

# 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*

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*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

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.