

August 2020



Ocean Vuong is a prize winning Vietnamese American poet. He is a young gay man or as he describes his autobiographical character Little Dog, a “gay yellow faggot”. Now, living in New York with a university education, he grew up in Hartford Connecticut with his Ma (Rose) and his grandmother Lan (Lilly) as refugees. Vuong tells his story through a letter he addresses to his mother that she will never read as she’s not literate in English. “What I am about to tell you you will never know....I am writing to reach you – even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are.”

Through a fragmented narrative, the book describes his family’s history in Vietnam under the US invasion and occupation and how Lan fell in love with and married a US soldier. Her daughter Rose grew up in an orphanage and worked among other casual jobs as a sex worker in Saigon. In the US, Rose works at a nail salon where she hunches over clients’ feet and hands all day, ruining her lungs and back. She is traumatised by her life and her violent husband and is loving yet occasionally violent towards her son. Crazy and wise grandmother Lan looks after Little Dog and they have a warm and caring relationship. His white American grandfather Paul is also a tender and accepting presence in his life. His father is absent -taken away by police after a particularly violent attack on his mother and isn’t missed.

It is also a coming of age story about Little Dog, his lonely and bullied schooling, his love affair with Trevor, a young all American white boy who lives in a trailer with his alcoholic homophobic violent father. Trevor is addicted to opioids and lives very precariously but he is Little Dog’s only friend. Their sex is exploratory and vigorous, passionate and tender.

The title of the novel seems to refer to the emotional flowering of youth as Little Dog comes to appreciate who he is and where and who he is from. The wanderer butterfly appears from time to time throughout the novel as a symbol of this fleeting brilliance. It is a carefully crafted and lovingly rendered portrait of Ma (Rose) and Lan (Lilly). There are vivid and scary flashbacks to scenes of their life in Vietnam during and after the war and this creates a context for their life in the US. I felt he offered a universal portrait of the refugee's struggle while describing a very individual set of circumstances. It was brave writing and true with occasionally overly flowery, cryptic and introspective passages.

Most of us really appreciated the book and found it tough but very rewarding. There is so much going on and it's a complex narrative but we felt an all pervasive tenderness and indeed generosity inspite of the brutality. Sometimes we found it too much, overwhelming and over blown with the heavily poetic prose. Those who listened to Vuong reading the audiobook found it gave them a deeper appreciation.

Check another member's review [here](#).

Ratings: Lynda, 4.5, Pauline Nicola Margie 4, Viv 3.5, Janet and Sandy 3, Claudia 2.

Our next meeting will be at Preece House on 14/09/20 at 6:30PM to discuss 10 Minutes 38 Seconds In This Strange World by Elif Shafak.

Other Books We Read

August 2020

- Actress by Anne Enright, 3
- Kokomo by Victoria Hannan, 3
- Suzanne by Annais Barbeau-Lavalette, 4
- The Ministry of Utmost Happiness by Arundhati Roy, 3
- The Cockroach by Ian McEwan, 3
- Flaubert's Parrot by Julian Barnes, 4
- Moon Tiger by Penelope Lively, 5
- A Bigger Picture by Malcolm Turnbull, 3
- The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath, 3.5
- Seven poor men of Sydney by Christina Stead, 3.5
- Heartbreaker by Claudia Dey, 3
- Flaubert's Parrot by Julian Barnes, 4
- Middlemarch by George Eliot, 4.5
- Under Full Sail by Rob Mundle, 4
- Mudlarking – Lost and Found on the River Thames by Lara Maiklem, 4, 4 and 3.5
- Love in the Time Of Cholera by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, 4.5
- The Hidden Life of Trees by Peter Wohlleben, 3
- Poum and Alexandre by Catherine de Saint Phalle, 4.5
- The sea and Us by Catherine de Saint Phalle, 4
- The girl with the louding voice by Abi Dare, 3
- The Things She Owned by Katharine Tamiko Arguile, 2.5
- Stone sky gold mountain by Mirandi Riwoe, 2.5
- Sex and Vanity by Kevin Kwan, 2 and 2.5
- See What You Made Me Do, Jess Hill 4.5
- My Name is Lucy Barton, Elizabeth Strout 3

The Museum of Innocence, Orhan Pamuk 4
A spool of blue thread by Anne Tyler, 2.5
Humankind by Rutger Bregman, 3.5
Breath by James Nestor, 3.5
An Elephant in my Kitchen by Françoise Malby-Anthony, 3.5
Anything is Possible by Elizabeth Strout, 3.5
Home Fire by Kamila Shamsie, 3
Interviewing by William Seymour, 3.5
Ex Libris by Anne Fadiman, 3.5
Possessing the Secret of Joy by Alice Walker, 3.5
Mothering Sunday by Graham Swift 4.5
One Moonlit Night by Caradog Prichard, 3.5
The Bookshop by Penelope Lively, 4
Staziland by Anna Funder, 4