



Fusion Fantasy

Ken Liu's sprawling hybrid fiction

by SOPHIA NGUYEN

THERE'S A kind of novel that comes with a full-color map and list of *dramatis personae*. Like the overture to an opera, this tells the audience what they're in for; it prepares them to be transported. Ken Liu's sprawler of a series-in-progress, *The Dandelion Dynasty*, is exactly that kind of fantasy, and it has something for every kind of nerd: references to Penelope's plight in *The Odyssey*, play-by-play of military maneuvers, specs for vehicles made of silk, wood, and sinew—even tax codes and trade regulations.

This smorgasbord represents the author's varied enthusiasms. After concentrating in English and computer science, Liu '98, J.D. '04, worked as a software engineer and lawyer; he's now a consultant on technology litigation. He cracks up while admitting to the origin of one plot device: a three-day civil-service test described as "a trial of endurance and steadfastness of will and purpose" and "not merely an exercise in reasoning and persuasion, but also a practical problem in three-dimensional geometry"—based on (what else?) the bar exam. Students, collapsing from exhaustion, are borne away on stretchers. Says Liu: "I wrote it like a battle scene."

The series also takes in disparate literary traditions. Liu studied Western classics in college, and an Anglophone reader of the

series' first novel might trace its warlord figures back to swift-footed Achilles and wily Odysseus. Even the legion of side-characters in *The Grace of Kings*—a riot of princelings, bandits, and orphan boys—are reminiscent of *The Iliad*'s lesser fighters: countless yet individuated, each with his name and fate. Yet Liu, who is a longtime fan of the *wuxia* genre's tales of martial-arts heroism, also planned for the plot to reimagine a Chinese "foundational narrative": the Chu-Han Contention, the interregnum between the Qin and Han dynasties when two once-allied kings turned on each other. "It was a period and a set of events," he explains, "that defined what it means to be Chinese as a cultural concept." Fusion, especially in food, can get a bad rap—somehow managing to connote both blandness and exoticism. But Liu's is a truly hybrid epic. Its influences aren't decorative, but the bricks and mortar of a richly invented world. "In a way," he says, "this story is very American."

The Wall of Storms, just published, stages new

In 2012, Ken Liu's short story "The Paper Menagerie" swept science fiction's highest honors: the Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy Awards. He has won the Hugo as well for his translations of Cixin Liu's *The Three-Body Problem* (the first translated novel to win), and Hao Jingfang's short story "Folding Beijing."

contests. Liu describes it as "a much more modern novel," drawing less on the archetypes of oral tradition. With the new emperor entering middle age, his task shifts from conquest to nation-building. The next generation—which includes shrewd princesses and woman scholars—must grapple with their elders' political mythmaking. The story's scope broadens even further with the arrival of an existential threat: an invading nomadic force (somehow suggesting both Vikings and Mongols), with steeds that breathe fire. Still, this is not a Manichaean, racialized clash à la Tolkien: "What I want to do is explore the complications of that kind of cross-cultural conquest," he says, "and what happens to a culture, and what happens to a people who have to survive and make the best of a very terrible situation."

A fascination with how identity can shift due to mass movement—across oceans, or galaxies—also threads through Liu's short fiction. The title story in *The Paper Menagerie* is about a bullied American boy who thinks his immigrant mother "might as well be from the moon." Another tale, "The Waves," follows a family of species-shifting, interplanetary travelers who say, "Earth is just a very big ship." But perhaps more fundamental is Liu's concern with the fraught inheritance of history, and the obligations between parents and children. He traces these interests to his children's births, and, more recently, his grandparents' deaths: "As links in this living chain, what is our responsibility to the generation before and to the generation after? What are our duties toward culture and family?"

This investment in cultural transmission also aligns with his work as a translator. Recent projects include *Death's End*, the final volume of Chinese science-fiction writer Cixin Liu's celebrated trilogy, *Remembrance of Earth's Past*, published in September, and a forthcoming short story anthology,

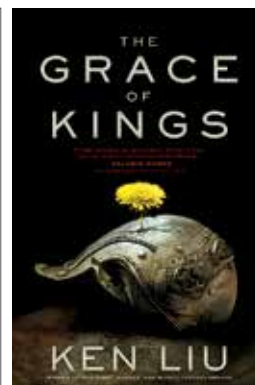
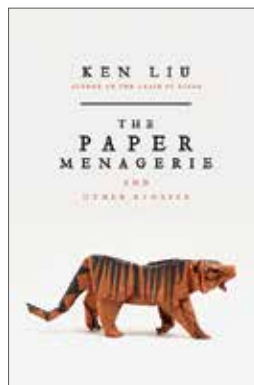


Photograph by Lisa Tang Liu

Invisible Planets. It's a commonplace that the art of translation requires negotiating cultural gaps, but sometimes a turn of phrase also poses political difficulties. In *Death's End*, a character wears a tunic style known in China as a Zhongshan suit (after Sun Zhongshan, the Republic of China's first president) and in the West as a "Mao suit." But that usage, Liu says, "would give a very wrong interpretation"—Western readers would link the character too strongly with Chinese communism—so he opted to use the Chinese term, adding an explanatory footnote.

Liu tackles a version of this challenge even with his own English-language novels, where he's careful to avoid shorthand that

can trigger latent stereotypes. "If you start the story with a lot of Chinese people in Chinese clothes, speaking Chinese, using chopsticks, then people will immediately say, 'Oh, I know what sort of story this is.' You can't do that." He accessories his fantasy with utensils that aren't chopsticks, and dots its skies with fire-breathing "garinafins" that



aren't dragons, giving it "a much more estranged look." In a way, this is the trick of all his fiction: it de-familiarizes readers, and welcomes them to strange worlds. By the stories' end—

with the trickster taking the throne, or the case closed by the cyborg detective—distant places feel not so foreign, not so unlike home.

Toward Democracy in America

A masterwork on the past, and future, of democracy

by ALAN WOLFE

IN THE AGE OF TWITTER, when stabs at wisdom can appear in 140 characters or fewer, it is refreshing to review a comprehensive book dedicated to a vitally important concept. Let there be no doubt: *Toward Democracy* makes a major contribution to both scholarship and citizenship in America. At a

time when our political system is threatened by polarization and extremism, we need a reminder of why we value it in the first place. That is precisely what Warren professor of history James T. Kloppenberg offers.

Democracy is a most improbable idea. Throughout much of human history, down

to the present in much of the world, the notion that ordinary people should have a say in choosing the government that rules them was as laughable as it was improbable. Rule was the province of tyrants, sometimes chosen by heredity privilege, other times determined by violent military conflict. Religious authorities conveyed the sense that people were hopelessly sinful and thus in need of firm guidance. Life was too short, too crowded with poverty, and too marked by widespread illiteracy to worry about what was taking place in distant capitals. Getting by was difficult enough. Self-understanding, let alone self-rule, was simply too far a stretch.

Kloppenberg hints at democracy's improbability through his choice of title: the word "toward" implies that the goal of democracy has not yet been reached. If so, then his book should be viewed as a pre-history of democracy, an account of the many revolutions in thought and practice that made it possible merely to imagine a world in

James Kloppenberg conveys the evolution of democracy from early theorists through Tocqueville's celebration, written some years before this beatific electoral scene, *The Verdict of the People* (1854-55), by George Caleb Bingham.

