

Six chapters and one big award later

How do you finish a novel someone else started? Vu Tran learned by doing it, one plotline at a time

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We're all familiar with that timeworn image of the solitary writer fretting and fussing over the keyboard as he struggles to finish a novel. Now imagine the stress if the writer had to finish a novel written by six other writers. That was the task facing Vu Tran as he penned the seventh and final chapter of *Restless City*, a collaborative serial novel sponsored by the Vegas Valley Book Festival.

"It's definitely the most interesting literary project I've ever worked on," says Tran. "I've never been part of a collaborative project like this before. Writers usually work in a kind of isolation, and they're used to having complete control over their work."

With *Restless City*, Tran was charged with tying up the loose ends of chapters penned by some of Las Vegas' best writers, among them *Review-Journal* columnist John L. Smith, author and College of Southern Nevada professor H. Lee Barnes and globe-trotting playwright and journalist Leah Bailly.

"Every writer wanted to make their chapter stand out, as they should, and every writer put in their own twist," says Tran, who teaches English at UNLV. "So not only was I working with six different styles, but six different twists. Resolving it was a fun challenge."

Restless City is the story of Las Vegas private detective Daniel Brady, who is investigating the murder of a woman who was part of a slot-cheat crew. His investigation takes him into a world of eccentric high-rollers, biker thugs, sketchy cops and ex-girlfriends. With the story twists flying left and right in previous chapters, Vu had a choice: struggle to tie up dangling storylines to braid a perfect plot at the expense of emotional resonance, or satisfy readers' deeper need for a sense of story.

"I realized what I had to do is identify the emotional core of the work and run with that, to find the story's emotional throughline, and make that resonate with readers," he says.

When Tran reads from the final chapter at the Vegas Valley Book Festival this weekend, he'll be boasting another honor as well. On Oct. 28, Vu Tran was one of 10 young writers to win a Whiting Writers' Award in New York. Previous winners include writers who've gone on to pen major works, such as Michael Cunningham, Tobias Wolff and Mary Karr. Tran is currently at work on a novel based on his short story, "This Or Any Desert," which appeared in the *Las Vegas Noir* anthology and was selected for inclusion in *Best American Mystery Stories 2009*.

"It sounds cheesy, but getting the award felt like a really reassuring hug," says Tran, whose short stories have appeared in the *Harvard Review*, *Southern Review*, *Glimmer Train*, and the 2007 O. Henry Prize Stories collection. "It tells me that all the hard work and worrying and anxiety is worth it."

Vu Tran reads from the final chapter of *Restless City* 4 p.m. Nov. 7 at the historic Fifth Street School. CityLife Books will also publish a print version of *Restless City*. (Disclosure: CityLife Books is an imprint of Stephens Media LLC, which also owns CityLife.)

Last updated on Thursday, November 5, 2009 at 12:12 am



Vu Tran