LOS ANGELES—Viet Thanh Nguyen has been wrestling with “Apocalypse Now” for most of his life — as a boy, a college student, a scholar, a writer of fiction. The movie was initially a source of pain, then a puzzle to be understood, and finally an inspiration for his novel about a Vietnamese spy, “The Sympathizer.”

Even now, after a rapturous reception for the novel, his first, that included the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, Mr. Nguyen’s feelings about Francis Ford Coppola’s 1979 war epic are still somewhat raw.

“‘Apocalypse Now’ is an important work of art,” Mr. Nguyen, 45, said in an interview at his house here. “But that doesn’t mean I’m going to bow down before it. I’m going to fight with it because it fought with me.”

“The Sympathizer,” which is narrated by the unnamed spy, begins with the Communist takeover of South Vietnam in 1975 and then continues in Southern California among a group of die-hard exiles whose motto is “Always resent, never relent.” A megalomaniacal Hollywood director invites the spy to critique the script for his war movie and then hires him to share his native expertise during filming in the Philippines.

For those who don’t get the many hints in those chapters, the novel’s acknowledgments list more than a dozen works about the making of “Apocalypse Now.” “I’m a scholar,” Mr. Nguyen explained.

Despite such trappings, “The Sympathizer” does not read like an academic work. It is mordantly funny and highly polished, but it makes antiwar classics like “Catch-22” and “Slaughterhouse-Five” seem happy-go-lucky. At the end of “Catch-22,” the hero runs away from the army that is trying to kill him. At the end of “The Sympathizer,” the antihero is tortured.

“There are no conventional happy endings here,” Mr. Nguyen said. “Conventional happy endings are the property of Hollywood. And that’s propaganda — propaganda for the American dream. I don’t believe in that.”

The American dream has been looking a little tattered recently, which makes “The Sympathizer” a historical novel that matches the current mood.

“It’s fitting and proper that ‘The Sympathizer’ won the Pulitzer,” said Robert Olen Butler, who won the prize in 1993 for his own, much gentler tale of displaced Vietnamese, “A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain.”

“The book’s fundamental anger welters at the heart of the politics and protests and public discourse of America today.”

Mr. Nguyen lives in Silver Lake, a largely Hispanic neighborhood here that has more recently become a hipster hangout. His living room is immaculate, devoid of all personal touches. In one corner are five coffee-table books. They all have “Vietnam” in the title.

“A war doesn’t end simply because we
say it does, and a war isn’t simply the things that happen on the battlefield,” he said. “To me, war is a much more expansive beast.”

If “The Sympathizer” was born out of anger, it also grew out of other books. Writers draw inspiration from fellow artists all the time, but with Mr. Nguyen, the relationship is especially tight.

Ralph Ellison’s “Invisible Man” is evoked on the first page. (Mr. Nguyen and his partner, Lan Duong, named their first child Ellison.) The infamous liver scene in Philip Roth’s “Portnoy’s Complaint” is reprised, this time with squid. But “Apocalypse Now” is the most overt influence. “The Sympathizer” is a handsome tribute to one of America’s greatest living directors, or perhaps a punch in the face, or maybe both at once.

“I think if someone were to spend 50 or 60 pages putting me into a novel, I would be amused,” Mr. Nguyen said. “Francis Ford Coppola is a genius in the book. Even if he is flawed.”

That’s a polite way of putting it. At one point in the novel, the director apparently tries to kill the spy by setting a cemetery ablaze. It would be interesting to know Mr. Coppola’s reaction to all this, but he did not respond to a request for an interview. That disappoints Mr. Nguyen a bit. “I’m not afraid of confrontation,” he said.

Mr. Nguyen first saw Mr. Coppola’s film when he was around 10. He was a Vietnamese refugee who spoke fluent English, a bookworm curious about his roots, a war buff like so many boys. He watched the movie alone at home in San Jose on a newfangled VCR.

One scene in particular devastated him. American soldiers on a boat taking the protagonist, played by Martin Sheen, upriver stop to search a Vietnamese family’s sampan. The soldiers end up massacring everyone.

“People just like me were being slaughtered,” Mr. Nguyen said. “I felt violated.” A decade later, as a student at Berkeley, he talked about the scene for a film class. He began rationally, he remembered, and then realized his voice was full of rage. “It was an antiwar movie about the war in Vietnam, but the movie was about Americans,” he said. “The Vietnamese were silent and erased.”

Two decades on, Mr. Nguyen teaches the scene in his course on the American war in Vietnam at the University of Southern California, where he is an associate professor of English and American studies and ethnicity. He also discusses “Apocalypse Now” in “Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War,” published in April by Harvard University Press.

Call it obsession, call it dedication, but this immersion in the war and the art it produced is not typical of Vietnamese-Americans — or, for that matter, of Mr. Nguyen’s own family. His older brother, Tung Thanh Nguyen, a professor of clinical medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, remembers the real war but tries not to think about it.

“I have never made it through a movie about the Vietnam War,” he said. “I refused to pick up a book about the war. Does that mean it doesn’t matter? No, it means it matters way too much. This is how people cope.”

Their parents, retired proprietors of a corner grocery in San Jose, declined to have their names printed on the dedication page of “Nothing Ever Dies.” For them, their past isn’t even past, which makes their son’s choice of profession seem especially unlikely.

The older brother said, “To be a Vietnamese-American and choose to write fiction, especially about the war, is an incredibly rebellious act.”

Like most seemingly overnight successes, Viet Thanh Nguyen had a long apprenticeship. “The Sympathizer” is the first novel he ever tried to write, but he has been writing short stories for 20 years. “The Sympathizer” was submitted to 14 publishers, and 13 turned it down.

Grove Press, an independent house, took it on and made a major commitment. After all the ecstatic reviews and awards, the novel sold about 22,000 copies in hardcover — no blockbuster.

“I’m delighted it’s sold as many copies as it has, given it’s not a warm and fuzzy book,” the author said. “If I’d written the Steven Spielberg version of a Vietnam War novel and it didn’t sell two million copies, I’d be disappointed.”

The Pulitzer presents an opportunity to take the book to another level. Grove published 20,000 copies in paperback before the prize, then another 120,000 after. Mr. Nguyen has received many offers to speak at conferences.

And there are less tangible rewards. “My dad called me after the prize, voice shaking with happiness — and he’s not an emotive man,” Mr. Nguyen said. “So I finally made my dad happy, and all it took was winning the Pulitzer Prize for my first novel.”