

# The BiblioFiles: Victoria Ying

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DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents The BiblioFiles.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

DR. DANA: Hi. This is Dr. Dana. Today, my guest is graphic novelist, Victoria Ying, creator of *City of Secrets* and its sequel, *City of Illusion*.

In *City of Secrets*, we meet two children, Ever Barnes and Hannah Morgan. Ever is an orphan hiding in a massive intricate jigsaw puzzle of a complex known as the Switchboard Operating Facility. He is befriended by Hannah, the daughter of the wealthy businessman who owns the facility. Soon, the two children discover that the facility houses a secret that people are willing to kill for. With war escalating between the cities of Oskars and Edmonda, the race to uncover the secret becomes all the more urgent and dangerous.

In *City of Illusion*, Ever and Hannah travel to a third city, Alexios, which specializes in illusions and magic. Unfortunately, villains are still on their trail attempting to unlock the mystery that ties all three cities together. The stakes are huge, and the winner can gain enough power to conquer and control everything and everyone.

Ying's graphic novels are incredibly stylish with sweeping action and interesting visuals. Part espionage and part science fiction, her characters enliven the page, creating an experience that feels like you are turning the pages on a fast-paced film. Imaginative and intriguing, they absolutely deliver on adventure and heart.

In addition to her two full-length graphic novels, Ying has produced short stories, illustrated numerous picture books, and has been a developmental artist for Disney Studios and Sony, working on major films such as *Frozen*, *Tangled*, *Big Hero 6*, *Moana*, and *Wreck-It Ralph*.

Victoria Ying, welcome to The BiblioFiles!

VICTORIA YING: Thank you. Thanks for having me.

DR. DANA: Looking at your website, there's so much artwork there in so many amazing formats. I know this is a basic question, but it feels like a good place to begin. Where did you train as an artist?

VICTORIA YING: My first love of art was from comics and manga, actually. So when I was in middle school, I was exposed to *Ranma 1/2*, *Sailor Moon*, and a lot of the things that certain millennials have a very particular obsession with. But my obsession went a little further because I would copy those drawings and then start to try to come up with my own comics.

I was very focused and very determined from that very young age to become a comics artist. I knew I wanted to go to art school, so I applied for ArtCenter College of Design, where I majored in illustration. When I got there, however, I learned that comics was not the most lucrative field, and I switched gears and decided to try my hand at working in film, which had a lot of the same elements that I was really drawn to in comics. But after being in film for a while, I actually still missed telling stories and being the person who was doing both the art and the storytelling. I came back to comics in my 30s.

DR. DANA: Wow. So today, we'll be chatting about your two full-length graphic novels. But did you begin your career doing conceptual art for films, picture books, or something else?

VICTORIA YING: Yeah. So my very first job out of school was working in concept art for actually video games. I worked at Disney Interactive for about a year. And the Disney feature animation program, they had something called the talent development program where they would take young and freshly graduated people from schools and give them a six-month almost internship. And then at the end of that six months, they would decide whether or not they wanted to keep you on.

So I worked for one year with Interactive. And I had applied for the training development program twice before I actually got in. And then once I did get in, I was just lucky enough, right place, right time, to be able to work on *Tangled* and some of those films. And I ended up staying at Disney Feature Animation for about eight years.

DR. DANA: That's really cool that Disney nurtures artists like that.

VICTORIA YING: It's a really cool program, and I can't recommend it highly enough. It's something that a lot of other studios have copied. And I think it's such a great idea because not only do you kind of develop the artists specifically for your projects, you also get to keep them around. And I think that most of the younger artists at Disney have all come through that program now.

DR. DANA: Wow. Moving on to *City of Secrets* and *City of Illusions*, the names of your three cities are Oskars, Edmonda, and Alexios. I'm curious where the names came from. Are they a tribute to people you know?

VICTORIA YING: They are not, actually. So naming things is one of the things I'm absolutely the worst at when it comes to writing. I get tripped up on names constantly. The names of the cities, the names for characters, I'm they're always "TK," which in publishing speak, that means "to come." You fill it in later because if I think too much about names, just nothing ever comes to me. So for the names of the cities and names or most of the characters, I actually used name generation websites.

DR. DANA: Oh, my gosh.

VICTORIA YING: Yeah. Because I'm so bad at it. I will just refresh the name generation until something sounds right. And I'm like, oh, OK. That sounds good. There are some names that have come to me that I've just felt like this is the perfect name. Ever Barnes, his name was really just a name that struck me. And I was like, this is like the perfect protagonist name for what I'm trying to do. But almost everyone else's name was something that either was just a temporary placeholder that stuck around or was something that I replaced by just using a name generator website.

DR. DANA: Hey, you know what? Any tool in the toolbox.

VICTORIA YING: Yeah. You know what? I think that that's the biggest thing. You don't have to be a genius at every aspect of writing. If there's parts that you're weak at, it's totally fine to use tools that are available.

DR. DANA: I'd like to ask about the color palette and style you chose for your graphic novels. The colors are somewhat muted. The clothing is very Victorian. It definitely has a certain vibe. Can you tell us about your choices when creating these worlds?

VICTORIA YING: Yeah. So with comics—this is my first full-length graphic novel that I was illustrating fully. And when I was doing the colors for the book, there were certain standard graphic novel looks. And a lot of them are very cell shaded, very animation-y. And I love that look too, but I wanted something that felt painterly. But at the same time, I didn't want to paint the whole book.

Graphic novels are just so much labor. And I knew that I needed to be able to conserve my own energy in order to be able to create multiple books in the time frame that was required. So I developed a process that—actually, the entire page—they're painted in black and white. And then I use a process called gradient mapping, which actually takes the gradients in the black and white tones and assigns a color to them. And then I apply another layer of color on top of it. That's just a wash, almost like a clear glaze. So the color is—the red that's the accent color in it, I wanted to use that because that's a color that actually sits really well on top of the gradient map.

And yeah, that's basically how I did it. And the reasoning behind those choices was just because I wanted it to feel like it was fully painted without actually fully painting it. And the reds and those accent colors were really something that stood out really well on the colors that I had already established in my black and white.

DR. DANA: Actually, my next question is about the color red because one of your main characters, Hannah, wears it almost exclusively in *City of Secrets*. And sometimes, it's a full dress on her. And other times, it's a sash. But most of the other characters are just wearing black and white. Knowing Hannah's personality, what's the significance of the red for her?

VICTORIA YING: So definitely, it's a character trait. Coming from concept and film, you try to infuse as much story as possible into the smallest details. When I worked on *Tangled* and *Moana*, one of my assignments was to do costume. And so you think a lot about what are the small things that you can do to communicate story, even if you're just looking at a still frame or if you're just looking at a model sheet.

So with Hannah, yeah, she has a very bold personality, and I wanted to make that come across in her clothing and her choices. And I also—the practical reason of just having her really stand out on the page, so you can really see her. And the color red, specifically, part of it is the aesthetic choice of it sitting on the yellows and the cool blues of the black and white.

But then the other reason is because red is a color of luck in Chinese culture, and she is definitely a lucky girl in a lot of ways. And I wanted to infuse that little bit of storytelling there too because she is an Asian character. She's supposed to be mixed, but I wanted her to feel like she was a character who was regal in a lot of ways and someone who just managed to draw all that good luck towards them.

DR. DANA: Without giving away too many spoilers, there are some pretty epic and massive battles, but there are also quieter, emotional moments. Do you have a preference for which you like to draw more?

VICTORIA YING: I actually really love writing the small quiet moments. I love character acting and just getting those little tiny emotional beats of expression, trying to find the truth and communicate what characters are feeling when they're just speaking. Some of my favorite scenes are really just two talking heads.

But the emotion that I'm trying to get across and the subtlety of the acting there, that's always much more challenging for me because it's pretty easy to draw a robot punching another robot. The action there is very clear. And the feeling you're supposed to get from it is very obvious. But when it comes to two characters talking—and maybe they have a different—they're coming at the conversation from a different point of view. You want to kind of show that conflict. And that complexity in characters and complexity in people in general has always been something that's really intrigued me. And it's one of the things that I love drawing.

And I'm trying to keep that interesting too. If you have three pages of characters just talking to each other, how do you make sure that there's enough action going on? But there's a reason why it's a graphic novel. It's not just prose. And I wanted to use the medium of comics and use the art and the words together to create a full experience of that human emotion during conversations.

DR. DANA: Did you ever have to redraw, and redraw, and redraw, and redraw a quiet moment, or do they flow pretty well?

VICTORIA YING: So my process, I usually thumbnail the whole book out. And then in the thumbnails-- my drawings are really very, very simple. They basically look like smiley faces. It's a circle with two dots and a mouth. That's pretty much it.

But a lot of times, I will be inking, which is when I actually nail down the features, and I nail down exactly what's happening. And sometimes, I have to keep going back to my thumbnails because sometimes, the emotion in the thumbnail is just that smiley, happy face. That's just the two dots in the mouth. That can communicate so much more than me adding all that detail.

So it's much more about finding the honest truth in it. And most of the time, that actually is much more evident in the simple sketch that I did initially. So yeah, sometimes I'll have to flip back and forth and be like, OK, why does this feel better? This little doodle scribble somehow feels more honest.

And then the finished drawing doesn't have that magic anymore. So yeah, sometimes I'll have to like nail down that expression a little bit better. And sometimes it just becomes simplifying it, really just going back to that basic symbol for a person that we all see in our heads.

DR. DANA: There's also—I remember specifically a panel. I'm afraid I can't remember which book it is, but there is a simple pause in a panel where two characters are looking at each other and then this embrace. There's this wordless communication that you've managed to get across in this pacing. And that is one of my favorite moments.

VICTORIA YING: Yeah. A lot of that for me comes from my background or my love of Japanese comics. So girls comics in manga, so much of that is about romance, about relationships. And they really spend a lot of time just getting those emotions across and spending drawings. The whole pages are characters are just looking at each other. And I love that. There's just something about those moments that gives me tingles. And so that's what I've always wanted to do in my own comics. I draw in some of that influence and let those emotional moments really land.

DR. DANA: Along those lines, in your two graphic novels, can you describe one scene, one character, or one panel that is your secret favorite and tell us why?

VICTORIA YING: So my secret favorite is the panel where we introduce Chifa for the first time. She is a street magician. And I've always loved the idea of female magicians. There's so few of them.

And I really wanted this sly young girl who looks super cool and is also doing really cool stuff. And her hands in that scene, the drawings that I did of her-- I just love that character so much, and I love that we get to introduce her in this way where she's being super competent and doing something very slick and very cool. The *Ocean's Eleven* movies are my favorite. And having a character who is a con man, basically. And a young girl con man, at that, was very fun. And yeah, that's probably my favorite.

DR. DANA: Some of our listeners are going to be very excited to hear the particular movies you've worked on as a conceptual artist. So I feel I would be remiss if I didn't ask at least one question about what it was like to do the art for these famous Disney movies.

VICTORIA YING: Yeah. So working at Disney and working on these films was such a privilege. Working on graphic novels its own joy because I do get to be in control of every aspect of it. But the cool thing about working on films is that every single person along the way also makes it better.

So in a lot of ways, I miss that. I miss working with great modelers. I miss working with great animators because I don't know everything. I can't do everything well. And having those people along the way to just make this project so much better is such a cool thing to be a part of. Working on those films, you're working on something that's so much bigger than one person. And that's what makes it so cool. When I can travel to somewhere and—anywhere in the world, I would travel and talk to kids. And they would all know these films. And that was super cool.

And that's something that I don't think I could ever have with writing books. It's much more—the global reach of Disney is something that we can all aspire to as creators, but there is a certain nostalgia, a certain magic. And getting to work on those films was definitely a fulfillment of my own childhood dreams.

DR. DANA: And what does a conceptual artist do? I'm imagining there is some connection between being a graphic novelist and a conceptual artist. And I really do see this connection because your graphic novels are very much almost like film, in a way.

VICTORIA YING: Thank you. Yeah. I definitely wanted my graphic novels to be very cinematic. So I have those two influences. I have both manga influences, which are almost poetic in a way, a lot of the ways that they frame things and the way that they take time. And they use the medium of comics is so different than the traditional Western comics. But I also really had this grounding from cinema. And I wanted to have that feeling of this is a movie that you're watching. So that's something that I was always trying to really get across.

DR. DANA: What does a conceptual artist do?

VICTORIA YING: Yeah, so visual development as a term is a catch-all for everyone who's in the design department. And VisDa, which is the shortened term for it, is responsible for all kinds of things. So we're responsible for character design, prop design, environment design, color keys, basically any 2D art that needs to get made in order for the film to be finished.

So most of the stuff that I was responsible for tended to be environment design, costume design, set dressing, which meant that the shape of the room was already determined, but the inside and the small details of where objects are placed was not. So those are all the different roles that I had on those films. And every film was different.

So *Tangled*, we actually had a really short production span for that. It was about 18 months, which now is normal, but at the time was really fast. And so I got to do a lot of different stuff on that film just because we had so little time and so little manpower that they were just like, can you do this? And I'd be like, yes!

And for that film in particular, I did the design of the window for the tower. I designed the interior of the tower, the placement of objects, and the stove, and the kitchen area, her bedroom. I designed her bed and all that stuff.

There's just a lot of things that when you start breaking down what's involved in creating one of these films, it's not like a feature film with live action where you get to go to the store and just buy a cup off a shelf. You actually have to draw that cup. Someone has to make that cup. Someone has to light that cup. And so for me, every single object that is present in the film, that had to get designed. So I was part of the team that was responsible for that.



DR. DANA: Were you part of the team for Elsa's dress, the famous dress?

VICTORIA YING: I wasn't part of the dress, but I did work on the team for her hair. So there's definitely pages, and pages, and pages of different hair designs that we did. And it's funny because I tell people a lot the job of a visual development artist is to come up with the wrong answer.

There is so much work that no one ever gets to see because it's all the stuff that we said no to. There's a lot of concepts of Elsa where she had short hair. Or there's a lot of concepts where she had long, flowing hair. And you only get to see the one that ends up on screen, which is one out of 1,000 drawings. And I think that that's fun and exciting because you work with the director, and you guys work together to come to whatever's best for the story and whatever is the best expression of the director's vision.

And working in comics, using a lot of those skills, I was able to use a lot of the techniques that I learned from working in films to keep consistency in my own comic. So for example, the Switchboard Operating Facility and the City of Oskars, both of those things, they have a relationship. And in order for me to keep that relationship real, what I did is actually built the entire city and the building as a 3D model and then drew over it. So I definitely used a lot of the skills that I learned from working in films to complete my graphic novel.

DR. DANA: So when you work for Disney, I'm sure—and you train for Disney, they want a certain look for their films. But then as you mentioned, for graphic novels, you get to decide everything. How was it to find your own visual voice, for example, with your two graphic novels?

VICTORIA YING: Yeah. So I am an artist and designer who's always been really interested in just trying new stuff and making stuff look cool. The downside to that is that my work can be fairly inconsistent. People think, “oh, well, I assigned you this, and I expected this back.” But sometimes I'll be like, “well, I saw this cool thing, and I wanted to try it,” and so I gave them something completely different.

And sometimes that's great. Sometimes they're like, “wow, I didn't expect this, and it looks really cool.” But sometimes they're like, “but I actually really wanted that thing that I asked you for.”

And that can be—that's obviously just part of the job. And you have to be a professional, and you have to still deliver what they are expecting. But when I was working on my own stuff, I get to embrace that a little bit. I get to kind of follow whatever is leading me.

So *City of Secrets* and *City of Illusion*, they have a very specific visual look, which is very, very different than my upcoming book, *Hungry Ghost*. My upcoming book is a completely different color palette, completely different painting style, and completely different line work. And the cool thing about being a graphic novelist and being in charge of all that stuff for myself is that I get to make that choice to be like, “OK, this is what's appropriate for this story because the two stories are very different.”

*City of Secrets* and *City of Illusion*, they are steampunk fantasies that I love, and they're very cool. But *Hungry Ghost*, which is a YA issues book, a contemporary YA, they're very different feelings. And I wanted to make sure that that came across on the art as well.

DR. DANA: That was actually my next question is, what are you working on now? It sounds like *Hungry Ghost* is something that you're deeply entrenched in.

VICTORIA YING: Yes. *Hungry Ghost*, actually, I'm finished with it because graphic novels take a long time. But then also, there's a lot of lead time in publishing. So *Hungry Ghost* is going to come out in April 2023.

I'm very excited about it. It's the book of my heart. It's something that I'm really excited to share with readers. But I'm actually working on the next book that I'm contracted with for a second, which I don't really think I can quite talk about, yet but it's another YA contemporary that's also based on a lot of my own lived experiences being a comics artist and being a young very, very focused and determined kid who is like, “I want to be in comics.” That's what this book is a lot about.

But I'm also working with Marvel right now on a new young reader series that I can't say who the hero is yet, but is very cool. And also, I'm working on a second *Diana, Princess of the Amazons* book with DC Comics.

DR. DANA: Wow. You got your dream.

VICTORIA YING: Yeah.

DR. DANA: Marvel, DC, you're in.

VICTORIA YING: I know, definitely making comics.

DR. DANA: Victoria Ying, thank you so much for coming on The BiblioFiles today.

VICTORIA YING: Thank you so much for having me.

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