Echoing #MeToo and other calls for female empowerment, the series focuses heavily on human trafficking, self-defense, and crimes against women. How did these recent movements in today’s culture influence developing the series?

Lily Wong is a modern-day ninja concerned with the issues of modern-day women. This wasn’t a calculated decision inspired by current affairs. Rather, Lily emerged from my mind on a hunt for her younger sister’s rapist and murderer. Family relationships and duty are intrinsic to Asian culture, so Lily’s perceived failure as an elder sister is what drives her to become a big sister to a city and to fight crimes against women and children. That said, the #MeToo movement speaks loudly to me as a former actress in Hollywood and martial arts instructor. The demeaning behavior of the past must end. It’s time to redefine American culture with greater awareness and respect.
How soon into writing the first book of the series did you know Lily’s story was going to be continued?

I knew “The Ninja Daughter” would begin a series before I even wrote the first sentence. Lily Wong demanded I tell her story — one of heroism, tragedy, family, culture, and relevancy. Not only did she fascinate and motivate me to write, but she connected me even more deeply with current affairs, my city, my ninja art, and my heritage.

#ownvoices attempts to recognize diversity and promote representation throughout the literary community. What does it mean to you to be an #ownvoices author?

Writing from my own Chinese-Norwegian heritage, experience as a master ninjutsu practitioner, and longtime resident of Los Angeles, I was able to infuse “The Ninja Daughter” with distinctive authenticity. Personal experience and deeper insight is something readers can and should expect from an #ownvoices author. As for representation in fiction and media, I cannot express how important it is for people of all cultures and communities to see themselves portrayed in nuanced and empowering characters. Characters and stories that veer outside of mainstream experience expand our empathy and connect our society.

The Lily Wong Series is set in Los Angeles, and the spirit and depiction of the city is just as important as the characters. What motivated you to have the book set there?

Los Angeles has been my city for over 35 years, providing me a deep well of experience and familiarity from which to draw. I view Los Angeles as a macrocosm of Lily’s own personality and urban multicultural experience. As Lily points out in “The Ninja Daughter,” Los Angeles is like dot art: View it closely and you’ll see dramatically distinct communities. Take it in as a whole, and our city presents itself in glorious harmony. The same can be said for Lily. In true Asian fashion, I’ve woven this sort of symbolism in “The Ninja’s Blade” and throughout the Lily Wong series. It’s yet another way that Lily and I connect with our shared Chinese heritage.

In “The Ninja’s Blade,” Lily is suffering from PTSD stemming from previous events in book one. Why was it important for you to acknowledge this trauma and how did it help you develop Lily’s character in book two?

Unless you’re a psychopath, violence — done to you or by you — leaves a mark. Past actions inform and often confuse our actions in the present. They can influence our decisions, affect us emotionally, and make us question our self perception. This doubt and angst is part of the human condition. Seeing the actions that took place in “The Ninja Daughter” affect Lily in “The Ninja’s Blade,” not only deepens her character but will hopefully resonate deeply with readers.

“I CANNOT EXPRESS HOW IMPORTANT IT IS FOR PEOPLE OF ALL CULTURES AND COMMUNITIES TO SEE THEMSELVES PORTRAYED IN NUANCED AND EMPOWERING CHARACTERS.”
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Violence of any kind leaves a mark — even on a ninja protector like Lily Wong. How did you feel about the ways past violence affected her in-the-moment choices and perceptions?

2. What are ways that past trauma can hurt or perhaps even help someone's future endeavors?

3. Lily is accused of racism early on in the story. Did that surprise you as much as it surprised Lily? Does a close comparison with the past excuse bias in the present?

4. Did you worry Lily might be mistaken about Dolla and Ana Lucía, as well?

5. What are the dangers of an imbalance of power in friendship, relationships, and/or business? What are the warning signs?

6. What did you think of Gung-Gung and Po-Po? How does Ma's relationship with her parents compare to Lily's relationship with Ma and Baba?

7. How did Gung-Gung and Po-Po's visit change the way Lily and Ma treated each other?

8. Do you notice any similarities between Lily's family dynamic and your own?

9. What do you think about Lily's budding romance with Daniel? Are they a good match? Have your opinions of him and his fit for Lily changed since meeting him in the first book?

10. The teenage characters — Emma, Dolla, Rosie, Sharelle, Cheeks, Princessa, Ana Lucía — were lured, coerced, or forced into prostitution in a variety of ways. Which of these characters resonated most deeply for you and why? Did any of their stories surprise or impact you more than others?

11. What connotations arise from the terms child prostitution, prostituted children, commercial sex trafficking of youth, and why does terminology matter?

12. Despite her PTSD, Lily dives into extreme danger to find Emma and save the prostituted girls. How do you feel about her vigilantism?

13. What would have happened to these girls if Lily hadn't taken action?
FROM THE KITCHEN OF LILY WONG

PAN STEAMED SNAPPER

2 pounds whole snapper or white-fleshed fish, cleaned and scaled
1 tablespoon chopped ginger
2 tablespoons light soy sauce
2 tablespoons Shaoxing rice wine
1 bunch baby bok choy
3 green onions shredded
3 tablespoons minced ginger
1 handful cilantro chopped
2-3 tablespoons cooking oil (with touch of chili oil if desired)
Low-sodium soy sauce

1. Marinate fish for 15 minutes in chopped ginger, soy sauce, rice wine, and sesame oil.
2. Coat bottom of pan with sesame oil, heat, and place fish. Drizzle with the marinade and water around fish.
3. Cover pan and steam for 10 minutes until the fish is cooked.
4. Add bok choy (and more water) around fish and steam 5 minutes longer.
5. Plate fish and bok choy. Deglaze pan if necessary and pour juices over fish.
6. Cover fish with green onions, ginger, and cilantro.
7. Heat the cooking oil over high heat until it smokes, then drizzle hot oil over the fish.
8. Serve immediately with vegetables, rice, and soy sauce on the side.

CHICKEN CABBAGE SOUP (with variations)

2 frozen boneless chicken thighs
1 tablespoon (or as needed) 100% pure sesame oil
1/2 cup sliced sweet onion
2-3 tablespoons minced fresh garlic
2-3 tablespoons minced fresh ginger
1/3 cup sake
1 32-oz box low-sodium beef (or chicken) broth
1/3 green cabbage sliced/shredded
Option: 2 cups cubed pre-cooked butternut squash
Option: 2 eggs swirled with broccoli and sliced mushrooms
Option: pre-cooked wonton dumplings
Option: low-sodium soy sauce and chopped scallions

1. Brown one side of chicken in just enough sesame oil to coat the pan.
2. Turn over and add onions, garlic, and ginger. (If using mushrooms, sauté here.)
3. Add sake to deglaze pan and chop chicken with metal spatula or knife.
4. When evaporated, add beef or chicken broth (or water with a little low-sodium soy sauce) and bring to boil.
5. Add cabbage and simmer.
6. Add optional squash or pre-cooked wontons with extra water if desired.
7. Serve with low-sodium soy sauce and freshly chopped scallions.
CASTING THE WONG FAMILY

We asked author Tori Eldridge who she would cast in the movie version of "The Ninja’s Blade," and here are the results! Who would YOU pick for your dream cast?

Chloe Bennet as Lily Wong
Chloe Bennet (born Chloe Wang from a Han Chinese father and Caucasian American mother) co-stars as the kickass superhero Daisy "Skye" Johnson on "Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D." From Chicago, Chloe learned Mandarin in Beijing when she lived with her grandmother while performing as a pop singer.

Stellan Skarsgård as Baba
Stellan Skarsgård is a Swedish actor with a wide body of work from "Breaking the Waves" and "Good Will Hunting" to "The Avengers" and "The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo." He's one of those rare actors who can be villainous or as beloved as Lily’s Baba.

Michelle Yeoh as Violet Wong
Michelle Yeoh was my inspiration for Lily’s elegant mother, Violet Wong. She's a Malaysian actress of Han Chinese descent best known for "Crazy Rich Asians," "Tomorrow Never Dies," and "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," and is one of the most exquisite women in film.

Kieu Chinh as Po-Po
Kieu Chinh is a Vietnamese-born actress best known for "The Joy Luck Club" and the hit television series "M.A.S.H." Chinh has a timeless beauty and cheery cheeks perfect for Lily’s sweet grandmother.

James Hong as Gung-Gung
James Hong is who I've always imagined as the patriarch of the Wong family. An iconic Asian-American actor, with over 400 film and television credits, Hong also has one of the most expressive and intriguing faces I've ever seen.
Praise for Tori Eldridge and the Lily Wong Series

"Lily Wong is gutsy, smart, and irresistible — just like ‘The Ninja’s Blade.’ Grab it!"

Meg Gardiner, Edgar Award-winning author of “The Dark Corners of the Night"

"‘The Ninja’s Blade’ will have you on the edge of your seat, turning pages so fast toward the end that you risk death by paper cut. Lily may not be winded at the end of those ninja fights, but you sure will be. If you’re not reading this series, you’re missing out big time.”

Tracy Clark, author of the acclaimed Cass Raines Chicago Mystery series

"Eldridge’s debut thriller introduces readers to a heroine for the #MeToo era and deftly explores the dangers of Lily’s avocation, the challenges of familial relationships, and the need to continue to fight the abuse and exploitation of others. ... Readers who enjoy an action-packed adventure that doesn’t neglect character development and speaks truth about the human condition will welcome this quirky, passionate, and endearingly relatable protagonist."

Library Journal (Starred), Debut Pick of the Month, November

"Eldridge’s wild ride of a first novel marries ‘Kill Bill’ with ‘Killing Eve.’ Readers will want to see more of the feisty Lily. Eldridge expertly mines both domestic suspense and action thriller."

Publishers Weekly

"Tough, snarky, and grudgingly vulnerable, Lily Wong is an irresistible heroine set perfectly against a quirky millennial L.A. backdrop."

Booklist

“If you love a heroine who’s tough, brilliant, and never runs from a fight, look no further. ‘The Ninja Daughter is your gal. Tori Eldridge introduces the warrior-sleuth you’ll want fighting by your side.”

Tess Gerritsen, NYT bestselling author of “The Shape of Night”
The Ninja's Blade by Tori Eldridge, Agora Books/Polis

Book club kit designed by Jennifer Vance