

Vietnam-born author to speak at Penn in Plymouth

BY JULIE BROWN
OBSERVER STAFF WRITER

Bich Minh Nguyen, author of *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, is traveling the state discussing her book. The book, which tells of Nguyen growing up as a Vietnamese refugee in 1970s and 1980s Grand Rapids, is this year's Great Michigan Read selection from the Michigan Humanities Council.

"The author tour starts this week," said Sue Patterson, adult services librarian at the Plymouth District Library and a member of this year's book selection committee. "She started in Grand Rapids on Tuesday."

Nguyen, born in 1974 in Saigon, was slated for later Michigan stops in Traverse City, Midland and Lansing. With the humanities council and Plymouth District Library,



Nguyen

the author will speak 1 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 17, at the Penn Theatre in downtown Plymouth. Nguyen will also sign copies of her book.

"I think it's wonderful," Plymouth resident Patterson said of the appearance, the only one of Nguyen's in southeast Michigan. "I think it's a wonderful opportunity for us to show off Plymouth."

The Friends of the Plymouth District Library are involved with the Michigan Humanities Council presentation, focusing on Nguyen's memoir published in 2007. There's no registration required for the Oct. 17 program and seating is first-come first-served for the 405-seat Penn Theatre.

Nguyen left Vietnam with her

father, grandmother, uncle and sister as Saigon fell. They ended up in Grand Rapids through a church-sponsored relocation program. She writes movingly of efforts to fit in to a new culture, described often in terms of the Burger King, Dairy Cone and other foods available.

Nguyen tells of her efforts to fit in to Grand Rapids in the 1980s "before diversity and multicultural awareness trickled into western Michigan. Before ethnic was cool. Before Thai restaurants became staples in every town. When I think of Grand Rapids I remember city signs covered in images of rippling flags, proclaiming 'An All-American City.' ... As a kid, I couldn't figure out what 'All-American' was supposed to mean. Was it a promise, a threat, a warning?"

Her first name is pronounced "Bit" but classmates used the phonetic

spelling as a swear word, and teased Nguyen and sister Anh about their background. Their father married a Mexican-American woman in Grand Rapids who gave birth to son Vinh.

The author, who now lives in Chicago and West Lafayette, Ind., attended the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, earning a bachelor's degree in English and a master of fine arts degree in creative writing. She teaches at Purdue University in Indiana as an associate professor in the English department, and is married to novelist Porter Shreve.

Stealing Buddha's Dinner won the PEN/Jerard Fund Award. It's the Contemporary Books discussion book for November at the Plymouth library, as well as the January Brown Bags group book. The Plymouth library will also host a Vietnam veterans panel discussion 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, Oct.

28, at the library, 223 S. Main in downtown Plymouth. Registration is requested for the panel discussion at (734) 453-0750, Ext. 4. The panel features members of Chapter 528 Plymouth-Canton Vietnam Veterans of America.

"We'll have other related programs," said Patterson, including those focusing on history and culture of Vietnam.

"We're hoping to draw obviously from the surrounding communities," the librarian said of the Oct. 17 author visit, which is free. Doors will open at the Penn about a half hour before the program starts. Questions should be directed to the library, as the Penn isn't staffed at all times.

For more on Nguyen's visit, see <http://www.michiganhumanities.org/programs/tgm>.

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PCA hosts folk concert

The BaseLine Folk Society will host another coffee house-style open-microphone concert at its new Plymouth home beginning at 7 p.m. Saturday.

The Society, musicians who promote and enjoy folk and traditional music of all varieties, recently relocated from Northville to the Plymouth Community Arts Council building on Sheldon Road at Junction, also known as the Joanne Winkelman Hulce Center for the Arts.

The headline act Saturday is songwriter Mike Brock, who sings and plays guitar. The open-mic segment will feature up to eight performers; musicians can sign up for open mic on a first-come basis between 6:15 p.m. and 6:45 p.m. Scott Ludwig will be the host.

BaseLine events are 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. on the third Saturday of each month through May. Admission is \$5 a person; year-long memberships, good for the entire season, are \$25 for individuals and \$50 for families.

The Plymouth Community Arts Council is at 774 North Sheldon, south of M-14. For more information on BaseLine, contact Mike Mullen via e-mail at mjmullen@yahoo.com or call him at (248) 347-6881.

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