



Oculus: Poems

Sally Wen Mao

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A brilliant second collection by Sally Wen Mao on the violence of the spectacle—starring the film legend Anna May Wong

In *Oculus*, Sally Wen Mao explores exile not just as a matter of distance and displacement but as a migration through time and a reckoning with technology. The title poem follows a nineteen-year-old girl in Shanghai who uploaded her suicide onto Instagram. Other poems cross into animated worlds, examine robot culture, and haunt a necropolis for electronic waste. A fascinating sequence spanning the collection speaks in the voice of the international icon and first Chinese American movie star Anna May Wong, who travels through the history of cinema with a time machine, even past her death and into the future of film, where she finds she has no progeny. With a speculative imagination and a sharpened wit, Mao powerfully confronts the paradoxes of seeing and being seen, the intimacies made possible and ruined by the screen, and the many roles and representations that women of color are made to endure in order to survive a culture that seeks to consume them.

Oculus: Poems Details

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From Reader Review Oculus: Poems for online ebook

Margaryta says

REVIEW FORTHCOMING

Melissa says

Sally Wen Mao's poetry is both complex and relatable. It's a collection of beautifully written, well researched, thought provoking poems. Social media, pop culture, voyeurism, race, history, technology, performance, Hollywood. Each poem is complete, many quite powerful, but taken together the collection reveals so much more.

Lili Kim says

I'm so glad I got to meet Sally Wen Mao in person, as she explained so much of her poetry and need to have Asian women's voices be heard. I had no idea about Afong Moy, the first Chinese woman who was caged and prodded as she was brought to the US. Nor did I know about Anna May Wong, who had to play the stereotypical Asian role and who had to die a thousand violent deaths on the big screen. I also appreciate how she talked about Ki Suk Han, who was pushed onto the NYC subway tracks and whose death was captured all over the news from an insensitive photographer and news outlets. I still remember that incident, and I feel so deeply for his family. Finally, I still remember how Romeo Must Die ended, and how Asian males are continually emasculated in Hollywood.

Notable lines:

"Why does the light in the night / promise so much? She wiped her lens / before she died. The smudge still lives."

"In the blustering garden where I was fed / compliments like you are our golden / apple and you are our yellow star, I lost / my lust for luster."

"When I was eight, the boy who sat behind me brought pins / to class. 'Do Asians feel pain the way we do?' he'd ask. / He'd stick the needles to the back of my neck until I winced. / I wore six wool coats so I couldn't feel the sting."

"I counted the days with my abacus. / Look, I was fucking / bored. Was I the animal here? Or were they?"

"There was no word / for tokenism in those days of yore. / When you were rare, when you were a Lady, / you had to be tender, you had to be good."

From "Anna May Wong Makes Cameos"-

Romeo Must Die (2000): I'm Aaliyah's sassy friend. I give her tough love and good advice. Kiss Jet Li, I tell her. The director cuts their kissing scene, replaces it with a hug, rendering my scene pointless so they cut me

from the film.”

Chris Roberts says

Verse flourishes in the air,
it surround sounds us,
the poet is mere a collector of words,
a transcriber, nothing more.

#poem

Chris Roberts, Lord God

Shelby Connelly says

It was refreshing to change up my usual reading with some poetry, and Sally Wen Mao brought some interesting themes and beautiful language to her book. I especially enjoyed her dynamic word choice and the intermingling of technology, appropriation, sex, and death. Overall, a very striking book.

Caroline says

3.5 stars

Sally Wen Mao is making Asian Futurism in the spirit of her idol Janelle Monae's Afrofuturism. Some of the poems in *Oculus* were a little too abstract for me (in a narrative way, if that makes any sense), but there were a lot of great poems, too. I was intrigued by the examination of technology as it pertains to self-identity. A lot of the poems are highly referential, with allusions to history, cinema, art, labor, fashion, and even Pokémon. It's an interesting mash-up and I learned a lot reading this collection. I was particularly moved by the poem about Daul Kim's death by suicide, which was a sad time for any fashion lover.

Jaclyn (sixminutesforme) says

“I wrote this book for women of color. Without you, the world isn’t possible. Because of you, I keep going. I have learned this the hard way: you matter, and don’t let anyone or anything convince you otherwise.”

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I wanted to share this quote from the acknowledgments because it serves a reminder of so many of the explorations within this collection that representation matters.

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This is an incredibly moving and present collection, and I’d encourage you to read the author’s notes at the

end of the collection to get some insight into the specific real stories that she is sharing with the poems. For example, the title piece #Oculus in the first section is based on the 19yr old girl in Shanghai who uploaded her own suicide onto Instagram in 2014.

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I was particularly struck by the Anna May Wong poems that consume a large portion of the collection, and their exploration of representation (or more accurately, MISrepresentation) and “yellowface” in Hollywood and the film industry.

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Similarly, the Diary of Afong Moy looks at the first Chinese woman to travel to the US, who at 19 was exhibited as a curiosity as part of a marketing exercise to sell more Asian products to middle class white America.

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The poems are incredibly moving and place current discussions about identity and representation within a historic context. I look forward to reading more from this author and her brilliant way with words! ?????.

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#diversespines #oculus #sallywenmao @graywolfpress #jaclynbookreview #poetryreview

Nicole says

There's a steady current of tech/futurism themes that really isn't my thing in poetry but will definitely work for others! I thought her strongest poems were those where she essentially inhabited someone else's life (Anna May Wong, Afong Moy, Faye Valentine).

Jerrie (redwritinghood) says

As the title implies, these poems focus on the voyeuristic tendencies of humans. Watching of girls and women, particularly Asian women, as entertainment. Many center around the 1930s actress Anna May Wong. Maybe this focus detracted from the structure of the collection as it started to seem repetitive. Mao is clearly a poet of great talent, but the overall collection left me without a strong impression of like or dislike.

Gwendolyn says

Another great selection from the Rumpus Poetry Book Club. I particularly like how Sally Wen Mao explores Hollywood depictions of Asians and Asian Americans, never shying away from the uncomfortable truths. Mao's poetry is challenging in the way good poetry should be, and I learned a lot while reading through this collection (especially by looking up the pop culture references I was unfamiliar with).
