



2021

Review of On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous

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Recommended Citation

Diep, Bao (2021) "Review of On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous," *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement*. Vol. 16 : Iss. 1, Article 17.

DOI: 10.7771/2153-8999.1245

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Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement

Vol. 16 Iss. 1 (2021)

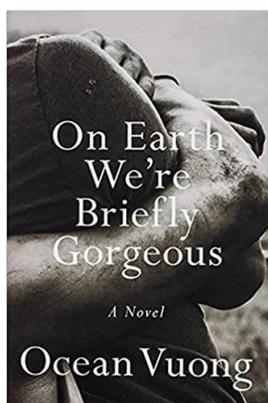
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Book Review: Vuong, O. (2019). *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. 256 pp. Penguin Press.
ISBN: 978-0525562023

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The Vietnam War ended 45 years ago, yet its legacy and aftermath continue to inspire many writers and artists today. There are works of literature, art, and movies that accentuate and highlight the impact of the war before, and after, yet only a handful of them touch on the individual and families that are impacted by it. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong is one of those exceptions.

Unlike other memoirs that emphasize solely the Vietnam War, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* guides readers to explore the aftermath of the war through the lenses of a young, queer Vietnamese refugee. Ocean Vuong is also brutally honest about his exploration of race, class, and masculinity and the taboo subject of mental health. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is a love letter, a confession, an attempt to make sense of Vuong's traumatic beginnings.

In the beginning, Vuong explores in-depth the effect of the Vietnam War on him and his family. After the fall of Saigon and the end of the Vietnam war in 1975, Vuong's family fled Vietnam and eventually settled in Hartford, Connecticut. The author, referred to as Little Dog in the book, profoundly shares experiences of his late twenties about the migration from Vietnam to the United States after the Vietnam war; and his struggles to assimilate to this American culture. Much of "On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous" is about what it means to become an American.

Little Dog shares his memories of being part of the nail salon that his mother opened since he was ten years old. He describes the nail salon as a culture that is so complex, toxic and raw. Those same toxic environments have raised and prospered the next generations of Vietnamese Americans. It is a place where "folklore, rumors, tall tales and jokes from the old country are told" (p. 80). A very place where "sorry" is a common word to describe the mixes of emotions: sadness, joy, hope, despair, etc. Little Dog has learned the hidden message of "sorry" and how "sorry" no longer "merely apologizes, but insists, reminds: I am here, right here, beneath you" (p. 91).



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Journal of Southeast Asian American Education & Advancement, Vol. 16, Iss. 1, (2021) ISSN: 2153-8999



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When Little Dog turned fourteen, he got his first job working on a tobacco farm outside of Hartford. There, Little Dog gets exposed to the ugly truth of migrant farm culture. The tobacco farm was also the place where Little Dog also realized that how “Sorry” or “Lo siento” symbolize survival, opportunity, and “passport to remain” (p. 93). The pain of separation, loneliness, and isolation are common emotions experienced by migrant farmworkers.

The tobacco farm was also the first place where Little Dog met Trevor, his first same-sex attraction. Little Dog came to conciliate his sexuality, yet struggled to accept that there is a power differential in their relationship. Little Dog further experienced humiliation when they had sex and how stereotypes and presumptions can be harmful. Despite these barriers, Little Dog continued to work at the tobacco farm, seeing Trevor for two more seasons. Little Dog also had come out to his mother, Rose, while they were at Dunkin Donuts. The death of Trevor from a drug overdose had put Little Dog in an entanglement that he tried to escape. Lan’s passing a few months later had finally led Little Dog to face his fear. Little Dog and Rose brought Lan’s ashes back to Vietnam for burial.

While masculinity is not a widely discussed topic in Vietnamese works of literature, Little Dog repeatedly highlights the subject throughout the book. Growing up fatherless, Rose used physical abuse to teach Little Dog how “to be a man.” “Perhaps to lay hands on your child is to prepare him for war” (p. 13). When Little Dog failed to defend himself from the neighborhood children, Rose would get angry and picked Little Dog up and screamed, “What kind of boy would let them do that?” and then, “Stop crying. You are always crying!” (p. 26); which was followed by a pattern of slaps from Rose to her son. This method of parenting has been portrayed in American culture for decades, typically performed by the father figure. Masculinity can indeed be destructive. Perhaps Rose wants to revoke Little Dog’s aggression and frustration, as the result of a society that feminizes boys by denying them the necessary rites and rituals to realize their true selves as men.

Toxic masculinity is deeply embedded in many cultures that often prevent young boys and men from expressing their emotions, which are viewed as weakness and vulnerability. “It’s true that, in Vietnamese, we rarely say *I love you*, and when we do, it is almost always in English” (p. 33). Asian men are often portrayed as less than the ideal image of American masculinity. Trevor fits the stereotype of dominance and masculinity. “I thought of that boy, how far from me he was and still American” (p. 98). The power dynamic roles that both Little Dog and Trevor share in their relationship once again strengthen the idea that white centrality is highly valued in mixed-race relationships.

“I don’t like girls,” Little Dog blurts out (p. 129). Little Dog had purposely avoided using the Vietnamese word for gay, *Pê-đê*, which comes from the French for *pédéraste*. Before the French



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invasion of Vietnam, there was no word for gay people. Either the idea of queerness was nonexistent or was seen as normal. When Rose reminded Little Dog that queer people are killed for wearing dresses, she wondered what could have gone wrong when she gave birth to a healthy, normal boy. Rose has implied that being queer was “not healthy or normal” and it goes against society’s idea of masculinity. Little Dog, nonetheless, has shattered the barrier by coming out to his mother as such a young age.

I couldn’t help but read this text through an educator lens. As a queer person navigates through different social spaces, one often carries the burden of dual identities as ways to protect themselves and to blend in. Queer people of color often carry dual-identiti(es) that help them survive in the oppressive environment. Little Dog has carried such identiti(es) as a queer, person of color and a refugee. When a queer young person enters the American education setting, he/she must prepare to negotiate between being an LGBT member or member of a specific minority group that he/she identifies with. This phenomenon is a result of internalized racism and homophobia that some oppressed groups have not been able to overcome. By having to choose between identiti(es), queer students of color might lose the sense of belonging to any group that they affiliated with. Queer students of color who are immigrants or refugees might even experience the case of hyphenated identity, in which they not only feel alienated from their dual-identiti(es) but also not feeling fully American. This type of feeling imposes many obstacles for queer students of color to deal with in educational settings.

Immigrant, refugees, and minorities involuntarily carry crisis/crises with them due to intergenerational trauma, genocides, war, conflicts, and pandemics. From the book, Little Dog experiences stressors from fleeing the country and how the war impacted his family members both emotionally and psychologically. In contrast, immigrant students carry acculturative stress, which Williams and Berry (1991) describes as the adaption to the unfamiliar traditions of a new culture often involving changes in values, behaviors, identity, and knowledge. This stress can affect their children, as well as their performance in school.

"You're a mother, Ma. You're also a monster. But so am I, which is why I can't turn away from you," Little Dog said. He has unreluctantly shared his experience of being a victim of child abuse from his mother, who has PTSD. When he was 13, he told Rose to stop hitting him. “Stop, Ma. Quit it.” The author has metaphorically borrowed the image of surviving monarchs passing messages to their children as a way to relay how Rose’s message of trauma and violence has been handed down to Little Dog. While Little Dog believes that Rose’s abusive acts reflect her trauma from the war, he still has reservations to accept her actions.

For the fact that generational trauma exists in his family, Little Dog has also recorded that his grandmother, Lan, who suffers from schizophrenia, is frequently his protector. By provoking a



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taboo subject, the author has engaged the audience to confront their fear of the invisible monster that often shatters families and communities. For many immigrant and refugee communities, the aftermath of wars often carries heavyweights and total loss for individuals and families. PTSD, trauma, and separation are factors that contribute to post-war mental health disorders. These diseases or as I call them, “invisible monsters,” are often ignored and go untreated because they carry shame, guilt, and despair.

Minority and immigrant youths who live in low-income areas attend school each week being affected by toxic stresses and trauma, as the result of adverse childhood experiences such as chronic neglect, family violence and different forms of oppression. Their stresses could also relate to their parent’s daily struggles, and they could easily be targeted at schools. Childhood stress can be thought of as a continuum. Little Dog has experienced a tremendous amount of childhood stress, from the time his family fled Vietnam and arrived in America.

On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous is a first of its kind memoir that touches on important and taboo issues regarding homosexuality and mental health. As a preliminary introduction to Vietnamese American culture and its controversial views on queerness, it will appeal to readers and scholars and those who want to learn more about the experiences of Vietnamese American queers. Ocean Vuong has undoubtedly expanded opportunities for other scholars to engage similarly important topics.

About the Author



Bao Diep is a PhD student in the Culture and Teaching program at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. He earned his BA in Sociology, and his MSW in Social Work also from the University of Minnesota- Twin Cities. His research interest includes Southeast Asian American students’ experiences in higher education; Vietnamese American students’ experiences, and how their identities, particularly queer identities, impact their experiences in higher education in the United States.

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