



by Khuê Ph?m

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Fiction

 Books at Berlinale 2022

## Brothers and Ghosts

*Wo auch immer ihr seid*

### review

Intriguing, immediate and occasionally harrowing, *Brothers and Ghosts* by Khuê Ph?m is a moving tale of exile, identity and self-discovery. Focussing on first and second-generation Vietnamese emigrants, the novel should appeal to fans of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*.

Ki?u Nguy?n is thirty years old. Born to Vietnamese parents who emigrated (separately) to Berlin in the sixties, Ki?u has never had any interest in her Vietnamese roots. Yet while her parents have worked hard to establish the trappings of a middle-class German family life – from a BMW in the garage to the perfect Christmas tree – she's never quite felt fully German either.

However, Ki?u's interest is piqued when her Uncle S?n – who lives in California, like most of Ki?u's extended family – gets in touch out of the blue. S?n phones to tell Minh that their mother is on her deathbed. When she dies, Minh (Ki?u's father) is reluctantly persuaded to attend the reading of the will, and Ki?u agrees to join her parents on the trip.

The novel is structured in alternating chapters, titled Ki?u, Minh and S?n. In Ki?u's own chapters she narrates the events of the present day from her own perspective. In the others Ki?u uses the third person to tell the very different stories of how her father and her uncle left Vietnam for the west. Through detailed flashbacks, these chapters

are set against the historical events of the last decade of the Vietnam War.

Strongly academic, the young Minh receives a scholarship to study medicine in Germany, leaving Vietnam in 1968 after the Tet Offensive. Originally a strict supporter of the Southern Vietnam cause, he falls in love with Hoa: a fellow student in Germany, and an activist for the plight of the Vietnamese after the My Lai massacre of 1968. Hoa supports Minh as he struggles to integrate into German life, and he too becomes an activist.

Meanwhile, S?n decides to flee Vietnam with his female friend, Mai in 1979. They are smuggled out of Vietnam to Thailand via Cambodia where Mai is captured by the Khmer Rouge and subsequently rescued. Eventually they make it to California.

Back in the present day, S?n and Mai reunite their alienated siblings. On the day of the will reading, the family discovers a secret that their mother had kept her entire life. Inspired by her grandmother's secret, as well as the experiences of her father and uncle and of the strong women who ultimately become their wives, Ki?u makes a life-changing decision.

In an increasingly global society, where people continue to be displaced, this novel movingly foregrounds the importance of having a deep connection to one's roots and cultural origins, wherever one might be in the world.

## press quotes

*A groundbreaking work in German literature, Pham's novel marks a seminal accomplishment that tells the dignified, thorough, and epic story of a Vietnamese family through clear, gem-like sentences and unflinching observations. With Pham's vision, nothing is left unturned and all things are salvaged and lost at once. A courageous and bold achievement by a bright new voice.*

Ocean Vuong

## about the author



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**Khuê Pham** is an award-winning Vietnamese-German writer. A graduate from the LSE, she has contributed to the *Guardian* and *NPR* before becoming an editor at the renowned German weekly *Die ZEIT*. Interested in pop culture and politics, she has interviewed Anna Wintour, but has also co-written an investigation into the Essex lorry deaths, that earned her the nomination for Germany's version of the Pulitzer Prize. In 2012, she co-wrote a non-fiction book about second generation immigrants in Germany. In 2021, she published her first novel *Brothers and Ghosts*, which is inspired by the story of her Vietnamese family. It was recommended by the international jury of 'New Books in German' in their fall '21 selection, and was chosen for a highly coveted book presentation at this year's Berlinale film festival.

More at [khuepham.de/english](https://khuepham.de/english)

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