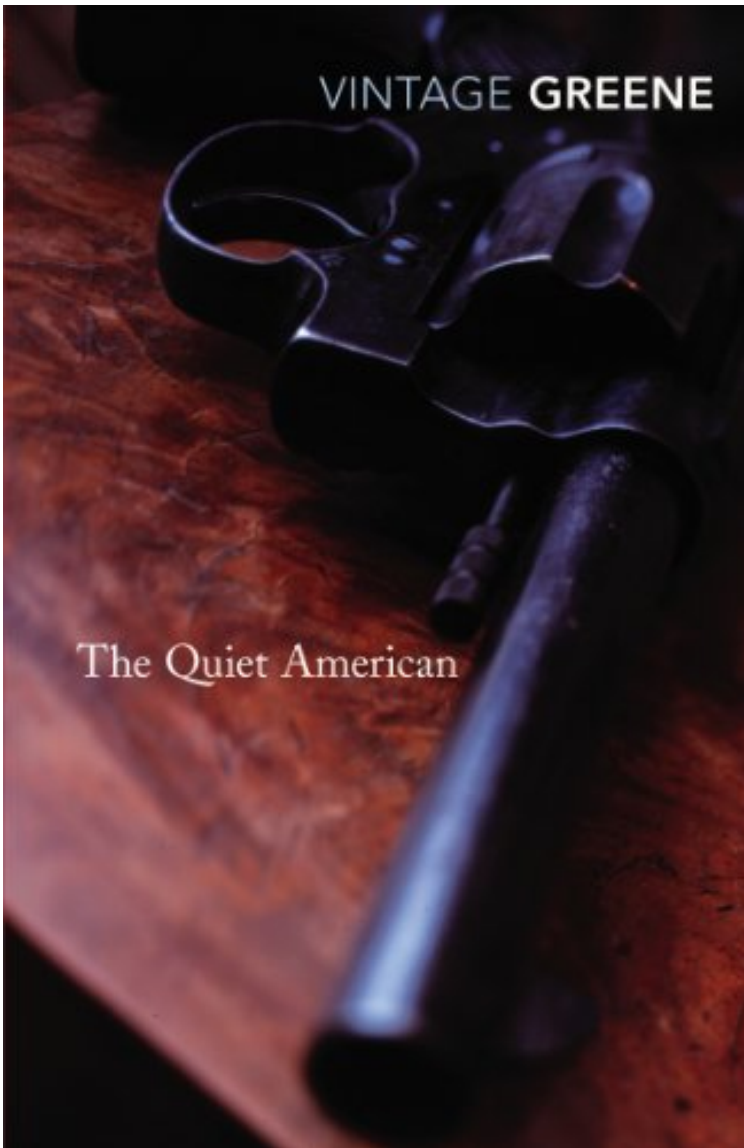


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The Quiet American



Par Graham Greene
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurWITH AN INTRODUCTION BY ZADIE SMITHInto the intrigue and violence of Indo-China comes Pyle, a young idealistic American sent to promote democracy through a mysterious 'Third Force'. As his naive optimism starts to cause bloodshed, his friend Fowler, a cynical foreign correspondent, finds it hard to stand aside and watch. But even as he intervenes he wonders why: for the sake of politics, or for love?ExtraitPART ONE IAfter dinner I sat and waited for Pyle in my room over the rue Catinat; he had said, Ill be with you at latest by ten, and when midnight struck I couldnt stay quiet any longer and went down into the street. A lot of old women in black trousers squatted on the landing: it was February and I suppose too hot for them in bed. One trishaw driver pedalled slowly by towards the riverfront and I could

see lamps burning where they had disembarked the new American planes. There was no sign of Pyle anywhere in the long street. Of course, I told myself, he might have been detained for some reason at the American Legation, but surely in that case he would have telephoned to the restaurant he was very meticulous about small courtesies. I turned to go indoors when I saw a girl waiting in the next doorway. I couldn't see her face, only the white silk trousers and the long flowered robe, but I knew her for all that. She had so often waited for me to come home at just this place and hour. *Phuong*, I said which means Phoenix, but nothing nowadays is fabulous and nothing rises from its ashes. I knew before she had time to tell me that she was waiting for Pyle too. He isn't here. *Je sais. Je t'ai vu seul la fenetre.* You may as well wait upstairs. I said. He will be coming soon. I can wait here. Better not. The police might pick you up. She followed me upstairs. I thought of several ironic and unpleasant jests I might make, but neither her English nor her French would have been good enough for her to understand the irony, and, strange to say, I had no desire to hurt her or even to hurt myself. When we reached the landing all the old women turned their heads, and as soon as we had passed their voices rose and fell as though they were singing together. What are they talking about? They think I have come home. Inside my room the tree I had set up weeks ago for the Chinese New Year had shed most of its yellow blossoms. They had fallen between the keys of my typewriter. I picked them out. *Tu es troublé*, *Phuong* said. It's unlike him. He's such a punctual man. I took off my tie and my shoes and lay down on the bed. *Phuong* lit the gas stove and began to boil the water for tea. It might have been six months ago. He says you are going away soon now, she said. Perhaps. He is very fond of you. Thank him for nothing, I said. I saw that she was doing her hair differently, allowing it to fall black and straight over her shoulders. I remembered that Pyle had once criticized the elaborate hairdressing which she thought became the daughter of a mandarin. I shut my eyes and she was again the same as she used to be: she was the hiss of steam, the clink of a cup, she was a certain hour of the night and the promise of rest. He will not be long, she said as though I needed comfort for his absence. I wondered what they talked about together. Pyle was very earnest and I had suffered from his lectures on the Far East, which he had known for as many months as I had years. Democracy was another subject of his he had pronounced and aggravating views on what the United States was doing for the world. *Phuong* on the other hand was wonderfully ignorant; if Hitler had come into the conversation she would have interrupted to ask who he was. The explanation would be all the more difficult because she had never met a German or a Pole and had only the vaguest knowledge of European geography, though about Princess Margaret of course she knew more than I. I heard her put a tray down on the end of the bed. Is he still in love with you, *Phuong*? To take an Annamite to bed with you is like taking a bird: they twitter and sing on your pillow. There had been a time when I thought none of their voices sang like *Phuong*'s. I put out my hand and touched her arm their bones too were as fragile as a bird's. Is he, *Phuong*? She laughed and I heard her strike a match. In love? perhaps it was one of the phrases she didn't understand. May I make your pipe? she asked. When I opened my eyes she had lit the lamp and the tray was already prepared. The lamplight made her skin the colour of dark amber as she bent over the flame with a frown of concentration, heating the small paste of opium, twirling her needle. Does Pyle still not smoke? I asked her. No. You ought to make him or he won't come back. It was a superstition among them that a lover who smoked would always return, even from France. A man's sexual capacity might be injured by smoking, but they would always prefer a faithful to a potent lover. Now she was kneading the little ball of hot paste on the convex margin of the bowl and I could smell the opium. There is no smell like it. Beside the bed my alarm-clock showed twelve twenty, but already my tension was over. Pyle had diminished. The lamp lit her face as she tended the long pipe, bent over it with the serious attention she might have given to a child. I was fond of my pipe: more than two feet of straight bamboo, ivory at either end. Two-thirds of the way down was the bowl, like a convolvulus reversed, the convex margin polished and darkened by the frequent kneading of the opium. Now with a flick of the wrist she plunged the needle into the tiny cavity, released the opium and reversed the bowl over the flame, holding the pipe steady for me. The bead of opium bubbled gently and smoothly as I inhaled. The practised inhaler can draw a whole pipe down in one breath, but I always had to take several pulls. Then I lay back, with my neck on the leather pillow, while she prepared the second pipe. I said, You know, really, it's as clear as daylight. Pyle knows I smoke a few pipes before bed, and he doesn't want to disturb me. He'll be round in the morning. In went the needle and I took my second pipe. As I laid it down, I said, Nothing to worry about. Nothing to worry about at all. I took a sip of tea and held my hand in the pit of her arm. When you left me, I said, it was lucky I had this to fall back on. There's a good house in the rue d'Ormay. What a fuss we Europeans make about nothing. You shouldn't live with a man who doesn't smoke, *Phuong*. But he's going to marry me, she said. Soon now. Of course, that's another

matter. Shall I make your pipe again? Yes. I wondered whether she would consent to sleep with me that night if Pyle never came, but I knew that when I had smoked four pipes I would no longer want her. Of course it would be agreeable to feel her thigh beside me in the bed she always slept on her back, and when I woke in the morning I could start the day with a pipe, instead of with my own company. Pyle wont come now, I said. Stay here, Phuong. She held the pipe out to me and shook her head. By the time I had drawn the opium in, her presence or absence mattered very little. Why is Pyle not here? she asked. How do I know? I said. Did he go to see General Th? I wouldnt know. He told me if he could not have dinner with you, he wouldnt come here. Dont worry. Hell come. Make me another pipe. When she bent over the flame the poem of Baudelaires came into my mind: Mon enfant, ma soeur . . . How did it go on? Aimer loisir, Aimer et mourir Au pays qui te ressemble. Out on the waterfront slept the ships, dont lhumeur est vagabonde. I thought that if I smelt her skin it would have the faintest fragrance of opium, and her colour was that of the small flame. I had seen the flowers on her dress beside the canals in the north, she was indigenous like a herb, and I never wanted to go home. I wish I were Pyle, I said aloud, but the pain was limited and bearable the opium saw to that. Somebody knocked on the door. Pyle, she said. No. Its not his knock. Somebody knocked again impatiently. She got quickly up, shaking the yellow tree so that it showered its petals again over my typewriter. The door opened. Monsieur Fowlair, a voice commanded. Im Fowler, I said. I was not going to get up for a policeman I could see his khaki shorts without lifting my head. He explained in almost unintelligible Vietnamese French that I was needed immediately at once rapidly at the Suret. At the French Suret or the Vietnamese? The French. In his mouth the word sounded like Franung. What about? He didnt know: it was his orders to fetch me. Toi aussi, he said to Phuong. Say vous when you speak to a lady, I told him. How did you know she was here? He only repeated that they were his orders. Ill come in the morning. Sur le chung, he said, a little, neat, obstinate figure. There wasnt any point in arguing, so I got up and put on my tie and shoes. Here the police had the last word: they could withdraw my order of circulation: they could have me... *Revue de presse* "No serious writer of this century has more thoroughly invaded and shaped the public imagination than Graham Greene." Time