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On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous by Ocean Vuong review — the debut novel causing a lot of fuss

There's a lot of buzz about Ocean Vuong: does his first novel deserve the attention?

Review by Claire Lowdon

“An American soldier f***** a Vietnamese farmgirl. Thus my mother exists. Thus I exist. Thus no bombs = no family = no me.” The origin story of the Vietnamese-American writer Ocean Vuong as told in his poem Notebook Fragments, from *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*. The debut collection won the TS Eliot and a Forward prize in 2017, two extraordinary achievements for the then-28-year-old. If the buzz about Vuong didn't reach you then, it soon will, because his first novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, looks set to be a much bigger literary event. It's been championed by Vuong's mentor, the poet and academic Ben Lerner, plugged by Oprah and Andrew Marr and hailed as “the great American novel” by Max Porter.

Vuong's material is gripping even in precis. The novel is a letter to the narrator's mother Rose, who, like Vuong's own mother, is an illiterate manicurist abandoned by her violent husband soon after the family moves to America as refugees from Vietnam. Vuong's father loomed large in the poetry. The novel focuses on Rose, her schizophrenic mother, Lan, and the narrator's story of growing up gay in a deprived neighbourhood of Hartford, Connecticut. The narrator/Vuong character is called Little Dog — a “despicable” name used as a “shield” in the hope that evil spirits will hear it and pass on by. We follow Little Dog from early childhood, struggling with limited English to interpret America for his broken mother and grandmother, through the secret world of his adolescence and his first love affair, to a qualified present-day peace, marked by tragedy but also, quietly, triumph.

Vuong sounds like an ideal writer for our times before you even start to assess the writing. It would be no surprise to see his name on the Booker longlist. If that happens, he'll be subjected to more intense scrutiny than he was in 2017: novels are bigger news than poetry. The response will probably be polarised. Detractors will mutter about preciousness and pretentiousness in the prose. Fans will brandish unimpeachable adjectives such as “urgent”, “raw” and “brave”.

Beware of any unmediated raves; don't let them fool you into expecting a polished masterpiece. This is a poetic novel, formally and stylistically ambitious. There are going to be problems, and because Vuong is taking real creative risks, those problems, when they arise, are significant. As you might intuit from the title, one of Vuong's modes is a high-stakes hyper-lyricism (think ee cummings and Emily Dickinson) that can teeter over into kitsch — “the piano drips its little notes, like rain dreaming itself whole”.

Vuong's greatest weakness is his fondness for metaphors involving punctuation and syntax. Not only is it tiresome when writing repeatedly references the act of writing, it's also an impoverished field of reference — there are only so many punctuation marks. The poor comma works particularly hard. Page 139: “It is no accident, Ma, that the comma resembles a foetus —

that curve of continuation.” Page 154: “Trevor with the scar like a comma on his neck, syntax of what next what next what next.” Page 159: “Both of you lying beneath the slide: two commas with no words, at last, to keep you apart.”

But the risk-taking works both ways, and the highs here are inversely proportional to the lows. There is a lot of good writing on the level of the sentence. Little Dog notices the “blond hairs sweated brown” along the arms of his first love, the drug-addicted Trevor. Working a tough summer job harvesting tobacco, the moustache of another labourer is “almost grey from dried sweat”. He hears his mother’s stilted English (“How can I hep you?”) and tenderly conjures his grandmother through smell, “her breath a mix of Ricola cough drops and the meaty scent of sleep”.

Vuong also employs an amazing vocal range that powers this nearly plotless novel, allowing for startling juxtapositions and feats of compression. He skips effortlessly from the narrator’s childhood memories of being beaten by his mother (who suffers from PTSD) and the biography of Tiger Woods to lyrical fantasies about buffaloes and monarch butterflies.

Most impressive is the treatment of abuse and mental illness, two problematically trendy modern subjects that are so often slapped down for instant profundity. Vuong handles violence and its difficult legacy (particularly evident in Little Dog’s sex life) with intelligence and artistry. Each permutation is presented not as part of a universal Issue but as something particular to his characters. There are no archetypes here.

Vuong’s determination to see well-trodden ground afresh, with unremitting complexity, is extremely rare. Lay this book alongside Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life* or Gabriel Tallent’s *My Absolute Darling*, and you are looking at the difference between adult literature and fairy story. In these authenticity-hungry times, Vuong could have let his sensational biography simply “speak for itself”. There is a great deal to admire: that he was able to give such personal material novelistic treatment; that he had the patience to wait until that was possible; that he only had wait until he was 30. We should answer his patience with our own as we watch this exciting talent try things out on the page, sometimes getting it right, sometimes getting it wrong, but always striving to make it new.