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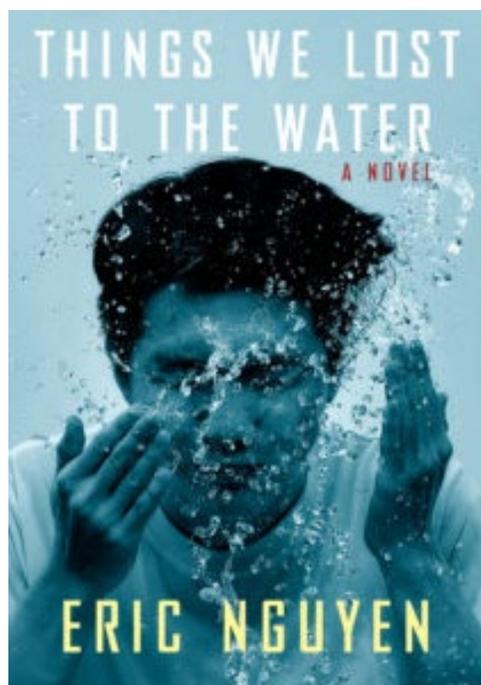
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KALEIDOSCOPIC AND MAYBE EVEN MORE TRUE

A Conversation with Eric Nguyen



Eric Nguyen earned an MFA in creative writing from McNeese State University in Louisiana. he has been awarded fellowships from Lambda Literary, Voices of Our Nation Arts (VONA), and the Tin House Writers Workshop. He is the editor in chief of [diaCRITICS](#). He lives in Washington, DC. *Things We Lost to the Water* is first novel.

Sarah Heying is senior fiction editor of *Yalobusha Review*

SH: What a brilliant debut novel! I was in awe of how deftly you wove together the various POVs. You give the most space to Hương and her two sons, Ben and Tuấn, but then occasionally another character's interiority pops in. What was your process like for figuring out whose POV needed space, and when? And what do you see to be the role of shared narrative to these characters' stories?

EN: Initially, I was interested in Hương's story, but eventually, her sons made their way into the narrative and it became a generational story, where each character represents a different kind of immigrant experience. The mother is the one that actively fled a country after having built an entire life there. Tuấn her first son has some memory of a past life, but barely. And Ben, all his memories were formed in the US. So these three characters and their perspectives became a way to explore those Vietnamese American experiences. By having everyone have their say, it makes it feel kaleidoscopic and maybe even more true. They say every story has more than one side to it, and I think

this novel is an exercise in that.

Among the three main characters, deciding whose point of view needed space was really about where they were in their lives and if anything in their lives needed to be shown—say a milestone or a moment that would impact their formation of who they are. The problem I had to solve while writing this was how to make sure I don't miss the other characters while writing from another's perspective, and for me the key was reminding myself that this was a family I was writing about and what one person decides to do eventually affects the others. So thinking of it as a metaphorical Jenga tower helped.

SH: The novel takes the theme of belonging—a staple of coming of age, immigrant, and coming out narratives—and makes it so incredibly complex and infinite in what it can tell us about how humans strive to find themselves and each other through the messiness of life. With Ben, belonging seems both impossible and imperative, and it seems inextricably entangled with feelings of ownership. He has to wrest his particular story from the narratives that were handed to him—by his family, Dr. Schreiber, literature, or otherwise. Through writing the novel, how has your own understanding of the relationship between belonging, ownership, and storytelling evolved?

EN: I think the idea of belonging and ownership and stories are all tied to one another. To belong means you own part of a community's story and you have the right to tell it. As a queer Vietnamese American, I have always this feeling of not belonging. Growing up, I was too American, in a way, to fit into the small community of Vietnamese that my parents belonged to, which were mostly Catholics, and there I was an atheist who spoke Vietnamese like a first grader. But then, at school, I was always one of a handful of Vietnamese kids and thus not American enough. When I discovered my queerness, which added another layer of not quite fitting in. Given all of this, it took me a while to feel comfortable with writing Vietnamese American or queer characters. My early stories didn't even have these types of people in them. But through writing this, I think I learned that all of these identities belonged to me already, that I had the right to tell these stories, and that, anyway, the borders of communities are not as rigidly defined as one would think. There are many types of people in any community and with that many stories.

SH: Related, New Orleans is a city that gives so many people such intense feelings of ownership and pride. How do you think these threads about ownership and belonging play out in ways particular to New Orleans (whether through the

characters' or your own experience)?

EN: For my characters, I feel I sense of ownership and belonging play out in their experience of having lost a place before. I think that feeling of having lost something as big as a country and a life makes it more easy to make that proclamation that you belong to a place and also that it is yours because you've built a life there. This is the case for H_Uong, who, having lost so much, I think craves something that is hers that, hopefully, can't be lost again. So I think for her being proud of New Orleans comes naturally. But for Addy, or even Ben, who grew up most of their lives in New Orleans, they wouldn't quite understand that, especially growing up in a place where they are quite different (as a Haitian immigrant for Addy, as an Asian American for Ben). For Ben, especially, it becomes a burden. I think it's kind of that feeling of living your whole life in a small town and wanting something else.

In my experience, the people who are from New Orleans are really prideful of the place because it really is such a welcoming city. It feels easy to belong, to find a place.

SH: I just love H_Uong so much. The way her character diligently created this archive of intimacy felt so relatable, and I was struck by the way her process compared to Ben's writerly aspirations in the academic and literary spheres. Can you speak to which aspects of these characters' relationships to writing and recording you relate to in your own process?

EN: I feel the way those two characters come to the act of writing is very similar to the way I, and perhaps many other writers, come to it. At first, you just really write for yourself—like in a diary or, for me growing up, writing short stories for myself to entertain myself. But then you become an adult and there are particular ways to write, to become a writer. And I think that was what led me to get an MFA in the first place—an effort to professionalize this hobby. But I think, in writing this novel, those two realms of writing kind of merged, the walls broke down. To write about the Vietnamese American experience, that is to write one that is intimately connected to my own, is to write for myself. But then to also write it for others to understand, that's the professional, academic, literary part of it. Looking at the bigger picture, it feels like I finally found a way to tell others about myself (even it's all fiction), and this moment of having this book published feels like I've come full circle.