BKLYN BOOK CLUB KIT

ON EARTH WE’RE BRIEFLY GORGEOUS

OCEAN VUONG

On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous

A Novel

Ocean Vuong

2020 BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY
LITERARY PRIZE WINNER
Dear Reader,

Though our libraries may not be fully open, we continue to believe in the importance of great books and quality library experiences. In this pursuit, we are launching BKLYN Book Club Kits. These kits are bursting at the seams with virtual swag that complements individual books, such as discussion questions, recipes, playlists, and author content. The kits may be used in conjunction with a Brooklyn Public Library book club or on your own. Through these means we hope to foster deeper connections with authors, your books, your community, and with you—even when we’re apart!

This title, On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous by Ocean Vuong, won the 2020 Brooklyn Public Library Literary Prize in Fiction & Poetry.

We hope you enjoy this book and the accompanying kit!

KEEP READING! BPL’S BOOK CLUB PAGE HAS DISCUSSION GROUPS, BOOKLISTS, BOOK CLUB KITS AND MORE: BKLYNLIBRARY.ORG/BORROW/BOOK-DISCUSSION-SETS

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**BOOK SYNOPSIS**

*On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* is a letter from a son to a mother who cannot read. Written when the speaker, Little Dog, is in his late twenties, the letter unearths a family’s history that began before he was born—a history whose epicenter is rooted in Vietnam—and serves as a doorway into parts of his life his mother has never known, all of it leading to an unforgettable revelation. At once a witness to the fraught yet undeniable love between a single mother and her son, it is also a brutally honest exploration of race, class and masculinity. Asking questions central to our American moment, immersed as we are in addiction, violence and trauma, but undergirded by compassion and tenderness, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* is as much about the power of telling one’s own story as it is about the obliterating silence of not being heard.

With stunning urgency and grace, Ocean Vuong writes of people caught between disparate worlds, and asks how we heal and rescue one another without forsaking who we are. The question of how to survive, and how to make of it a kind of joy, powers the most important debut novel of many years.
THE BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY LITERARY PRIZE

Each year Brooklyn Public Library, in collaboration with the Brooklyn Eagles, recognizes outstanding works of nonfiction and fiction & poetry with a prize given in the fall at the Brooklyn Classic, the signature fundraising event of the Brooklyn Eagles.

In 2020, librarians from across the borough submitted 110 titles for consideration. A volunteer team of nearly two dozen librarians—specializing in fields ranging from adult literature, business and career services, and historical collections—served on the selection committee. The committee looked for books that push boundaries, bring light to unheralded stories or give voice to the silenced.

Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* was awarded the 2020 BPL Literary Prize for Fiction & Poetry. Enjoy Vuong's acceptance speech in which he recalls his start as a writer at Brooklyn College.

VIEW OCEAN VUONG’S ACCEPTANCE SPEECH: [YOUTUBE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CS1QSWCCUHA?list=pl-1722)

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY LITERARY PRIZE: [BKLYNLIBRARY.ORG/SUPPORT/BPL-LITERARY-PRIZE](http://bklynlibrary.org/support/bpl-literary-prize)

BKLYN BOOK CLUB KIT: *ON EARTH WE'RE BRIEFLY GORGEOUS*
MEDIA APPEARANCES

Get to know author Ocean Vuong through this collection of media appearances. You will find videos, radio/podcast episodes and articles, including interviews with Amanpour & Company, Weekend Edition, The Atlantic and The New Yorker, among other appearances.

Screenshot from Vuong's appearance on Late Night with Seth Meyers, S6 E111 | 06/12/19

ENJOY THESE MEDIA APPEARANCES: OCEANVUONG.COM/PRESS-MEDIA

BKLYN BOOK CLUB KIT: ON EARTH WE'RE BRIEFLY GORGEOUS
Can't get enough of Ocean Vuong? You're in luck. He also published a poem titled "On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous," which predates the eponymous book by five years. Enjoy this excerpt and find the whole poem via the link below.

ON EARTH WE'RE BRIEFLY GORGEOUS
BY OCEAN VUONG

Tell me it was for the hunger
& nothing less. For hunger is to give
the body what it knows

it cannot keep. That this amber light
whittled down by another war
is all that pins my hand

to your chest.

ENJOY THE FULL POEM:
POETRYFOUNDATION.ORG/POETRYMAGAZINE/POEMS/57586/ON-EARTH-WERE-BRIEFLY-GORGEOUS
A COCKTAIL INSPIRED BY THE POEM

Bartender and poet David Siller of Queens gives us his Ocean Vuong-inspired take on this classic cocktail.

GOLD RUSH

1. Pour 2 or 2.5 oz of your brown spirit of choice, traditionally bourbon. For this particular recipe, it is recommended that you use a stronger proof bourbon, such as Knob Creek; for a twist, use Louis Royer Force 53 cognac.

2. Add .5-1 oz. fresh lemon juice to the shaker, according to your preference.

3. Add .5 oz honey syrup to shaker. To make honey syrup, heat one cup of honey with one-third cup of water and mix until fully incorporated. Allow to cool, then you can store in fridge or pantry. Using honey syrup allows for easier mixing in the cocktail, and softens the sweetness in the drink.

4. Add ice to shaker, cover and shake.

5a. To serve up, shake hard until bruised (tiny ice chips form in the shaker). Pour into a chilled martini glass.

5b. To serve on the rocks, shake until mixed, then pour over ice in a high ball glass.

6. Garnish either with lemon twist.
BKLYN BOOKMATCH READALIKES

Did you enjoy *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*? Want to read something similar? Check out these readalike titles below.

**The end of Eddy**
Louis, Edouard, author.
The most talked-about European novel since My Struggle—a sexually frank, brutally honest coming-of-age story.

**How to pronounce knife:**
Thammavongsa, Souvannah, author.
The stories that make up *How to Pronounce Knife* focus on characters struggling to find their bearings in unfamiliar territory, or shuttling between idioms, cultures, and values.

**The leavers**
Ko, Lisa, author.
One morning, Deming Guo’s mother, an undocumented Chinese immigrant named Polly, goes to her job at the nail salon and never comes home. No one can find any trace of her.

**Night sky with exit wounds**
Vuong, Ocean.
Ocean Vuong’s first full-length collection aims straight for the perennial “big”—and very human—subjects of romance, family, memory, grief, war, and melancholia.

**The son of good fortune:**
Lysley, Terri, author.
Excel tries to seem like an unremarkable American teenager. But he knows his family is far from normal. “We are ‘TNT’—tago ng tago,” his mom told him, “hiding and hiding.” Excel is undocumented—and one accidental slip could uproot his entire life.

**When I grow up I want to be a list of further possibilities**
Chen, Chen, author.
Chen Chen investigates inherited forms of love and family—the strained relationship between a mother and son, the cost of necessary goodbyes—all from Asian American, immigrant, and queer perspectives.

You can access the list and place holds on these titles in multiple formats through the BPL catalog:.borrow.bklynlibrary.org/booklist/6pydw

In the mood for something else? Get customized reading recommendations from Brooklyn Public Library’s free BKLYN BOOKMATCH service: bklynlibrary.org/bookmatch

BKLYN BOOK CLUB KIT: *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*
Ocean Vuong is the author of *The New York Times* bestselling novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, out from Penguin Press (2019) and forthcoming in 30 languages. A recipient of a 2019 MacArthur "Genius" Grant, he is also the author of the critically acclaimed poetry collection, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, a *New York Times* Top 10 Book of 2016, winner of the T.S. Eliot Prize, the Whiting Award, the Thom Gunn Award, and the Forward Prize for Best First Collection. A Ruth Lilly fellow from the Poetry Foundation, his honors include fellowships from the Lannan Foundation, the Civitella Ranieri Foundation, The Elizabeth George Foundation, The Academy of American Poets, and the Pushcart Prize. Vuong's writings have been featured in *The Atlantic, Granta, Harpers, The Nation, New Republic, The New Yorker, The New York Times, The Village Voice, and American Poetry Review*, which awarded him the Stanley Kunitz Prize for Younger Poets. Selected by *Foreign Policy* magazine as a 2016 100 Leading Global Thinker, Ocean was also named by *BuzzFeed Books* as one of “32 Essential Asian American Writers” and has been profiled on *NPR’s “All Things Considered,” PBS NewsHour, Teen Vogue, Interview, Poets & Writers, and The New Yorker*. Born in Saigon, Vietnam, he lives in Northampton, Massachusetts, where he serves as an Associate Professor in the MFA Program for Poets and Writers at UMass-Amherst.

Learn more about Ocean at [oceanvuong.com](http://oceanvuong.com)
BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

WARNING: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS INCLUDE SPOILERS!

1. When we meet the narrator of this novel, we don’t know his name, only that he is writing to his mother in a language she cannot read. He says, “I am writing from inside a body that used to be yours. Which is to say, I am writing as a son” (10). How does the book explore the interplay of language—he identifies himself and communicates the world—and lived, corporeal experience?

2. Names are precarious and shifting throughout the novel, for both the narrator and his mother. How does he feel about the name his grandmother gives him, Little Dog? Does his reflection that “to love something, then, is to name it after something so worthless it might be left untouched—and alive. A name, thin as air, can also be a shield” suggest acceptance or dismissal of his given name (18)?

3. Do the narrator and his mother have the same idea of what is required, or what it means, to be an American? How do their expectations compare with their experiences—his as a student and hers in the nail salon?

4. What is the author’s relationship with pain and violence, inherited and lived first-hand? How does he represent pain he suffers (from his mother and Trevor) in his writing? Compare how he relates painful versus pleasure: “Sometimes being offered tenderness feels like the very proof that you’ve been ruined” (119).

5. Does the family’s story evoke pity or sympathy from you as a reader, and why if so? Consider how they use mood rings to evaluate if they’re happy, and the idea that “Good was more often enough, was a precious spark we sought and harvested of and for one another” (214).

6. While reading, did you know that the novel was autobiographical? How did that affect your understanding of the story if so, and if not does that change your interpretation of it now?

THESE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS WERE CREATED BY THE PUBLISHER PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE AND ARE NOT AFFILIATED WITH BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY.