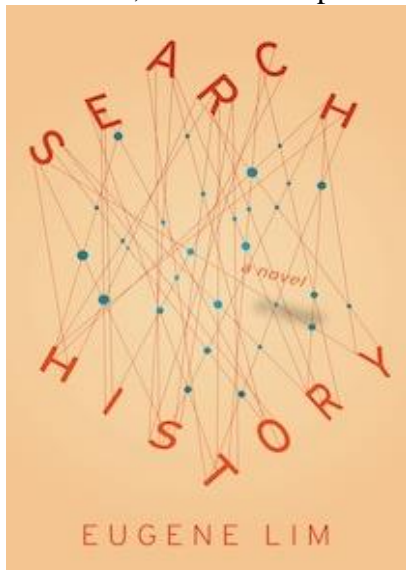


Eugene Lim's 'Search History' is a pulpish adventure interwoven with meditative moments

By Paul Di Filippo

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(Coffee House Press)

CONSIDER THE MAP OF AN HOUR OF IDLE BROWSING ON THE INTERNET: a tangled, convoluted path through the universe, represented by a cascade of places, persons, things and ideas. It's unpredictable and serendipitous, yet in some sense inevitable, given the initial starting conditions and the person behind the mouse clicks. Contemplating one's search history, I am always reminded of the great story title from Samuel Delany: "Time Considered as a Helix of Semi-Precious Stones."

Eugene Lim has constructed his latest novel, "[Search History](#)," along these lines, meaning to replicate in a prose narrative our cybernetic knowledge quests, be they deadly serious or wantonly whimsical. The segues between Lim's chapters seem either arbitrary or linked by a hidden esoteric logic. Characters mutate and change roles and natures. Metafictional asides advise us — benignly or maliciously — how to interpret events. All is in flux. Even the title, "Search History," can be read as a catalogue or a command: *You must search history to understand the present.*

And yet out of this chaos emerges a vivid set of beings, beset by humanity's common fears and passions, doubts and epiphanies, who also participate in a pulpish adventure interleaved with meditative moments.

Lim's novel fits into a loosely affiliated school of experimental books that play fast and loose with narrative conventions and which question the very meaning of fiction. From books by John Hawkes and [Nathalie Sarraute](#) to contemporary writers Lance Olsen and [Steve Aylett](#), these stories have shattered preconceived notions about novels and recast the bits into fresh forms.



Author Eugene Lim. (Ning Li)

Our tale begins with a robot who bears the name of real-life writer César Aira. Musing among other matters on a day when the world will be overtaken by “a new aesthetic: music *by* cyborgs *for* cyborgs,” the robot writer gives birth on the page to a figure, Doctor Y, who will become central to our whole tapestry. Then, mission accomplished, our robot “winks completely out of existence,” like a classical *deus absconditus*, leaving the storytelling to a host of other characters.

Doctor Y is a depressive artificial intelligence scientist who is obsessed with a bizarre project, an AI that anticipates human needs: “The program is turning out to work all too well, as the robots not only seem to anticipate when you want companionship or a beverage or the stereo turned on but quickly evolved to discover and emulate that which you most longed for — a desire perhaps unconscious, secret even from yourself — a desire which in most people turns out to be the recovery of the dead.”

The themes of mortality, memory and grief suffuse a narrative that revolves around a troupe of eccentric players. One is a figure called “Frank Exit,” a bohemian piano player (or, perhaps, a videogame-obsessed IT guy?) who kills himself by running into a burning building. His good friend Muriel grieves the loss so deeply that she comes to believe that a random dog is the reincarnation of Frank. Seeking to kidnap the dog, Muriel discovers that the animal is really an artificial creation embedded with Doctor Y's miracle algorithms. Now ensues a round-the-globe “Mission: Impossible” hunt for Doctor Y and her cyber-dog, a chase that finds Muriel and her pal Donna, Thelma-and-Louise-style, staking out Utah motels and dashing through Cairo restaurants, ending with a ploy by Doctor Y that would not be out of place in a James Bond thriller: “She had terraformed the far side of the moon and built a small fortress, where she was planning to rocket away.”

This major thread is interspersed with a plethora of other material: “Autobiographical Interludes,” which, barring contradiction, one may read as Lim’s own touching experiences; musings on the visual arts; and fascinating, blue-sky sessions on the topics of identity and cultural hegemony among a group of millennial friends at a restaurant dubbed “Inauthentic Sushi.”

“Sometimes I wonder if the things we so chiefly use as markers for identity aren’t in fact the *least* fundamental,” the narrator remarks. “Ideas of race or class or tribe may be true for political and social movements but, on closer inspection, these categories turn out to be only the flimsiest and unimportant of costumes. And things like: one’s sense of humor, the choices of friends one keeps, how we organize our approach to crisis — these are more durable and fundamental aspects of our identity than the tribal ones.”

This bricolage surprisingly coheres by the novel’s end into an authentic expression of a mind striving to comprehend the inexplicable cruelties of the universe and humanity’s most proper response. As the narrator tells us: “Because after long enough you forget what you wanted, what you were going for, so that the search becomes where you live, its history your universe.”

Fans of Haruki Murakami’s melancholy, oneiric tales will also delight in Lim’s assault upon consensus reality. He encourages the reader to “stop making sense,” in the Talking Heads manner, and experience the universe as a magical tapestry of events whose overall pattern is perceivable only by God — or maybe after one’s own death.

Paul Di Filippo is the author of the Steampunk Trilogy, “The Deadly Kiss-Off” and, most recently, “The Summer Thieves.”

Search History

By Eugene Lim

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