



★ Spider Love Song and Other Stories

Nancy Au

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Nancy Au's exquisite short story collection *Spider Love Song and Other Stories* focuses on survivors—refugees, orphans, widows, single mothers, and village elders—who are caught between old world Chinese values and heritages and the challenges and promise of a new world.

Tremendous in their sensitivity and imagination, these stories layer complex images with a powerful cadence. Their characters struggle to navigate cultural differences and challenging circumstances. Creatures from the natural world, including beetles, arachnids, damselflies, sea turtles, and a fox spirit, reflect both the strangeness and vulnerability of the characters' lives.

"She Is a Battleground" captures the resilience and determination of an eighty-year-old woman who walks home with dignity even as neighborhood boys taunt her: "She is an ancient drug, with chipped teeth like tin bells, a tongue like a rake, a fighting drive to live, a horror heart in wooly slippers." Direct and intense, such stories demand attention.

In "Louise," Lai captures a one-eyed wild duck in a lunch cooler at a park; tensions build with her partner and a park ranger in the tumbling, humorous series of events that unfold. In "Spider Love Song," Sophie Chu dresses each day in a tattered elephant costume to ensure her missing parents recognize her upon their return, while in the surreal and breathtaking "Anatomy of a Cloud," a dragon, Fei, tends to her dying mate, YingLong, on a perch high in the mountains:

She studies his brilliant blue scars, wounds from dry lightning strikes—like shafts of sun and yun, like virga, like crystal storm sublime—where the azure teardrop scales would not regenerate on the back of his slender neck.

Nancy Au's debut short story collection is resonant, nuanced, and profound, and its views of characters facing difficulty with strength and courage are unique and engaging.

KRISTEN RABE (September / October 2019)

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