

Sigrid Nunez Wins Top Literature Honor

CAS lecturer's novel *The Friend* receives National Book Award for best fiction



"I see it as a book about different kinds of loss," says Nunez, a College of Arts & Sciences lecturer in the Creative Writing Program. "There's the loss a person suffers when someone they love dies, the losses that we all have to face as we grow older, and the lost illusions that most people encounter as they go through life. But the book is also about healing from loss."

It's also a trenchant take on today's literary scene. Her keenly observed depictions of writing workshops are laced with a sly wit.

Nunez had long wanted to write a novel about suicide and suicide loss, about her work as a writer and writing teacher, and about literary mentorship. At the same time, she wanted to explore human-animal companionships. (She acknowledges being more of a cat person herself.) "I saw a way to explore all these subjects in one novel," she says.

The author of seven novels, Nunez has earned a reputation for versatility. She has written about ballet (*A Feather*

on the Breath of God) and about a deadly plague (*Salvation City*), and a fictionalized account of the marmoset adopted by Virginia Woolf's husband, Leonard (*Mitz: The Marmoset of Bloomsbury*). She's also written a well-received

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memoir of her own mentor, Susan Sontag, *Sempre Susan*.

But *The Friend* has brought her a new level of attention, with critics uniformly extolling the book. *Kirkus Reviews* describes it as "quietly brilliant and darkly funny," and says that it's "a lonely novel: rigorous and stark, so elegant—so dismissive of conventional notions of plot—it hardly feels like fiction." And from the *Los Angeles Review of Books*: "one of those rare novels that, in the end, makes your heart beat slower."

Judges for the 2018 National Book Awards concurred. Last fall, *The Friend* won the National Book Award for best fiction—a top literary prize. Nunez was one of 25 finalists selected from 1,637 books submitted for consideration, 368 of them works of fiction. JO

Jennifer Tseng Appointment a Boston Breakthrough

The first woman in city to lead surgical units at a medical school and teaching hospital

FOR ALL OF BOSTON'S RENOWN AS a center of pioneering medicine, there remains one medical field where hospitals here lag, just like everywhere else: female surgeons.

That's what makes Jennifer Tseng's appointment in 2017 as chair of the BU School of Medicine department of surgery and as chief of surgery at Boston Medical Center a breakthrough: Tseng is the first woman appointed chair and chief of surgery at an academic medical center in Boston.

Women account for more than a third of all physicians and physicians-in-training in the United States and are half of all medical students. And yet, in 2015 they numbered only 19.2 percent of general surgeons, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges.

Tseng specializes in surgical oncology and gastrointestinal surgery. In a recent chair's note, she writes of MED's tradition of diversity and inclusion, dating back to one of its founding institutions, the New England Female Medical College, the first US institution to train female physicians, including the first black female physician, Rebecca Lee Crumpler, in 1864, and in 1890, Charles Eastman, the first Native American physician.

Tseng was born in northern California, the daughter of immigrants who fled their native China for Taiwan in 1949 and came to the United States in the 1960s to go to college. After graduating from Stanford University with degrees in biology and English, Tseng earned a medical degree at the University of California, San Francisco, School of Medicine, and a master's in public health from the Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health.

SIGRID NUNEZ' LATEST NOVEL is a meditation on grief and the deep emotional bonds we forge with our pets. *The Friend* is the story of a middle-aged writer who has lost her best friend, mentor, and former lover to suicide. Following his death, she inherits his 180-pound Great Dane, Apollo, which poses immediate problems: the narrator lives in a 500-square-foot apartment in a building that has a strict no-pets policy.

In *The Friend* (Riverhead Books, 2018), Apollo is at times a smelly, drooling houseguest, but he also loves to be read to (he's partial to Rilke and Knutsen). And as the novel unfolds, dog and narrator bring comfort to each other. At one point, the narrator notes, dogs "don't weep. But they can and do fall to pieces. They can and do have their hearts broken."

MED's James Utley Professor of Surgery, Tseng was formerly a professor of surgery at Harvard Medical School—only the fourth female full professor in the school's history—and chief of surgical oncology at the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center. She is married to a cardiologist and has two children, ages 11 and 13.

Bostonia talked with Tseng about how she chose medicine over a career in writing and the connection between surgery and humanism.

***Bostonia:* Were there any physicians in your family before you?**

My grandfather was a general and thoracic surgeon and my grandmother was an OB-GYN and primary care doctor during the day. She assisted him in the surgicenter they ran out of their house at night. They practiced in China and Taiwan. They both inspired me to go into medicine. They were in their 50s when they came to the United States—they were chain immigrants—and they retrained as psychiatrists.

Why psychiatry?

There's a certain type of surgeon that's the contemplative, quiet, gentle surgeon with great hands. My grandfather was very much like that. The line between surgery and psychiatry for that type—it's very profound.

What is it about surgery that attracts such a person?

Surgery is intense. It's one of those things that, when the stars align in the operating room, you can be truly of the moment. Everything else needs to go away.... You are so intimately connected to this person you're operating on. People are literally putting their life and their body and their spirit in your hands...and if you mess up, the stakes are incredibly high.



"Surgery is intense," says Jennifer Tseng, chair of the MED department of surgery and chief of surgery at Boston Medical Center. "You are so intimately connected to this person you're operating on. People are literally putting their life and their body and their spirit in your hands."

Did you face resistance from men in the operating room?

I think most of the trouble comes from within. Maybe this is true of everybody, but it's particularly true of successful women—I think there's this little voice in your head that says maybe you're not good enough, or maybe you don't deserve to be there.... That voice may be what drives many of us, men and women, to work harder... but I think it's very easy for that voice to spiral into being just negativity, insecurity, putting yourself down.

The number of times I've been mistaken for a nurse or respiratory therapist is legion—if I spent time worrying about that, which I did

early on, it doesn't really help.

You know, I started as a medical receptionist...

When was that?

In high school. My mom made me take typing over the summer; if you can type, you can always have a job. At 16, I got a job as a medical receptionist. First I was at the Palo Alto Medical Center. The next summer I switched to Valley Medical Center, which is a county hospital in San Jose. I worked there every summer, holidays, weekends. It was great. I got paid \$9 something—a huge amount of money at the time. I would type, and answer the phone, and deal with the patients who walked in.

It was a cancer clinic. Nobody spoke English. I learned to work with two other secretaries, who were older than me, and a bunch of doctors and nurses and radiation technologists, and early on I started to realize that it's not just about the doctor, it's a team. **SARA RIMER**

And yet people do it. They surrender their beings to you. It's this incredible privilege and trust.

Were you drawn to medicine as a child?

Yes, I was always interested. Some of it is this Asian immigrant, "You will be a doctor" thing. At five, I said I was going to be a doctor. Then I was going to be a writer, then I was going to be a dancer, but I had no talent as a dancer, so I ruled that out.

At Stanford, poet Adrienne Rich was one of my advisors.... I spent a lot of time thinking about not going into medicine, and becoming a writer.... She was very supportive. She said that being of service was the most important thing.

Why did you decide to become a surgeon?

I felt in general surgery I could do the best part of medicine, understand the biology of disease, and still have the powerful tool of operating to help people.