



Interview: Marcelino Truong on his Graphic Novel about Family and the Vietnam War



By [Olivia Snaije](#)
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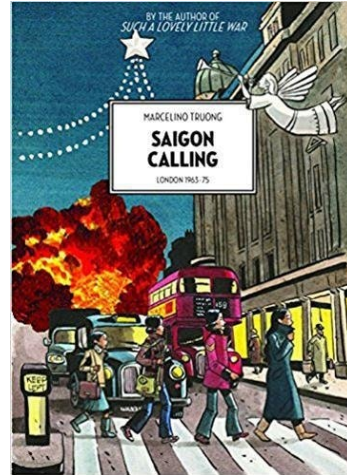
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Marcelino Truong is a painter, illustrator and author, whose father was Vietnamese and his mother French. Named Marcelino after the street, Calle San Marcelino, in Manila, Philippines, where he was born, Truong lived in Washington DC, Saigon and London as a child. He studied political science and is a self-taught painter and illustrator. Since 1983 he has worked as an illustrator and comics artist for the media, children's books, adult fiction, graphic novels and animated film. His autobiographical two-volume graphic novel about his childhood in Vietnam with his parents and three siblings, and as a teenager in the UK and France during the Vietnam War, was published in France in 2012 and 2015. The first volume, [Such a Lovely Little War](#) was published in English in 2016, translated by David Homel. The second volume, [Saigon Calling](#), has just been published and was named graphic novel of the month by *The Guardian*.

Marcelino Truong was four years old when he moved to Saigon where his father, a diplomat, and a Catholic close to President Ngô Đình Diêm, was appointed head of the South Vietnamese news agency.

Fifty years later, Marcelino Truong recounts his childhood memories of a family caught up in a ghastly war with dubious means to reach ideologies on both sides and dire consequences. It is also his intimate and forthright account of the effects of his mother's bipolar condition on a bicultural family grappling with the cataclysmic breakdown of a country.



It sometimes takes authors a very long time to talk about their childhood. What was your process—had you been thinking about it for a long time, was it something you had to do, and how did you know when the time was right?

I've wanted to write about my childhood and adolescence for years, especially my childhood in Saigon, as it is the most remarkable part of the story. I began to think about it in my 30s when I discovered the letters my French mother had written to her parents in Brittany from all the countries we had lived in. But first I had to learn my craft as an illustrator and it took me a long time to develop my style, as I'm completely self-taught in art. After years of illustration work and very little writing, an offer came out of the blue from the editor Jean-Luc Fromental, who works at Denoël Graphic in Paris. I was at first very nervous about writing the story line as I had no previous experience.

In a way, I think that working on this project at the late age of 50-something gave me the necessary maturity, because I was going to talk about something intimate; my family. Earlier on in life I was less tolerant and less indulgent of my family. What also helped was that both my parents had slipped into very old age, which meant they weren't scrutinizing my work so closely. I wasn't fearful, but I would have been concerned had they shown opposition. My father, who was clear-headed until the end, was able to read the first 151 pencil-art roughs of *Such a Lovely Little War*,

because I do all the artwork, page-by-page, at first in pencil. Then I go back and use China ink, watercolor and color inks.

I was afraid he might object to my depiction of his marital life, but no, he only asked me to make quite clear what his functions had been in his different jobs. He was worried that he might appear frivolous on a page where I show him attending a cocktail party in Washington DC!

How did you go about recalling events that happened 50 years ago? How did you immerse yourself in these memories, and were your siblings helpful?

My mum's letters were very important. She wrote in great detail. Not all her letters made very pleasant reading. She vented lots of bitterness and impatience, and because she was bipolar, Saigon was not the best place for her—she would have done better in more peaceful surroundings. But her letters were full of very interesting information and I could reproduce our exact timeline: when we got our vaccinations against the plague at school, when we went on our only holiday, when we hired the family chauffeur Chu Ba. These were all invaluable details in order to reconstruct our family life. She also described certain events that became historical, such as the air attack against President Diêm in 1962. I remembered quite a few things but it was mostly like when you awaken from a dream and you recall only a fraction of it. I spoke a lot with my sister Mireille who was older than me when we lived in Saigon. I had millions of conversations with my father mainly after my first trips back to Vietnam in 1991. In Vietnam, part of my family had followed the Revolution. Some had been in the Viet Cong and had come out as victors. It was interesting to hear their side of the story and I would discuss this with my father who lived in exile until his death.



Left to right, Truong's sister Mireille, his brother Dominique, and the author in 1962

Did you read other autobiographies, whether graphic novels or texts for inspiration?

Only basics such as [Art Spiegelman's] *Maus*, or [Marjane Satrapi's] *Persepolis* or [GB Tran's] *Vietnamerica*; I read very few graphic novels. I mainly read fat history books like William Prochnau's *Once upon a Distant War* and many others.

You studied political science; I can imagine you know a lot of the political technicalities about the Vietnam War yet your account is really through the eyes of the boy that you were, with casual details such as arriving at the airport in Saigon and seeing Napalm canisters on airplanes. Was it difficult to pare down the information, and keep what would have made sense to a child?

Well, I had to be careful not to be too academic, and not to flood the reader with too much information. From the start, I was obsessed with fitting everything into the format. I had to squeeze everything into the 260 pages. I kept the documentary pages to a minimum so that it didn't sound like a history class.

But the graphic novel form is useful in that it offers you great flexibility of tone. The fact that it was in this form helped make the story less serious; comic art is a great means of expression because you can talk about something very grim and serious yet you can instil humor in your story.

You can show the Truong family arriving at Tan Son Nhat airport with, in the foreground, a Skyraider with Napalm canisters fixed to its wings. You can make it so understated with just a little arrow pointing towards the canisters with the word “Napalm”. If you had to write about it, it would have to be more explicit. What’s so nice about comic art is that it is so visual—the way people are dressed, the buildings, the way an aircraft looks, it tells you so much. You can show the imagery of a specific period, such as propaganda posters, or postage stamps; they tell you a lot about a regime.

The moment of truth came in June 1961. Mama was afraid of the plane, so we took the SS *Flandre* from New York.



Every morning, to get some time to herself, Mama stuck us in the daycare, which we did not appreciate at all. Strange, but I don't remember much, besides my constant seasickness.



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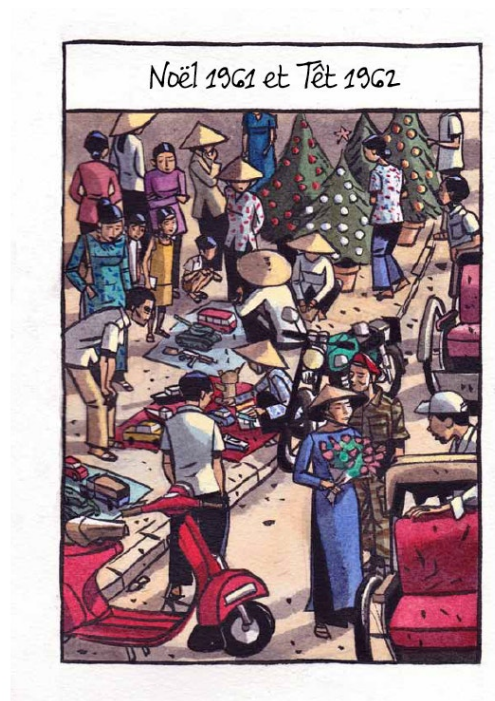
The Truong family traveled from New York to Le Havre by boat and then on to Saigon by plane in 1961

Your account focuses quite a bit on your mother, her difficulties adapting to Saigon, and her bipolar condition. Was it very painful to write about?

It’s always painful to write a book like this and I remember the process was very emotional, you find yourself crying, and it conjures many feelings. Luckily for me in my 30s I went through psychoanalysis, and it was a big opening up. [Before] I could only see what seemed to be my parents’ shortcomings and I was able to let go of some of the grudges I held against them despite all their efforts. I became more tolerant of my mother and ultimately this was helpful for the books.

Has the public reaction to your books been different depending on the country?

When the first volume of my book was published in Germany in 2015, I was invited to Berlin and Cologne. There was a different approach than in France. In both left and right wing newspapers I found an understanding that seemed greater than in France, because Germany has suffered much from two extremely effective totalitarian regimes: the Nazi tyranny and the hard-line East German Communist rule. In France, the political left had a very romantic vision of Ho Chi Minh and doesn't like to be reminded of its blind support for the Viet Cong and its then ally, the Khmer Rouge. The 1960s and 1970s was a very troubling period because many of the most liberal and educated scholarly minds supported leaders such as Ho Chi Minh or Chairman Mao who were despots in a one-party police-state. During the Vietnam War, there was much confusion. The counter-culture rebels of the 60s and 70s saw Castro, Che Guevara and Uncle Ho as liberators and freedom fighters. They saw us as puppets, as henchmen of US imperialism. How could the radicals imagine that Castro would hold on to absolute power for 55 years?!



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