupt the child inspectors; the Fame theme song Johanne teaches her to sing; the music her middle-aged mother dances to in her weekly dance classes; the melodies the strolling merchants sing while advertising their basket wares. Explain the importance of music in Ru.

9. The ‘American Dream’ plays an integral role in the narrator’s life and her search for meaning, and she references it often during the novel. What is her version of the ‘American Dream’? Do you think she attains it?

10. The narrator speaks of the Vietnamese women permanently hunched by the weight of their grief (39). To what extent do you think she identifies with these women?

11. How have the different meanings for the word Ru become evident throughout the course of this novel?