

## Of Clerics and Queens: Nghi Vo on Genre, Identity and Crafting Stories

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Best known for her elegant storytelling, lush detail, and evocative prose, Nghi Vo is the acclaimed author of *The Empress of Salt and Fortune*, the first in an ongoing series of novellas called *The Singing Hills Cycle*. Her body of work also includes the novels *Siren Queen*, *The Chosen and the Beautiful*, and *The City in Glass*. She has won the Hugo Award, the Crawford Award, and the Ignite Award, and her books have been repeatedly featured in NPR's Best of the Year lists, securing her place as a significant and distinctive voice in speculative fiction.

This interview was conducted via email between May and June 2024. It touches upon the nature of the genre and forms of fantasy fiction, the significance of being a POC (person of colour) writer of speculative fiction, queerness, and worldbuilding. Vo speaks of the importance of creating counternarratives, the collaborative creation of storyworlds by author and reader,

about disruption, the importance of authoring yourself, and choosing the stories we tell about ourselves.

**Rheanna Mathews:** Genre fantasy has become a more diverse space, of late. How does fantasy fiction provide a space for you as a writer to tell your story?

**Nghi Vo:** I don't think the genre has anything to do with it. I think it's editors like Ruoxi Chen at Tordotcom who made it a priority to promote diverse voices that created a place where I'm allowed to show readers what I can do. Fantasy fiction, like every other genre, is built on the ideals, tastes, and ambitions of the people who publish it. While I'm a speculative fiction writer because I do love the possibilities offered by second world settings, the supernatural and the far future, it's important to understand that fantasy is a genre created by people first, and that will always be the first boundary that must be pushed out.

**RM:** Until recently, perhaps even now, the term 'fantasy' first conjured up images of castles and dragons, swords and sorcery, knights and damsels, and good and evil, in the way that Tolkien set the tone for in the popular imagination. As a POC writer of fantasy, how important is it to reimagine the genre-space of fantasy and develop counternarratives that draw from marginalised epistemologies?

**NV:** I think the moment that you open your mouth (or, in my case, open a new .doc), you are making a bid for attention, for yourself, for something you believe in, for your right to exist and to tell the world how it is, or was, or will be. In any space, in any genre, opening your mouth as an artist of colour means asserting your existence and that of people like you. Silence is death, and so is invisibility, and when we, as marginalised people, bring ourselves into the narrative, we make it bigger, more vibrant, more exciting. So, to answer your question, pretty damn important!

**RM:** As an author of short stories, novellas, and novels, do you have a favorite or preferred form? How would you say the form in which you write intersects with the genre to affect your storytelling?

**NV:** I'm absolutely a short story writer first and foremost. I've been writing short stories much longer than I've been writing novels and novellas, and I write them fast and easily. If you think of writing as diving into deep water, I can write a short story in one or two deep breaths, go under the surface and bring back what I need. Novels and novellas take more!

The joy of short stories in speculative fiction is the collaboration or perhaps the conspiracy with the reader. Necessarily, if you only have 4000 words, you imply a great deal. You hint, you suggest. If you do your job right, the reader comes to meet you halfway in creating the world, and when it works, it's the absolute best.

**RM:** If a story is experienced collaboratively, or as you say, conspiratorially, with author and reader meeting halfway, how do you think they experience the female heroic figure in the story?

**NV:** With any luck, this experience becomes one of identification. People should see the possibility of themselves as heroes, figures capable of doing the things that need to be done and celebrated for such. When I've done my job well, people see how they can be protagonists, and by that needle threaded, they can also perhaps see how the world looks if they were women, queer, brown, any number of other things I might have chosen to write about. Sometimes a story can be a mirror for the reader, other times it's a speculation, and more rarely, it can be the start of a transformation.

**RM:** Who is your primary audience, and do they influence your writing?

**NV:** I'm honestly not sure who my primary audience is. I'm mostly writing things I think would be fun to read or things that would delight my family. I assume the people who find my writing and end up sticking around are people like me, queer, brown, a bit weird, aware of how messy

life can be. I think of them sometimes, and I wish them well. I try not to hurt them. I ask them not to throw things at me. It's pretty chill.

**RM:** What significance does your worldbuilding hold for yourself and your readers?

**NV:** You know, I get asked about worldbuilding a lot in panels and interviews, and what I say is that I do my best to be consistent, but overall, the worlds I write about are more or less like the one we live in. If anyone knows of a world that's consistent, logical, and reliable, please tell me, and we'll all go! I do some worldbuilding, of course, but a lot of it is at a granular level, like mammoth domestication and talking memory spirits. I can't explain our world, and if I were able to explain fully a world that I've created, I think it would feel kind of limiting, if not dishonest.

**RM:** Memory and the many-sidedness of truth are explored in your novellas. In your opinion, how significant are memories and the stories people tell?

**NV:** Stories are everything when the world starts breaking down around you, when you have fewer relatives, homes, rules and governments than you did before. They're the tendons that connect muscle to bone, structure to the force that makes it move. They pass for family when that family's gone, and they stand in for sense when the world seems to have lost it.

Stories are currency, and connection, and instruction. They become smooth so they can be passed quickly from hand to hand and swallowed more easily. They're used to keep things alive and to remind us that some things should stay dead.

Stories aren't food or water or safety or sanity, or peace, but they can show you how to get them.

**RM:** In *The Empress of Salt and Fortune*, we see how In-yo painstakingly spins a narrative of herself and her legacy that then becomes ingrained in the public consciousness. In *When the Tiger Came Down the Mountain*, we see Si-yu unable to decide on a single version of the legend

of Ho Thi Thao and Scholar Dieu as truth. In *Into the Riverlands*, through Lao Bingyi, Mac Khanh, and Master Nie, we see again how legends gain a life of their own. How have you chosen to explore the nuances of cultural mythmaking in your work as a POC writer of fantasy?

**NV:** I don't really believe in self-made men, but I do believe in self-made stories. We don't choose a lot of the things in our lives, where we're born, who we're born to, whether the local political or aesthetic world favors us, but we do choose the stories we tell about ourselves. Telling a story is a choice. Not telling a story is a choice. As a person of color and a child of immigrants, I'm very aware of the power of stories and myths, both as a place to start and as something that can eventually grow binding or too small. The ability to change your story is such an important one.

**RM:** Could you elaborate on what you mean by "the ritual of lipstick" and how you have chosen to portray femininity in your work?

**NV:** The ritual of lipstick comes from Erin McKeown's fantastic song, "The Queer Gospel" (2017). To me, it's about finding the sacred in the everyday, your identity in things others would disregard. It's authoring yourself and finding your own aesthetic and ascribing to that aesthetic exactly the importance that you choose to give it, no more and no less. Sometimes it's a struggle to be yourself, but it is also a celebration, and lipstick is for parties and for fun.

For me, femininity is always so much better as a choice rather than an obligation. I like to see characters choosing it, and when they can't choose it, either to opt in or to opt out, to still understand it as just one way among many to exist in the world.

**RM:** *Empress* is described as being about the anger of women. In-yo's and Rabbit's anger topple an empire. How do you see your female characters, In-yo, Rabbit, Kazu, and Mai, the "silenced and nameless women" (86), subverting dominant heteropatriarchal discourses?

**NV:** Sometimes, all you need to piss off the patriarchy is exist. These women, just by existing in the first place as women with the need to take possession of their own lives and to do as they see fit, have disrupted the patriarchal world they live in. In my experience, honestly, patriarchy is easily disturbed. Give yourself a new name, call a thing as you see it, wear clothes they say aren't for you, love who you want, and suddenly the patriarchy is threatened. Disruption is easy — surviving it is more difficult, and that's where the story comes in.

**RM:** How do you translate your understanding of queerness into your work?

**NV:** I'm queer, and being so is a pleasure, a mode of moving through the world, occasionally being a target, often a joy, a way of connecting with people around me, and a source of constant amusement. Writing, largely the same.

**RM:** Cleric Chih is a nonbinary character who ties together the novellas in *The Singing Hills Cycle*, which also feature queer persons as focal characters. Would you characterise your novellas as queernorm fantasy? What queer issues do you raise in your texts?

**NV:** What I keep coming back to is this voice in my head telling me the world is the world is the world. I certainly don't begrudge anyone who labels Singing Hills queernorm; labels are what it takes to find the things that make you happy. However, for me, the queer people and the queer issues of Singing Hills are as much a part of that world as they are in my world. I and my loved ones are queer, and the issues we face (of which there are many in the times we are living in) are coloured by that fact. Which is to say, it's just the world to us, and whether other people like it or not, it's the world they're living in as well. We're not going anywhere!

**RM:** *Tiger* is a queer romance between Ho Thi Thao and Dieu, both of whom identify as female. Your use of the gender-neutral terms 'tiger' and 'scholar' to describe them seems significant. Could you tell me why you made this choice?

**NV:** I've spent a lot of my life answering the question 'what are you?' with the expectation that it would be answered with some truth about my ethnicity, birthplace, citizenship status, or sexuality. I've thought a few times about how I would answer that question if I didn't care about starting a fight or being accused of being difficult. If I were an 800-pound obligate carnivore, I would answer however I wanted. Similarly, I wanted Dieu to have that pleasure as well.

**RM:** How much of your own identity do you see inscribed in your works in general, and specifically in *Siren Queen* and the *Singing Hills* novellas?

**NV:** Okay, so I used to get really stressed out over people maybe knowing too much about me through the stories I write. Then I realised they definitely know too much about me through the stories I write, and I had better get on with it anyway.

It's all me, the things I think, the things I think are cool or abhorrent, the things that I find sexy or that I find fascinating that other people think are sexy, the things I think about or the things I want to stop thinking about.

*Siren Queen* was my first novel, and you can find me in the dark humor, the horror, and how it feels to have loneliness be so much a part of you it starts to feel good. *Singing Hills* is where you'll find how much I like to have a good time and how fascinated I am by how we define our worlds through the stories we tell each other.

**RM:** In *Siren Queen*, names are closely guarded secrets. In the *Singing Hills* novellas, the names indicate the regional and rich cultural backgrounds of your characters. They also seem to correspond to different Asian naming conventions as well. How important are names for identity formation?

**NV:** I was pretty young when I learned the term exonym, that is, the non-native name for a person, place, group or language, among other things. There's so much wrapped up in how

we're called and what we come to.

Listen. There's what you call yourself, and what others call you. There's what you call yourself in the privacy of your home, and what someone who loves you calls you. There's what someone who hates you calls you.

A question that I come back to is personal choice and identity, how possible or comfortable it is to assert the name you have chosen over what others have laid on you as a gift or a curse. The question of names is maybe not the most important question, but it's definitely up there.

**RM:** Chi is kind and compassionate, but not always the objective cleric. In-yo is far from the dim barbarian princess the Anh imagine her to be. They are inappropriate, different, and subversive. How important is it to acknowledge and centre othered identities?

**NV:** I'm not a huge fan of quoting myself (I never really remember what I've said) but in *Empress*, one of the through-lines is, "you will never remember the great if you do not remember the small" (17). You're never going to get a full picture without including marginalised and othered identities; instead, what you get is, at best, going to be incomplete and, at worst, something that will be used to dismiss, abuse, and belittle people who were just standing there, confused and hurt as to why no one can see them.

**RM:** In your recent short story, *On the Fox Roads*, we are introduced to Lai, a fox demon. Other aspects of your worldbuilding in the *Singing Hills* novellas, *Siren Queen*, and *The Chosen and the Beautiful*, could easily be referenced from various East Asian cultures as well. On the one hand, voices from diverse communities and cultures that have been marginalised and invisibilised into homogenising categories need to be centred, and their stories told. On the other, especially in a genre like fantasy, there runs the risk that aspects of their culture might be subsumed into something merely fantastical (and therefore, not real) in the popular

imagination, further relegating them to the realm of ‘myth’ and ‘legend’ as the author of *Ghost Bird*, Lisa Fuller (“Culturally Aware Reviews”) says. How have you balanced this in your writing? As a reader, how should one approach such texts?

**NV:** As a writer, I’m painfully aware of the pitfalls of being the only story around. I like my stories, love ‘em, as a matter of fact, but I know that in no way should the stories I tell be the only ones that are heard. Only having one story is always treacherous, and what you’re talking about here, the idea of something becoming merely fiction rather than a vital cultural marker, is one of the dangers of having only one story.

As a reader, the defense against this is to be voracious about stories, unrelenting in your drive for novelty and depth. The more stories you demand, the more stories you consume, the better you’ll see foxes for what they are, writers for what they are, and the world for what it is.

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