

SDSU CENTER FOR COMICS STUDIES

# The Sketchbook

for Teaching Comics and Social Justice

LESSON PLAN FOR:

THE MAGIC FISH



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# Why This Comic for Social Justice?



## *The Magic Fish* by Trung Le Nguyen

Trung Le Nguyen's debut graphic novel *The Magic Fish* (2020) tackles the difficulties in communication between generations, and families (immigrant families in particular). The book interweaves the stories of the past and present. Both Tién (the protagonist) and his mother Helen use the stories as proxies in order to discuss their own lives. Tién in particular uses the stories to help tell his mother that he's gay. The coming out story of Tién is told as he reads his mother "The Little Mermaid" allows him to show her what it's like to feel like a fish out of water—something his mother certainly understands as both she and the mermaid have left one place for another, and in doing so, they lose their ability to communicate.

- Addresses Identity and Gender Roles
- Issues of Immigration
- Communication
- Generational Relationships

The difficulty of communicating is a common theme for the characters of the story, but the messages displayed in Nguyen's novel are clear. The art and particularly the coloring of the images help the reader understand the intersecting story lines and creates connection between the stories for the reader. Ultimately, this comic highlights that people are more than just one thing: we are an intersection of our past, and the stories we tell ourselves and others.

**Reflects on the difficulty of communication, and how we communicate across generations and cultures.**

**Explores issues of immigration and identity as he tells the story of one boy searching for the words to tell his parents he is gay.**



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# About the Comic



Trung Le Nguyen's debut graphic novel *The magic Fish* (2020) tells the story of Tién, a Vietnamese-American boy living in the midwest with his parents. At the start of the story, we learn that Tién's parents struggle with the English language, and the family reads fairy tales out loud to each other to help them with the language. These stories become important to the family as they learn English, but they go beyond that as a proxy allowing Tién and his mother to tell each other about their individual lives through the characters in the fairy tales.

Tién is struggling with how to best tell his parents that he's gay. After talking the problem over with friends, and a librarian, Tién is confronted by a priest at his private school who escalates the issue. Although Tién can't find the words to tell his parents his truth, he finds a story that can do it for him, and it's through the reading, and altering of the fairytale ending, that his mother tells him that stories don't have to always follow the same path.

The art and particularly the coloring of the images help the reader understand the intersecting storylines: past (shades of yellow), present (shades of red and pink), and fairy tales (shades of blue/purple). The colors of each panel place the reader in each storyline, but Nguyen also places the panels from each story next to each other to create relationships between them. In doing so, he not only tells each story as an individual tale, but connects them together with the characters.

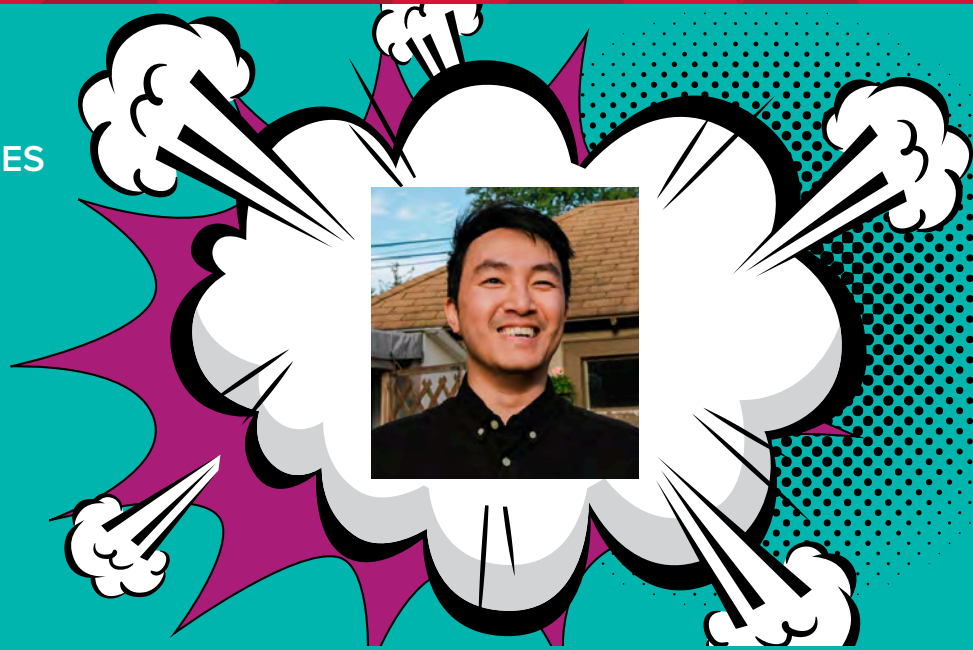
**The past, the present, and the imagined... all blended together to create a beautiful graphic novel about immigrants, love, and how stories can tell truths.**



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# About the Creator



Trung Le Nguyen is a Vietnamese-American comic book author and artist from Minnesota.

After graduating from Hamline University with a bachelor's degree in studio art and a minor in art history in 2012, Nguyen pursued a career in comics.

Along the way he's contributed to projects for DC Comics, Image Comics, Oni Press, and Boom! Studios.

Magic Fish is his debut graphic novel published by Random House Graphic in 2020.

The book was nominated for an Eisner award and won two Harvey Awards.

**Award winning  
graphic novelist  
and artist who  
explores  
immigration,  
family, and the  
difficulty of  
coming out.**



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# Discussion Questions



## *#1 - COLOR USE AND STORY:*

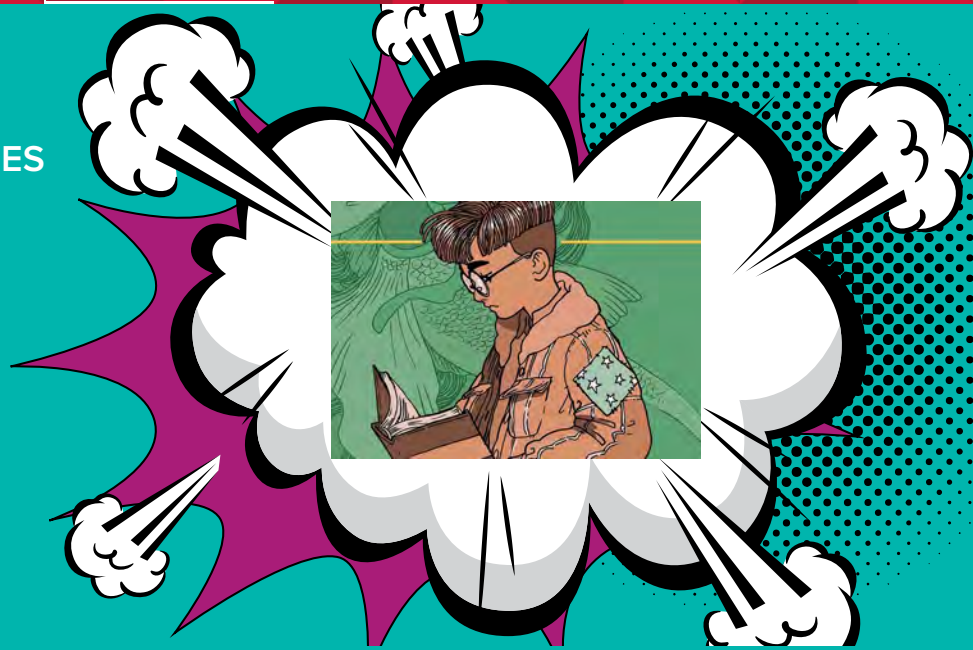
In Nguyen's novel, he uses three different colors to represent different storylines taking place. The past is represented by shades of yellow, the present is represented by shades of red, and purple is represented by shades of purple. In an interview, Nguyen stated that he originally planned on writing the story in all black and white. He went on to say that his publisher requested to print the story in color, and as a compromise they decided to use shades of three colors to represent the different storylines.

- If the novel was printed in black and white, do you think that would have changed the clarity of the story or some other aspect of the story?
- Why do you think Nguyen chose those three particular colors for each storyline? What did the colors do for your understanding of each tale? Did they elicit a certain mood or tone? What would happen if the colors were switched or substituted for something else (another color)?
- For most of the story, the colors don't mix within a single panel, but there are instances in the fairy tales (purple) where we see pops of orange (peaches) and red when there is blood. Why do you think Nguyen chose to integrate more than one color in those panels and not the rest of the story? What meaning do the peaches and blood play?



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# Discussion Questions



## **#2 - WORDS AND PICTURES IN COMMUNICATION:**

In the “Between Words and Pictures” section at the back of the graphic novel, Nguyen explains how: “Comic books speak a hybrid language between orthography and iconography... . It takes a certain level of proficiency in both languages to get by... .” This discussion of communication is also at issue in the novel when he and his parents read fairy tales to help them learn English, and when Tién searches for the words to tell his parents that he’s gay.

- a) How do the images and words of the novel convey meaning and emotion in a way that couldn’t be expressed with words alone?
- b) Tién’s patches on his jacket contain stars. They’re first placed there by his mother (pg 7), then JJJulian compliments them (pg 44) and we see Tién react with wide eyes and stars above his head (pg 45). What do the stars symbolize? How do the recurring images of stars throughout the various storylines help us understand the emotions of the characters?
- c) How does the author, Nguyen, use aspect to aspect transitions to communicate pacing and convey the emotions of the characters throughout the story? (For instance, on pages 113-117 we see Tién ready to tell his parents about his sexuality when they are interrupted by a phone call.) How does the author convey meaning by using irregular panel sizes placed off center? What does the shift in focus between characters and the falling vase convey to the reader? What does the author communicate to the reader when Tién views the picture of his friends and the stars escape the confines of the panels (pg 114)? What is communicated when Tién is portrayed to scale until he realizes something is amiss on page 115? Why double Tién’s size in panel 4 on page 114, and place his head between the top and bottom row of panels on that page?
- d) On page 123, when Helen returns to Nha Trang, she expresses that “It’s all—...different.” We see in three successive panels images of the city, people walking on a beach, and a busy market. Helen is outside the panels, walking her luggage and she’s placed between panel three in the present (signified by the red color) and panel four in the past (signified by the yellow color). What is the author trying to communicate to the reader when organizing the panels/character in this way? How do the visuals help the reader understand the mindset of Helen in this moment, and how do the images help the reader empathize with the character’s past and present?

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# Activities and Assignments



## #1 - CLOSE READING AND ANALYSIS:

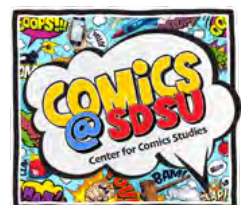
A) Throughout the story, Nguyen weaves the story of Tién and his family together with that of various fairy tales. The fairy tales placed alongside the story of Tién's family adds a layer of depth and meaning to each story. Early on in the story (pg 28) Nguyen uses a nine panel page to intertwine Helen's past and present with a fairy tale.

- How does the use of these non-sequitur transitions between storylines build tension in the story, and help the reader understand the mental state of Helen?
- How does the story of Helen's past relate to the story "Tattercoats," and why is Helen so afraid of the Old Man of the Sea?
- How does an understanding of these two stories help the reader empathize with the characters and their past?

B) Throughout The Magic Fish a sense of belonging and "the other" are common themes throughout all of the storylines. How does Nguyen utilize images, language, and other comic storytelling techniques to help the reader understand and identify these themes? How would this story differ if it were simply told using text?

➤ Some elements to focus on in your discussion:

- Color scheme
- Panel arrangement and breaking out of the confines of the panel structure
- Silent panels (no narration or speech bubbles)
- Transitions
- Non-sequitur transitions and images
- Clothing
- Water
- Hair



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# Activities and Assignments



## #2 - INDIVIDUAL / GROUP PROJECT:

At the start of the story (page 3), Helen wants Tién to read the story “exactly as they’re written” because she’s trying to “read the words as closely as [she] can. For Practice.” Tién explains that he likes to change the stories sometimes: “But it’s fun! There are so many versions, anyway.” If we read just the narrator’s interjections on that same page, we can see that Tién explains that “language is a map,” and that “You can’t help others when you’re lost.” Finally Tién ends the narrative on the page by wondering “...if [he’ll] ever find [his] way home.”

- If we compare this start to the story with how the story ends (pgs 214-229) we can see Helen change the final fairy tale in order to help communicate her feelings towards Tién and his sexuality.

### ACTIVITY:

Pick a fairy tale or another well known story and modify it in order to communicate a new message in support of a marginalized community.

- Create a script
- Create a comic (anything from stick figures to photo realistic images will do)
- Give a 5-10 minute explanation of what changes you made and why you made those changes to convey your message.

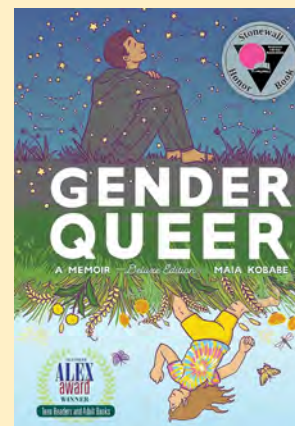


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# Further Readings



- ***Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*** by Scott McCloud
- ***On a Sunbeam*** by Tillie Walden
- ***Gender Queer: A Memoir*** by Maia Kobabe
- **Queer Comics Database: Discover your next queer read:** [queercomicsdatabase.com](http://queercomicsdatabase.com)
- **One Book, One San Diego Author Event with Trung Le Nguyen:** [www.youtube.com/watch?v=8I7sFc\\_r1DY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8I7sFc_r1DY)
- **Trung Le Nguyen's website:** [www.trungles.com/the-magic-fish](http://www.trungles.com/the-magic-fish)
- **Books Connect Us podcast, interview with Trung Le Nguyen:** [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ekMKT3bDp6Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ekMKT3bDp6Q)
- **"The Magic Fish Author Trung Le Nguyen Discusses the Heroism of Fairy Tales: 'It's a Fantasy of Growth'"** By Christian Holub, Entertainment Weekly: [ew.com/books/the-magic-fish-trung-le-nguyen-interview/](http://ew.com/books/the-magic-fish-trung-le-nguyen-interview/)
- **"How a Cartoonist Found Inspiration for 'The Magic Fish'"** By Graeme McMillan, Hollywood Reporter: [www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/how-trung-le-nguyen-found-inspiration-magic-fish-1283013/](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/how-trung-le-nguyen-found-inspiration-magic-fish-1283013/)



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# About the Educator



**Ben Jenkins completed his MFA in creative writing and his BA in English at SDSU.**

**Currently, Ben works as a lecturer at SDSU while also teaching English at Miramar College.**

**Ben is a tribal member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. In 2016, he won the new voices Native American writing contest at the literary journal, See the Elephant.**

**Some of Ben's interests include: literature and issues pertaining to American Indians and other indigenous people throughout the world, civil discourse, our relationship with technology, social justice, the environment, visual rhetoric, and comics.**



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