

## A CONVERSATION WITH ED BOK LEE

### What inspired you to write *Whorled*?

In Korean, there's a word, "maum," which means mind/heart (as one unified concept). When working on poems, I'm just trying to cultivate as wild and rich a life of the maum as I can.

I was raised in and by a family of Confucians, Christians, Buddhists and a grandmother who practiced shamanic animism. For a while now, I've been struggling with something the Dali Lama said on religion:

"People from different traditions should keep their own, rather than change. . . . In the United States [people] take something Hindu, something Buddhist, something, something . . . That is not healthy. For individual practitioners, having one truth, one religion, is very important. Several truths, several religions, is contradictory."

In retrospect, at its core, the book seems to be exploring this, and other obsessions surrounding globalization, psychic and spiritual displacement, loss and gain, etc. I think it's my effort to depict artfully and explore these and many other things that confuse me on a daily basis.

### What research did you undertake in writing your award-winning collection?

Every poem requires research, but mainly inward stuff. Poems can and must get at that substratum of being.

However, in "If in America," a poem about an actual Hmong-American hunter in Wisconsin, who shot and killed six white hunters, I did a lot of research because I wanted to get things both factually correct and emotionally true. He's still alive, and has a voice of his own. So I wrote a kind of inverted persona poem.

### What do you like most about *Whorled*?

*Whorled* is maybe like a drunk person going on about the world, who sometimes can't even stand up, but hopefully can carry some interesting tunes.

### What do you hope your readers take away from the book?

Jacques Lacan wrote, "The reason we go to poetry is not for wisdom, but for the dismantling of wisdom." As I've commented elsewhere, to riff off of that, one reason I think I write poetry is not for memory, but to dismantle it utterly and follow where the ani-

ating spirits go from there. And, lately, as in the final, (title) poem in *Whorled*, that's been leading me into the future where, for example, 90% of the world's languages are scheduled to go extinct by 2050.

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### What was your journey to becoming a published poet?

My mother once told me that I wrote a poem about God when I was in kindergarten. The teacher had given it to her, but by the time she'd told me this in passing one day when I was an adult, she'd lost it. I don't remember the poem at all, so I can't say much about its impact. But I wish I had it, maybe as a guidepost. It's a lot harder as an adult to fully embrace what is incomprehensible to you.

Read everything, and eventually you'll find yourself craving a kind of poem or story that you can't find anywhere. Write it. Then share it with the world, however you can, no holds barred.

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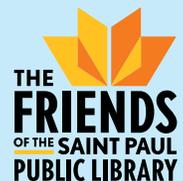
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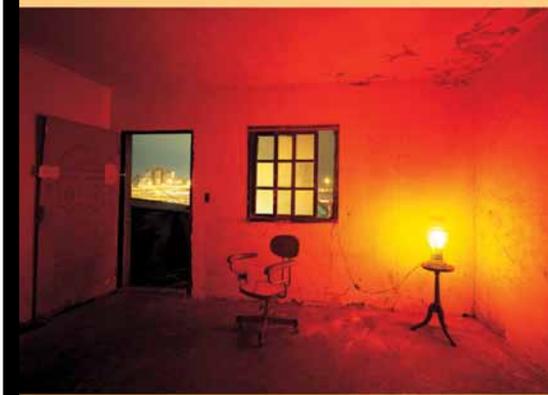
24TH ANNUAL

# MINNESOTA BOOK AWARDS

**Poetry Winner**

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## Whorled



POEMS

Ed Bok Lee

***Whorled***

by Ed Bok Lee

COFFEE HOUSE PRESS



# Whorled



Summary & Discussion Questions



## SUMMARY

What does it mean to be a global citizen in an era of constant war, rampant industrialization, and ever-advancing technology? *Whorled* confronts and celebrates the many complications of globalism through meditations on war, migration and culture.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the collection's main themes?
2. What pros and cons surround the fact that by 2050 many linguists predict that 90% of world languages spoken today will have become extinct?

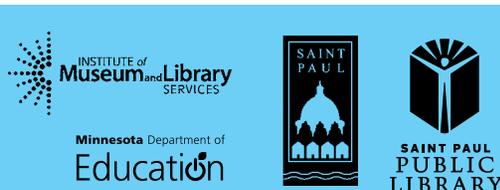
3. Did you read the poems in *Whorled* in order or randomly? How might your experience of the collection been different if you had read the poems in another order?
4. What were you reminded of from your own life while reading the poems "Whorled" and "If in America?"
5. What would the book have gained and/or lost if the themes in *Whorled* had been articulated in all prose stories or essays?
6. What does this statement mean, and do you agree with it, "The reason we go to poetry is not for wisdom, but for the dismantling of wisdom," (Jacques Lacan)? Why do you read poetry?
7. What does this quote mean to you, "It is difficult to get the news from poems, yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there," (William Carlos Williams)?
8. What messages is the poet communicating about globalization? What are the pros and/or cons of globalization?
9. Which poem speaks to you the most?
10. Pick 2-3 poems of different lengths and describe how the author uses length, stanza structure and language to help communicate tone and theme.

## ABOUT ED BOK LEE



*Ed Bok Lee was raised in South Korea, North Dakota, and Minnesota. A former bartender, physical education teacher, journalist, and translator, Lee has a M.F.A. from Brown University. His work has appeared in journals and anthologies and on public radio and MTV. Lee's first book, Real Karaoke People, was the winner of the Asian American Literary Award and the PEN Open Book Award. He teaches part-time at Metropolitan State University.*

**Learn more about the author at [www.edboklee.com](http://www.edboklee.com).**



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# 24TH ANNUAL MINNESOTA BOOK AWARDS