

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

Over the holiday break, I was catching up on fantasy fiction. And I'd heard great things about the writer Nghi Vo. So I started reading one of her novels The Chosen and The Beautiful, which came out in 2021.

In the novel, she retells the story of The Great Gatsby from the point of view of Jordan Baker. Jordan was a secondary character in the original novel. And she reimagines Jordan as being Vietnamese and adopted. And her version of The Great Gatsby is full of magic – some of it very dark magic.

I got completely sucked into this book. I burned my way through it, and then I went on to her next book, Siren Queen, which came out in 2022. It takes place in the same magical early 20th century America; except she moved the action to Hollywood.

The main character in Siren Queen is a Chinese American actress. Her stage name is Luli Wei. We never actually learn her real name. Her story is partly inspired by the real life movie star, Anna May Wong. And the main characters in both novels, Luli Wei and Jordan Baker, are queer.

1920s New York and 1930s Hollywood are two of my favorite settings for any kind of story. And these novels showed me a version of those worlds I had never seen before. I had so many questions. And I was happy that Nghi was able to talk with me. By the way, our conversation has a few minor spoilers about the books.

We started by talking about old Hollywood movies. One of the things that I've always found fascinating about the studio system, is that the executives had total control over the actors. They could get the actors to change their names, their faces, their voices, until they came up with just the right on-screen persona that clicked with audiences. And the studios would give the actors completely fake backstories for the press.

And Nghi says that was part of the inspiration for the novel, Siren Queen.

NGHI: Siren Queen started with me just sort of babbling to my friend Grace one night, and I literally still have the text where I typed her something like, hey, Grace, do you ever think about how much old school Hollywood is like fairyland? You have to give up your real name. You might give up your face. They own you for the rest of your life. I

was doing, measuring a lot of fantasy in the eighties and the nineties, and that was an idea that came up just a lot, you know, knowing your true name. When the elves get it, they have you in their power.

Mm-hmm

NGHI: I was just starting off from there. I mean, what is a true name? Who calls you by it? What is its uses? And I got the tone of Luli was very, very quickly, which was always a nice thing, and she just seemed weirdly stubborn about it. I'm like, okay, I'm just going to let this go. Like, how long can I go before she actually has to say her original name? And I realized she could just go through the whole book like that. <laugh>. It was a really, really fun discovery.

To give you a sense of Nghi's writing, here is the actress Shannon Tyo reading an excerpt of Siren Queen. The main character desperately wants to be a movie star. She finally gets a meeting with the head of the studio, whose name is Oberlin Wolfe. She's heard bad things about him, but she came prepared.

READING:

He took up the whole room, and I saw flashes of the real Oberlin Wolfe then. He was a beautiful man in slim-cut slacks, but behind him, or perhaps slightly off to the side, there was something far older, and far less human. I thought he was a common monster when I came in, but if that were true, it was because I had only seen a fraction of his form. He was large and knotted like the roots of some kind of terrible tree. He was sharp-toothed, and he was very hungry.

"Give me a kiss, China doll," he said, a growl in his voice.

Without thinking, I lifted my hand, pushing away my fringe. The kiss that Maya Vos Santé left there glimmered silver, and for some reason, it sat Wolfe back. He leaned forward — bent down on knuckled fists — and my hair stirred as he sniffed at my brow. Deliriously, I thought he would lick it, and my skin wanted to crawl right off of my body.

"Clever thing," Wolfe observed. "That's not something I can get for myself anymore."

Gingerly, as if afraid that I might lash out at him, Oberlin Wolfe closed the distance between us again. He was tall enough to lean forward and place his lips over the silvery mark on my forehead. At the touch of his mouth against my skin, I shuddered. It felt like nothing at all, only a kind of coldness and a kind of loss. My throat was full of something thick and viscous, and when I was finally able to swallow again, Oberlin Wolfe looked human.

One languid hand came up to touch his lips, and he regarded me carefully. For just an instant, there was something fearful in his gaze, or a confusion as to what I was and what I was for. It certainly wasn't the first time someone had looked at me like that.

Then he turned away from me with a shrug. Whatever I was was taking up far too much of his time.

“Well?” The word slipped out before I could stop it, brash and demanding.

He glanced back.

“You still here? Yeah, fine. We’ll give you a try. Two hundred and fifty a week to keep you for the next three years. That’s traditional. You can stay in the dorms unless you want to run home and live with Ma and Pa at night. We’ll get you trained up and see what we can make of you.”

“No maids,” I said, thrusting my chin up. “No funny talking, no fainting flowers.”

Wolfe turned and stared at me. Right then, he looked like nothing more than a harried man who wanted me to go the hell away so that he could finally deal with his hangover in peace, but even with this face, he could force a fall before I had even begun to rise.

“Crucified god. What the hell am I supposed to do with you then?”

I shrugged.

“Find something. Of course you can.”

For a while, the studio doesn’t know what to do with her if they can’t cast her as a stereotype. But one of the directors has an inspired idea. They’re doing a Captain Nemo movie. They cast her in the role of a monstrous siren. This is still a stock character for Asian actresses – the so-called dragon lady. Although in this case, she’s more like a fearsome mermaid. And The Siren movie is a hit. They end up making two sequels. I asked Nghi why she decided to bring the story in that direction.

NGHI: I knew more or less the space they were going to find for Luli. Uh, when I started writing the book, I didn't quite know how I was going to get there. I'm fascinated by monsters. I think the fact that, especially if you're in any way marginalized, you have to at least flirt with a monster identity if it's the one that the world gives you. I like the idea of Luli embracing it wholesale, and also the idea that she's not necessarily always comfortable with it. She loves it, and at the same time, it's something that was created for her. And it's, and given the role that she's taking in the way that they're dressing her, it's also a fairly sexualized part. It's a sexualized monstrosity, and her comfort with it goes back and forth. My comfort with it, uh, goes back and forth, but in the end of the day, I mean, if you're a queer kid growing up in the Midwest, you love Halloween. You, you absolutely love Halloween. You love the opportunity to go be someone else for a little bit. And that's where Lily starts. It's not where she ends, but it's where she ends up making the Siren Queen something that is something that is more hers than something that belongs to the studio. Um, by the end of the book, she's very much, uh, taken

ownership, so to speak. And it's something that, um, the people around her, they, they have to recognize it.

This is the scene where Luli is first cast in the part.

READING:

I thumbed through the script cautiously, waiting for the moment the siren fell in love with the grizzled captain, but I found nothing. She was a monster straight through. She never stopped trying to kill the man who had destroyed her world and killed her family, not until a stray bullet aimed at her enormous sea serpent caught her in the chest. She died hissing with hate, and I smiled.

"That was a tough sell," Scottie Mannheim told me with some pride three weeks later. "You know, it's hard to get the commission on board with killing a lady, even a..."

He trailed off, too kind to say "Chinese," but still dressed in the hideously long and heavy rubber tail they had to slick with Vaseline to get me into, I smiled.

"A monster," I said. "I know."

The chlorine of the pool made my eyes sting and my hair turn to straw, but every day, I looked forward to getting on set. I was eager to get fitted into my tail and to have a web of plastic seaweed scattered with seashells draped artfully over my body. I had to shout most of my lines because the machine that made the waves was terribly loud, and during the scene where the captain wrestles the siren for control of Poseidon's trident, Harry Long swung me into one of the plastic rocks so hard I saw stars.

He was aghast, carrying me, greasy legs and all, to his trailer to rest until a doctor could be found.

"It's just a nasty bruise with a bit of a gash in the center," the doctor said, poking painfully at my scalp. "Nothing terrible, she doesn't even need a stitch. Her hair will cover it, she's fit to work."

"Preposterous. She's not working for the rest of the day, I won't hear of it." I started to protest, but he shot me a quelling look.

I mean, one thing I think is really interesting is like, you know, you go into great detail of, of, you know, the sort of special effects of the 1930s and how they would do this with a mechanical tail and the wires. But this is a world where magic is real, tail there's like, uh, one of the women, you know, one of the actresses had a tale that they had to surgically remove. There's like, demons, kind of exist in this world, and all sorts of ma -- and changelings, and these Siren movies are popular. So, like, why do you think people in a world where, where fantasy things actually exist want to see made up fantasy movies?

NGHI: Because the movies are magic themselves. It's, um, it's, you know, I love movies. I love the, uh, idea of being in a theater and being for an hour or two, uh,

transported. It's, it fills your mind like almost nothing else in the world does if your mind is geared a certain way. And I have to imagine it's the same thing for the people in that world. It is something, it is being in a space and being transported, and we love that. I think humans, we, we love that idea. And no matter how it comes, we're going to love it. Even in a world where, you know, you can sell your soul before breakfast, I still think that there's something about going to a movie theater and paying your ticket and sitting down and being in the dark and having this communal experience of sharing a story with someone else. And that's going to be something we always want to do no matter what, what other fun we can have.

I was really interested in, in, in the way that you worked magic into the story, because I feel like very often when I read a fantasy novel, they're very, very intentional about like, okay, this one element of the world is magical, but everything's normal, or magic is the result of a lot of spells or a journey. And you are so casual in mentioning things that like, you know, like I remember there's a scene where they go to film in the desert and, and she says, you know, you don't see much around here except sometimes coyotes walking around with human skin. And I'm just like, wait, that exists in this world too?!

NGHI: <laugh>.

And I'm like, like, there's so many things you kind of casually mentioned, and I'm like, that, that could be a whole short story right there. Um, do, do you like not putting sort of that, that kind of like, oh, there's a very rigid rule of magic in this world that you do love, just, you like, just kind of coming up with stuff and just kind of let it hang like that?

NGHI: It, it's sort of like picking up like a handful of paint and throwing it against the wall sometimes, but there is, there actually is a method to the madness. Um, one of the things that you pick up, um, throughout, I think all my writing at this point is that what magic boils down to is magic is power. And there are so many ways that we have power in our own world. So why should magic be any different in Luli's world? You know, there's the magic of, uh, looking right, there's the magic of having a lot of money. There's the magic of having acquired a lot of knowledge. And a lot of times when I was writing, uh, Siren Queen, it ended up running on what I call to my friends, uh, fairytale logic, actually, because there are rules with the fairies, with the European fairy tales we grew up with. You know, that no one but the youngest third son is going to succeed. You know that if you meet an old woman on the road and she asks for your last bit of food, you give it to her because otherwise you're going to end up a, a rock or a frog or, you know, living down a well for the rest of your life. And we don't really question those rules. I made the bet that if I said it casually enough, I could make the reader believe it. I could, if, if I just phrased it in the right way and gave them enough interesting things to look at and an interesting character to follow, and a story they cared about, um, they would let me have the world where magic is just paint thrown at the wall.

After the break, we got back East and see how the magical party plays out in Long Island, right under Jay Gatsby's mansion.

BREAK

As I mentioned earlier, *The Chosen and The Beautiful* is the story of *The Great Gatsby* retold from the point of view of Jordan Baker. She was a secondary character in the original novel, but an intriguing character. She was a socialite who could easily float between the main characters: Jay Gatsby, his love interest Daisy, Daisy's husband Tom, and Nick – the narrator of the original novel. And this version of Jordan is Vietnamese.

Nghi gives Jordan a fascinating backstory and a whole life in between the plot points of the original novel.

In this book, the world of magic in this book is the same as *Siren Queen*. That's not a coincidence. Nghi actually wrote *Siren Queen* first even though it was her second published novel.

Back when she was writing *Siren Queen*, she had gone through a few drafts. And she was talking about the manuscript with her agent Diana Fox.

NGHI: We were already talking about selling it to Tor.com on a call with Diana about like, basically like halfway through this process of shopping it around, Diana asked, you know, are you working on anything else? And I'm like, oh, I have this really cool book that I'm working on about a girl who's raised by a ghost. And I think she said, huh, you got anything else? <laugh>? And I sort of just pitched, uh, *The Chosen and The Beautiful* to her, more or less exactly as it is. And it was, you know, it's an idea for a novel that I've had ever since, um, off and on ever since I read *The Great Gatsby* in high school, and when I stopped, uh, talking, she's really quiet on the other end of the line. And then she says to me, very, very patiently, Nghi, I would like you to stop writing your other novel and go right on this instead, because *Gatsby* is coming out of copyright in a, I think like a year and a half away at that point. And I said, okay. So, I wrote *Chosen and The Beautiful* in about four months, I think. And um, and they decided they wanted to publish it first as the debut. So, um, sort of that's how it's been going ever since.

The idea of re -- I guess, rewriting Fitzgerald or sort of writing in the same world in the same scenes as Fitzgerald, was that fun or was that, were there moments that you felt totally intimidated to be doing that?

NGHI: No, actually writing it was, uh, it honestly was just a ton of fun. I don't know if I felt very intimidated or very afraid. It just felt like this, this best game. It felt like this amazing act of play in a lot of ways to open up the book and figure out what characters are doing when they aren't on the screen, and to realize what they must be doing because, um, Jordan Baker canonically in the Great Gatsby has, um, secret meetings with Jay Gatsby that we never talk about in the book itself. And suddenly I'm like, oh, what are they doing? And then you have her sort of running around like this sort of rogue AI in the background moving the plot forward. And I've always been curious. I'm like, how happy is she to be doing that? Is she stone cold evil or does she have another agenda? And I've decided that she has a lot of agendas going on actually.

Speaking of stone cold evil, um, you know, again, again, I'm thinking back to like high school essays, everyone always talks about how Gatsby sold his soul. Did you, was that also one of your initial thoughts of, well, what if he literally sold his soul to the devil?

NGHI: Yes. That came on very quickly because, you know, I, uh, I have, I have a public school education, and of course The Great Gatsby is a part of that. And when you talk about The Great Gatsby in high school, you have to talk about ambition and what you'll do for it and what you'll lose for it. And it's hard to escape the idea at the end that Gatsby is the great loser when you dis when you discuss that, when you discuss The Great Gatsby, he is the one that is literally left floating like trash in the pool. And when it comes to selling your soul, it's such a vibrant metaphor and it's such a really interesting piece of world building, especially when you go into the twenties and this new decade of excess after World War I, and suddenly you're in a new world of advertising in the twenties and you're being promised everything. And that has got to feel a little bit like a sort of global national deal with the devil.

READING:

"You see I've been doing some of my own investigations," Tom said after a tactful pause. "You didn't just sell your soul for some drug stores and way off the dirt farm, did you? No, you let Meyer Wolfsheim broker you some kind of deal. You traded up, old sport, until you got to someone grand, and then..."

Tom turned to me and Nick, frozen on the divan and by then entirely a captive audience.

"And what do you think they wanted from him?"

"I'm sure you'll tell us," I said acidly, and he nodded as if to say thank you.

"You kept the party going for Hell and for New York. You opened the doorway to all the fun, and you turned an old-world tippie into big business, got it running like blood throughout the East and the Midwest. You became the linchpin holding Hell to Earth, and how they all loved you for it. And then," Tom said with satisfaction, "the party stopped."

It had, because of Daisy — who didn't care for his parties — and I wondered with a pang of contagious panic how that must have looked, what would happen when you didn't hold up your end of a bargain with Hell.

Daisy cried out, pushing at Gatsby in a panic. When she stepped back, we could all see a red handprint high up on her arm, the fingers distinct and visible. It was blistered a little, like she had spent too much time in the sun, but even for that he might have been forgiven. Just before he let her go, however, just before he realized what he had done and started to apologize, I saw the look on his face, cold and sick and furious. He had sold his soul, and in exchange for the power to be a man worthy of Daisy Fay, he had created a way station for Hell, a little piece of the infernal in West Egg where the demoniac never stopped flowing and where no one ever noticed if someone disappeared and came back strange and hollow, or never came back at all.

Hell was as expansionist as France or England — and Jay Gatsby, with his singular focus and ability to harness the power of human desire, was the perfect envoy to gain them a foothold in the world above.

So, uh, everyone, at least everyone in high society is drinking something called demoniac, which is like demon's blood cognac.

NGHI: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Um, and it kind of allows them to see more of the spirit world. It kind of allows them to trip a little bit. And, and, and I am so fascinated by, what is the backstory? Like where are they getting the demon blood from? Who's, who's making it? Like, do you have that all like, like figured out?

NGHI: I do. However, what the world thinks of it is actually more interesting, I think because it is this mysterious substance that comes from, it always comes from somewhere else. That's the story about it. And it always comes, has, uh, some sort of dark, terrible origin and it makes you do things that you don't necessarily want to do, but maybe you do. And where demoniac comes from is, it comes from what I used to think about alcohol when I was a kid, <laugh> I have never been very good about alcohol, but I love the stories that people tell about alcohol and the things they did while they were on alcohol. And that's where demoniac comes from. Where it comes from in the world is it is one more piece of magic. It is one more piece of power from people who don't necessarily like you very much. How about that?

So magic is just another form of power.

Now Jordan is not the only Asian character that Nghi introduced into the world of Great Gatsby. And all her Asian characters know how to practice a magical craft where they can cut paper into anything until it resembles the real thing -- even animals or people. They look real but they're hollow inside.

Like in this scene -- which is a flashback -- Jordan is in Daisy's childhood bedroom. They were friends growing up. And Jordan is playing with paper magic.

READING:

I didn't actually trace around the Daisy in the picture. Instead, working free-handed, I snipped a figure that approximated Daisy's own out of the card stock. With Daisy whispering encouragement in my ear, with my eyes half-closed and a kind of instinct guiding me that I usually preferred to ignore, I cut out her entire figure, her bob, her neat hands, her love of the water, and her quick clever dancing. I made sure to cut out her narrow hips, her full lips, the way Christmas lights sparkled in her eyes as soon as the first of December rolled around, and how summer left her nearly stunned with sweat and exhaustion.

"Oh no," I murmured, because it was very much a high-school Daisy. There was something slightly unformed about her, rounded and a little pallid. It was a difference of two years, perhaps even three, and it was obvious to me that this Daisy was someone else.

Daisy herself, however, only hummed with satisfaction as she circled the newcomer, reaching over to lift her chin and fluff her hair a little bit.

"All right, you," she said. "You're made for going out to dinner, for being utterly charming in the best possible way, for making sure that everyone loves you, and then for coming back here, all right? Have you got that?"

To my discomfort, the paper double's eyes flickered to me.

Just then, Mrs. Fay knocked again, hard enough that it suggested that it was the last courtesy we were going to get. Daisy slid herself flat behind the door, opening it with her lip bitten hard between her pearl-like teeth.

"There you are at last, Daisy," her mother said. "Jordan?"

I jumped.

"Yes, Mrs. Fay?"

"Of course, we'll have Wilfred see you home..."

For the first time, the Daisy made of paper spoke. "Oh no, Mama, Jordan must stay! She's taking care of securing some of my laces on my dress before tomorrow..."

Wordlessly, because hearing the Daisy made of paper speak took my breath away, I held up the shears still in my hand.

"Fine, fine, you'll be running your own household soon enough. Jordan, if you want something to eat, just go down to the kitchen. They'll take care of you. Now come along, Daisy. You know that your aunt Opal has never been able to abide lateness..."

The door shut behind them, and Daisy bent over, knees buckling, a knuckle between her teeth. We were both frozen until we heard the telltale squeak of heels on the carpeted grand stairs, and then she burst into panicked laughter.

NGHI: When it comes to the paper magic in, uh, *The Chosen* and *The Beautiful*, one of the first things that came to mind was, uh, the Chinese history of, uh, paper sons during the immigration of Chinese Americans to the United States. There was this idea that, uh, during periods of heightened, uh, immigration restriction, Chinese immigrants to the United States could only bring along family members. And so, we quickly, uh, came up with this very, very brisk trade in false identities. And the immigration officials were very, very, very harsh during this process. So, the questions they were asking were along the lines of how many houses were on the street of your home village, things like that. So, there was a brisk trade in what they called paper sons at the time, um, you know, sons, relatives, brothers on paper.

Hmm.

NGHI: And that struck me as something I really wanted to play with the idea that paper becoming reality. And from there I went through a lot of research into, uh, cutting throughout Asia, Southeast Asia, because, uh, paper cutting in a lot of ways predates paper. We have examples and reports of the art from a time when people were cutting interesting patterns into leather, into leaves. And one of the things that got to me was, it's always, uh, it's always a home art. It's not high art. It is, it is something that people, mostly women did to make their homes beautiful. And it seemed like such an important way to express yourself in a time when you don't have a lot of opportunities to do so. And that's why, uh, that's why Jordan has it.

Well, Jordan and Luli are both characters who, um, have to navigate white spaces, very powerful white spaces. Uh, were there moments that you sort of put in little bits of your own feelings or experiences, you know, with them?

NGHI: Sure. I mean, I think that's something that, uh, that every writer does. But I think the only place that I really, really strongly referenced myself is when Luli talks about getting fan mail. And she talks about, um, letters from Chinese American, Asian American girls who are a lot like she is, and the ones who come from New York, and the ones who come from Chicago and the one who, the ones who come from lonely outposts throughout the great space in between. Because I think when you live in what Jordan would call the Middle West, there's a lot of space out here. Um, there is oceans and oceans of prairie and cornfield and soybean field between towns in Illinois where I grew up. And it feels like being at an outpost. It feels like you're sort of just waiting for, you know, eventually the mail to come and hopefully to get some good news from some other place that maybe you would like to think of his home. And that's one of the spaces where I get to speak about that. And that was really very fun to do.

It sounds like both books were just really fun. Like the process of writing was really fun. What were some of the most challenging parts to write with either book?

NGHI: When I was writing Siren Queen, I did not know how to write novels. <laugh>, let's, let's start there,

Right, because you were a short story writer.

NGHI: Absolutely, yeah. And, uh, short stories are, you know, it's, you're in and out by lunch. I mean, I can write a short story between now and when I go to sleep tonight, and it's not the same commitment that are that a novel is. And suddenly, you know, I go to sleep, and I wake up and the problems that are waiting for me are still waiting for me and I need to fix them. So that was the biggest challenging point of writing both novels. Um, and I writing novels in general, I'm, I'm writing another one right now and I'm like, wait, wait, I'm not done yet somehow after, only after only having written for, uh, two days, I'm not done yet. I hate that.

Does this novel take place in the same kind of universe?

NGHI: I probably can't talk about it very much, but yeah. Yeah, it does.

This is interesting because you're creating this cohesive world of a magical early 20th America, but you've also written a series of novellas called The Singing Hills Cycle. They're very different. I mean, they're set in kind of a world that's more like imperial China. They have more of a fable quality to them. One of the main characters is a talking bird called Almost Brilliant. Um, do you like switching gears like that, like writing in these two slightly different kind of fantasy worlds ?

NGHI: I don't know if I see them as very different. They're just mostly people who are trying to get through their day. That's, I feel like that's just a theme in a lot of my stuff. It's just, it's like, how are we going to get through today? Okay. I think maybe the biggest difference is the protagonist. My novels have protagonists, which I'm much more familiar with writing. They're, they're mean <laugh>. I, I, I like, I like protagonists who are kind of mean and who are doing what they need to do, and not always as worried as they should be about what those actions are doing to other people. And then I sort of lucked into the main unifying character of the Singing Hills, who is Chi the, um, the non-binary, uh, cleric who's wandering the world and just wants to hear stories. And Chi is just insanely sweet and positive. And I look at them and I'm like, who the hell are you? What are you doing here?

<laugh>? So, you identify with the characters that are a little bit mean? That's interesting,

NGHI: <laughs> Of course, I do! Absolutely. I mean, I was, I, I get this convers this, um, this question sometimes it's like, what is it like to write such unsympathetic characters? So I'm like, I beg you, pardon, <laugh>. I don't think you should have to be nice just to live. And that's something that I'm sure those, that my characters would say there, because there have been a lot of times when they haven't been allowed to be nice. But on top of that, they're all also times when they don't care to be nice. And I think that's so much fun to write about.

Yeah. And also too, I mean, theoretically you could have written Siren Queen and, uh, Chosen the Beautiful in a world without magic at all. Um, what does magic bring to these worlds?

NGHI: I have been a fantasy writer and reader since I was very young. Like, um, I think my first fantasy novel was *The Warlock in Spite of Himself* by Christopher Stasheff. And I found it at a yard sale, and I thought that the robot horse on the cover was just fantastic. And that's probably why I became a fantasy writer. So why wouldn't I want to write my story in a place where I feel, where I feel happy, where I, where I'm having a lot of fun, I guess the demons in the *Chosen* and *The Beautiful* could be metaphorical as could the changelings in, um, in *Siren Queen*. But it's so much more fun to bring it forward and add magic to it and make it big and bright and colorful and occasionally just let someone get eaten in the background. I mean, I'm not going to lie, that's just tons of fun.

Before you started writing not just novels but short stories, you were a ghost writer. What other jobs did you do back then?

NGHI: Uh, let's see. Um, various jobs. Uh, ghost writing, copywriting, you know, I did tech support, wait staff, um, phone, sex, just a lot of things.

Phone sex?

NGHI: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Yep. It's a, it's a great gig if you, if you, uh, if you're trying to stack three jobs, because for a while I was, and that was a mistake.

Yeah. Although you're kind of, yeah, it's a kind of world building, I guess kind of fantasy world.

NGHI: Mm-hmm. Oh yeah. You've, you've got, you've got about seven minutes

<laugh>. That's how you became a good short story writer?

NGHI: <laugh> No, it, it's, yeah, no, I, I would actually believe that, that that's, and also it, it crosses over really well with the tech support actually, because it's all about call control and it's all about customer satisfaction, although the two aims are different. One, you keep the customer online as long as you can, and the other, because of call metrics, you have to get them off the line as quickly as possible.

Interesting. So, the reason I <laugh>, I was asking you about that was, I just know that, that there's some people that are like, oh, I've been writing since, you know, fiction from, from the moment I could write fiction. And other people are like, oh, I had all these day jobs and I thought, oh, could I write fiction someday? It was this like, uh, unrealized dream for a while. Which was it for you, uh, around that time?

NGHI: I've always been, uh, writing, writing. I mean, that doesn't really go away. It's writer. I mean, writer is definitely one of those things that I am, and not just that I do author's, different author is just a thing I do, but writing is the thing I am. So that's always been just sort of a thread in the background. And, um, I always figured I'd make some cash from writing because, you know, once again, ghost writing, ad copywriting, things like that. But I didn't think it'd actually be the career. That's, that's kind of new.

Uh, you weren't ever like living this life of quiet desperation for a while.

NGHI: <laugh> No!

If I, if I could only someday be a write, fiction writer?

NGHI: No, no. It, it's, there is so much weird stuff out there to look at. I mean, there's this, okay, there's this one town in northern Illinois and for some reason, every time me and my best friend drive through it, her car breaks down. We don't drive that way anymore because I think there's something in that town that kind of wants to keep her and she's my best friend. They don't get to do that. But life is so weird. There's no time to be quietly desperate about anything. Like, there's the fact that when every time I try to make ciabatta, I get stuck in the dough. I love ciabatta. I hate trying to knead the bread because at one point or another I inevitably become half dough, half woman. And you can't be quietly desperate when you're stuck in a ciabatta dough. Life's too weird to be, to be quietly desperate about anything, I think.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Nghi Vo and Shannon Tyo, who did the readings.

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