

# 6 Books That Bring the Asian American Experience Out of the Margins



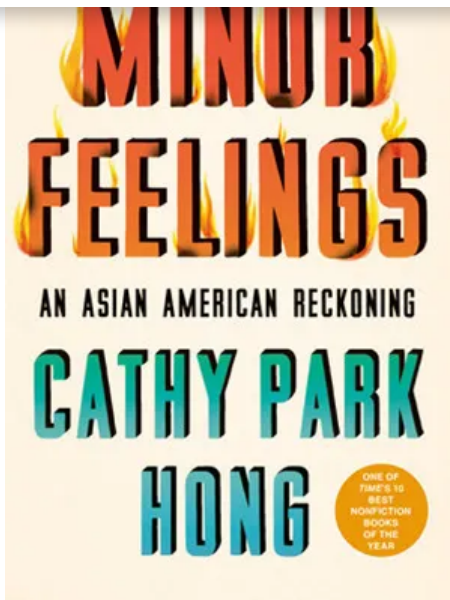
In memoir and nonfiction, these authors navigate big themes and resist stereotypes.

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with a beautiful felt-stabilized font in Manhattan, Cathy Park Hong thought there was “no reason for me to be depressed.” She sought treatment from a therapist who, like her, was Korean American. But the therapist refused to take her on for unexplained reasons, though Hong’s next therapist suggested that the “not fully processed” issues the two had in common might have been the

reason.



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It’s an incident Hong describes with sharp honesty and humor in her bestseller, *Minor Feelings* (One World, 2020). There were, in fact, reasons for Hong’s exhaustion and desponden is a first-generation immigrants’ daughter who, despite high achievement, felt invisible in American culture.

“In the popular imagination, Asian Americans inhabit a vague purgatorial status: not white enough nor black enough; distrusted by African Americans, ignored by whites, unless we’re being used by whites to keep the black man down. We are the carpenter ants of the service industry, the apparatchiks of the corporate world. We are math-crunching middle managers who keep the corporate wheels greased but who never get promoted since we don’t have the right ‘face’ for leadership. We have a content problem. They think we have no inner resources. But while I may look impassive, I am frantically

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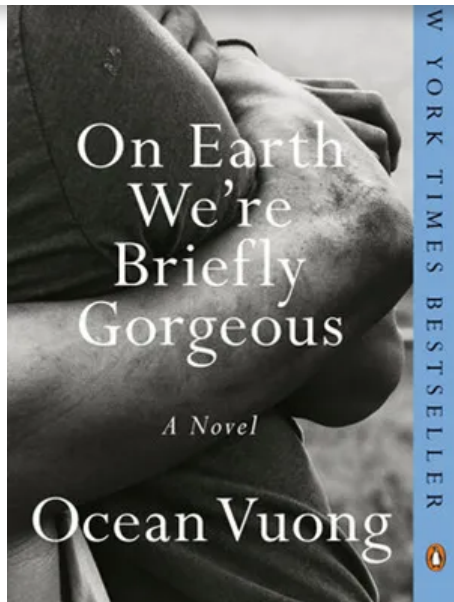
experience while watching a video of the great Black comedian Richard Pryor. His riffs on the emotional and intellectual absurdities of racism “blowtorched the beige from my eyes” she writes. According to Hong, Pryor does what geniuses do: “They blow up mothballed conventions in their chosen genre.”

That’s also a good way to describe what Hong does in this book, as she blows up the cultural myths and conventions that gaslighted her over a lifetime. She defines “minor feelings” as the depressing disempowerment that occurs “when American optimism is forced upon you, which contradicts your own racialized reality, thereby creating a static of cognitive dissonance.” *Minor Feelings* seamlessly connects the personal, public, and political to shine a light on our culture—and reality. [SUBSCRIBE](#)

## The Best We Could Do: An Illustrated Memoir

Thi Bui’s memoir, *The Best We Could Do* (Abrams ComicArts, 2017), is a graphic novel that explores her family’s experience of surviving the Vietnam War and coming to the United States as refugees. “I first read *The Best We Could Do* in 2018,” writes YES! digital editor Ayu Sutriasa, “but reading it again in 2021 during a pandemic and spike in racial violence against Asian





## Gorgeous

It's not surprising that Ocean Vuong's first book, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, was a work of poetry. A poet's sensibility shapes the prose of his acclaimed first novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (Penguin Press, 2019).

It's a work of concise elegance he calls autofiction—both memoir and art. The story, in the form of a letter from a son

to his mother, goes back and forth in time, evoking war, trauma, immigration, and survival with power and originality.

The narrator, his mother, and his grandmother are Vietnamese refugees who settle in Hartford, Connecticut. ' of poverty, everyday violence, and addiction, Hartford is not an ideal place for mother and grandmother to heal from war, mental illness, and PTSD. But there is connection there, too—in moments when the son sees the world through his mother's eyes, and in his passionate teenaged relationship with another boy.

In love and desire and beauty, the young man finds a path out of the cycle of suffering. “Yes, there was a war. Yes, we came from its epicenter,” he writes to his mother.

“In that war, a woman gifted herself a new name—Lan—in that name, she claimed herself beautiful, then made that beauty into

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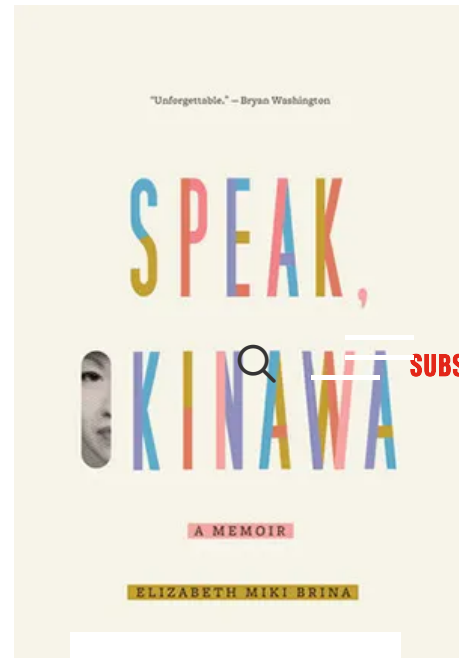


via. WE WERE BORN FROM BEAUTY.

Let no one mistake us for the fruit of violence—but rather, that violence, having passed through the fruit, failed to spoil it.”

## Speak, Okinawa

It can take a while to come to terms with history, whether it’s our family origin story or the broader histories and injustices we’ve inherited. Elizabeth Miki Brina was well into adulthood before she began to question why, growing up in 1980s and ’90s America, she turned away from her Japanese immigrant mother and toward her White American dad. To understand that, she researched the history of Okinawa, her mother’s birthplace, and the historical forces that shaped her parents’ meeting there when her father was a U.S. soldier on leave, part of an occupying military force. With chapters about the island itself, *Speak, Okinawa* (Knopf, 2021) reveals the historical context of the power imbalance that plays out within the family.

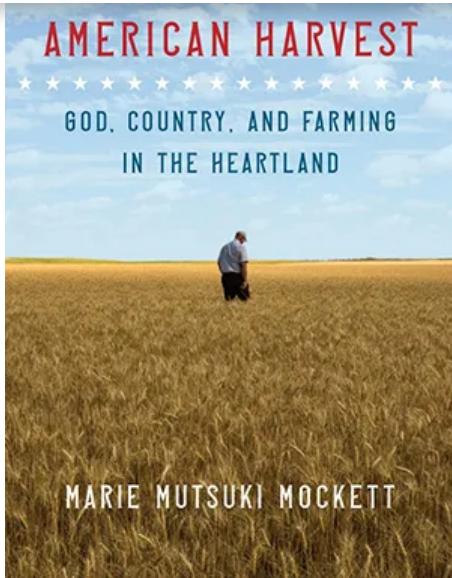


With her growing understanding, alienation gives way to healing, mutual forgiveness, and wellsprings of familial love. Brina’s book, a reviewer for the *Guardian* wrote, “is so warm and honest that you find yourself rooting for her and her parents, thrilled at her ‘adult

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## Country, and Farming in the Heartland



Marie Mutsuki Mockett had fond memories of childhood trips to Nebraska, where her White ancestors farmed wheat for generations. But those visits were mediated by the presence of her father. After his death, Mockett went back to the wheat belt on her own, a half-Japanese, well-educated member of

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the American bicoastal elite. This time it was a different story.

Mockett wanted to understand the great divide between the two Americas, the worldviews Nancy Matsumoto described in YES! as “city/country, secular liberal/conservative Chr. White, book smart/farm smart, organics-loving/Roundup-embracing.”

*American Harvest* (Graywolf Press, 2020) beautifully evokes Mockett’s journey alongside a White harvesting crew through the Midwest, with much appreciation for the region’s nature and culture. Her quest for understanding is sincere and motivated by love. But her questions, and eventually her presence, strike half the crew as unwelcome, especially when the germ of their cultural conflict emerges: the relationship between colonialism and Christianity. White settlers depended on religion to explain their right to take, and hold,

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psychological prison. ... I have no idea how to begin to dismantle it. And in my skin, I cannot pass through unnoticed.”

## I Was Their American Dream

Malaka Gharib’s graphic memoir is an Asian American Arab American story—her Filipina mother and Egyptian father met in Los Angeles after moving to the United States in the 1980s. Both ebullient and touching, *I Was Their American Dream* (Clarkson Potter, 2019) shows Gharib’s younger self negotiating parental hopes to form a new cultural identity—becoming something more than just an American dream.



Enkhbayar Munkh-Erdene, YES! associate art director, writes: “Gharib’s memoir is humorous, honest, and most importantly for a visual learner like me, illustrated. It fully captured my attention, and I finished it within an hour of picking it up. Being invited into her experiences allowed me to reflect on my own life’s journey as an immigrant woman in this country, but through a softer and more appreciative lens than I have had in recent years.

Gharib’s life experiences do not mirror mine—they’re actually almost the complete opposite. Yet I felt deeply connected to the personal

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