Ocean Vuong

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The Chameleon

The release of Ocean Vuong's novel this year was a major literary event. An interview with the author about Vietnam, Asian stereotypes and loneliness on the school bus.

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Ocean Vuong smiles shyly as he takes a seat in a hotel room in Berlin. Ever since the 30-year-old Vietnamese American writer published his debut novel "On Earth, We’re Briefly Gorgeous" (Penguin Press), he has been seen as something of a literary wunderkind. In Berlin, he gave a reading at the International Literature Festival. On this Friday in late September, he wears a blue shirt, a pink cap and a long, golden earring in his right ear: a queer poet, who exudes an air of fragility and pride. His face lights up when he hears that the journalist’s parents are also from Vietnam. He seamlessly glides from English into Vietnamese before switching back to English again.

ZEIT ONLINE: You were only two years old when you left Vietnam. Do you have any memories of the time before?

Ocean Vuong: No, nothing. It’s strange, but my first memory is of America. But I have relatives in Vietnam and I go back. I buried my grandmother there in 2009. It was disorienting: There is a Vietnam in my head that my relatives told me about, but when I went back to Saigon it was like being in Times Square in New York City. It was like being in a different world. Even the culture had changed. The children were much more open and free, some would say rude. I had very strict traditional rules in my house, and when I saw the kids talking to their parents, I felt like an old lady.

ZEIT ONLINE: You grew up in a Vietnamese family in Hartford, Connecticut. What was that like?

Vuong: We were living in an apartment with one bedroom and seven people: My parents, my grandmother, my uncle, two aunts and me. They are former rice farmers, they didn’t have an education or a TV. When you went into the apartment, you walked back in time. But it was also so alive, like a little village. Something was always happening, Vietnamese was always spoken, there was no silence. For a kid who didn’t talk that much, it was wonderful. I could just close my eyes, listen and feel part of my family.

ZEIT ONLINE: What happened when you stepped outside the little village?

Vuong: We lived in the inner city, in a black and Latino community. We had no car, so we had to walk everywhere. I didn’t know America was white until years later when I would go to the mall and be like: Wait a minute! What’s that?! The myth is that America is a melting pot, but nothing is melting, everything is divided. Looking back, I think that moving through so many social layers allowed me to be a chameleon: I can adapt my mannerism and my speech to every room I’m in. And that’s the best thing for a writer: I can go into every character, every persona.

ZEIT ONLINE: Were there any other Vietnamese people in your neighborhood?

Vuong: There was a Chinese family, but they never went outside. There was an Oriental supermarket though. It was very small, but jammed from floor to ceiling with tea pots, chopsticks and those red Vietnamese blankets. My mother would shop slower so she could be in that space longer. She would point at things and say: "This is fish sauce. This is soy sauce. This is how you make pho." As a kid I just hated it, but now I look back and think that it was such a beautiful education.

Vuong speaks softly and pensively. He became a novelist by writing poetry. His poems have been published in the New Yorker and the New York Times, his poetry book "Night Sky with Exit Wounds" was awarded the T.S. Eliot Prize and will be published in a German-English version next spring by Hanser ("Nachthimmel mit Austrittswunden"). His novel "On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous" also has an unusual, lyrical structure: It is written as a letter that the first-person narrator addresses to his mother, a woman who can’t read.

In his novel, Vuong tells the fragmented story of a boy called Little Dog, who was also born in Saigon, but grows up in Hartford. He falls in love with a white boy, who ends up being addicted to drugs. His writing speaks of the pain of an outsider, who fights his way out of the war-torn past of his family, and the boundaries of his social background. Vuong says that all characters are based on real people. He did not, however, want to write a memoir or a non-fiction book: He wanted his characters to have their own voice.

"I wanted to honor the long tradition of queer people"

ZEIT ONLINE: Little Dog, the main character of your book, rides the school bus every morning, but no one wants to sit next to him. Is that something you have experienced yourself?

Vuong: That scene in the bus happened a lot. There was one point in the first draft when I wrote a truer version of it, but I took it out because it was too perfect, like a scene from a movie.

ZEIT ONLINE: What was it really like?

Vuong: This little white girl saw me crying. She was also bullied because she had glasses and braces. She sat next to me and started doing this miraculous thing where she said: "Do you know your multiplication tables? 1x1 is 1. 2x2 is 4." We were reciting it together. When I wrote that scene, I looked at it and said: This is dear to me, I don’t want to turn it into literature. It seemed fraudulent. I put the rescuing elsewhere, with the white grandfather.

ZEIT ONLINE: What was it like to be the kid who had to sit by himself?

Vuong: The mother of Little Dog tells him to disappear, to not get noticed. "You’re already Vietnamese, that’s already one strike against you," she says. She comes from a different world, the war, so she wants to protect the kid: If you are noticed, you might get hurt. The kid listens. Part of this book is a Bildungsroman, but it’s also a Künstlerroman. How did that person become an artist? How does this kid that tries so hard to stay invisible start to speak, try to find his own pleasure in his sexuality?

ZEIT ONLINE: The sex scenes between Little Dog and Trevor, his white boyfriend, are very strong; it’s rare to read something comparable. Was it hard to write them?

Vuong: Those scenes were hard, but I wanted to write them because they describe the part of queerness that everybody is so afraid of. Queer people learn pleasure by failure. When you go to sex education in high school, they don’t tell you about queer sex. Parents never sit down with their children to tell them about it. There’s just nothing. You have to really stumble in the dark, figuratively and in reality, and that is a way of self-knowledge. I wanted to honor that long tradition of queer people.

ZEIT ONLINE: By writing these sex scenes so openly, you also challenge the stereotype of the inhibited Asian man.

Vuong: The things that are often associated with Asian people is that we are small, quiet and feminine; in America that is seen as weak. The stereotype is that we’re always accommodating others and embody an "after you" mentality. We’re in the service industry, we work in laundry shops and nail salons, we do hotel service and nursing. I was interested in the moment when an Asian-American character stops accommodating others and starts taking care of himself.

What is it like to be part of a minority that is only slowly becoming more visible? Vuong lifts his hands in the air and cups them to describe a tall, imaginary snow pile. To be an Asian artist is like walking through this snow pile, he says. In the beginning, there is nothing; in the end, there is a path.

ZEIT ONLINE: Last year saw the release of a Hollywood movie with an all-Asian cast, "Crazy Rich Asians." It surprised many by climbing to the top of the box office. Did you watch it?

Vuong: "Crazy Rich Asians" was a romantic comedy, it didn’t really touch deep on Asian-American issues, but it broke open the door, and it made a lot of money. I don’t love those films, but I went because it was so important. It was 11 in the morning, a matinee, and the theater was filled to capacity with white people. The first scene opens with a Chinese opera song. And I just start weeping. Who cares what happens in the movie?! It was just a bunch of white people, at 11 in the morning, listening to Chinese music. That alone was so important!

"She’s very proud that her son is doing this"

ZEIT ONLINE: Do you think there might be more appreciation for this type of story now? Do you think you might have benefitted from this?

Vuong: Absolutely. If I had written this book in 1970, nobody would know about it. I would never even have stepped into a publishing house. But there were some writers who paved the path before me: the feminist Maxine Hong Kingston, the Pulitzer Prize-winner Viet Thanh Nguyen, the novelist Monique Truong. There is a lot of awareness now. The question is: Will it stay?

ZEIT ONLINE: Your book will be translated into 23 languages. Will it be published in Vietnamese, too?

Vuong: Right now, no. It’s hard because there’s a lot of censorship in Vietnam and the book deals with Vietnam. It was sold to China, but it was censored there, too, a little bit.

ZEIT ONLINE: I went to Saigon recently and people were talking about you. They saw you on YouTube.

Vuong: There’s a great dichotomy between the state and the underground artists. It was always like this in Vietnam, but now we see it more because of social media. It’s heartbreaking because they say: You have to come, you have to come! And I want to go, but a lot of my friends get their visa messed up when they travel there, they get onto these lists of the secret police. So, I’m waiting for a good time. But I know that a lot of beautiful things are happening underground, like poetry readings.

ZEIT ONLINE: Have you ever translated parts of your book into Vietnamese for your family?

Vuong: I couldn’t translate my work. The English is too complicated and my Vietnamese is not good enough. Early on, I wanted to improve my Vietnamese to get a better vocabulary. I thought I could be a Vietnamese translator. I learned new words, and when I came home I started using these words. My mother and my family didn’t understand what I meant. I thought: I’m already so far from them with my English, I can’t take my Vietnamese any further. Maybe I’ll learn when everybody is gone. For now, I’ll keep my Vietnamese where it is, where they are – at third grade level.

ZEIT ONLINE: Your book is written as a letter to the mother of Little Dog. How does your own mother feel about it?

Vuong: I tell my mother what I write about, but it’s like telling her about Mars. It’s just not her world. The members of my family work in factories and nail salons. Reading a book is a bourgeois luxury they never had. Why should I demand their interest? I kind of like that: When I come home I’m just a son, not the writer Ocean Vuong. Still, my mother likes to go to my readings, she likes to dress up. She looks at the crowd because she can’t understand what I’m saying. She wants to see their faces, she studies them like an anthropologist. She’s very proud that her son is doing this.

ZEIT ONLINE: That he’s making it.

Vuong: And it’s really making it because I can support her. Before, when someone needed to get a new tooth or the car had broken down, everybody would have to call relatives. It became like a village on fire. We had to go to the little Oriental supermarket and borrow money. It was terrible and incredibly stressful. Now, when the phone rings, I can just take care of it. It seems like magic. Sometimes I joke about it. When I see my mother call, I pick up the phone and say: How much? (laughs).

ZEIT ONLINE: Many first-generation immigrants make huge sacrifices so their children can have a better life. Your mother is now sick with cancer. Do you feel that your success is a vindication for her hardship, something to give back?

Vuong: I think so, but it would be the same if I hadn’t become a writer. When I was a high school student, I worked at Panera Bread (an American bakery chain). They put me onto the computers to take the sandwich orders. Other people knew how to do it, but I didn’t, up to this day I’m very bad with computers. The sandwich maker would yell at me all the time: "Ocean, you got it wrong!" So, I begged them: Please, let me clean the toilets! They were so perplexed. The boss followed me because he thought I was doing something secretive in there. But I just wanted to be alone, and it was much better. Even when I did that, I would support my mother and my family.

*This interview has been edited and condensed for length and clarity. This is the English translation of the original German version*.