

On earth we've briefly gorgeous by Ocean Vuong Review by Margie

I think this book may be polarising for some as it has heavily poetic prose. Sometimes it may be too much but the author is a poet!

So that is what you would expect. "Trevor's eyes are grey irises smattered with bits of brown and ember so that, looking at them, you could almost see, right behind you, something burning under an overcast sky". I can imagine that some readers would not think a young man would think this deeply about another young man's eyes.

I think this young author has seen and felt much in his life, and is wounded but a survivor.

"Because the sunset, like survival, exists only on the verge of its own disappearing. To be gorgeous, you must first be seen, but to be seen allows you to be hunted."

And the detail of the sexual encounters between Trevor and "Little Dog" could be too graphic for some. But I thought the scene at the river when Trevor was cleaning Little Dog was very touching. Even Trevor himself is not a gentle person, with his unhappy background and his treatment of Little Dog for his pleasure and not to be taken as anything more. Some could see this as Little Dog not thinking he is worthy of love. "Sometimes being offered tenderness feels like the very proof that you've been ruined."

Personally, I really liked this author and the story. There is so much going on in this book, and for such a young author and a debut novel, there is a very "tender touch" to his writing and this story. The narrative is complex. The Vietnam war, displacement and loss of country, finding your way as an immigrant in America, bullying, coming of age, exploring sexual identity, PTSD. There is so much to explore in this book. And I think the author has experienced all of this. The relationship with his mother who said after hitting him "I am not a monster, I am a mother" - is she just toughening him up so he can survive in America?

There is a gentle touch to his writing, for example the love of his grandmother, the massaging of his mother's back at the end of the day, the kitchen time with his vegetarian American grandfather and the love scenes with Trevor, the forgiveness of his mother's harsh and often abusive treatment of him, the letter to her she will never read.

I liked the toing and froing of the time period, eg the Vietnam experiences of his grandmother and young Rose, intertwined with the now of the story.

I read up on the author's background and the book appears to be an auto biography - or it seems to me that the book is based on events that Ocean Vuong has experienced.

The book is not quite a 4, but definitely more than 3.5 for me.  
My favourite quote " He laughed, the fake one you use to test the thickness of silence ".