



Toddler-Hunting & Other Stories

Taeko Kano, Lucy North (Translator), Lucy Lower (Translator)

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"A sense of unease permeates this disturbing and exceptional collection of stories centered on unhappy women in postwar Japan...," wrote *Publishers Weekly*. *World Literature Today* proclaimed: "Reminiscent of Flannery O'Connor's works, Kono's stories explore the dark, terrifying side of human nature that manifests itself in antisocial behavior." *Toddler-Hunting Other Stories* introduces to American readers a startlingly original voice. Winner of most of Japan's top literary prizes for fiction, Kono Taeko writes with a disquieting and strange beauty, always foregrounding what Choice called "the great power of serious, indeed shocking events." In the title story, the protagonist loathes young girls, but she compulsively buys expensive clothes for little boys so that she can watch them dress and undress. The impersonal gaze Kono Taeko turns on this behavior transfixes the reader with a fatal question: What are we hunting for? And why? Now available in paperback for the first time, *Toddler-Hunting Other Stories* should fascinate any reader interested in Japanese literature—or in the growing world of transgressive fiction.

Toddler-Hunting & Other Stories Details

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From Reader Review Toddler-Hunting & Other Stories for online ebook

dead letter office says

i'm not sure whether japanese authors have an innate proclivity for deviance, or if i just happen to have read the weird ones, but she's got a great way of shocking you with the undercurrent of violence, prurience, and cruelty that runs through all these stories.

incidentally, does anyone remember which japanese author wrote a story about a woman who bobbited her husband then kept the evidence in a box and took it out periodically to put it in her mouth when she missed him? i can't for the life of me remember who wrote that, and googling just turns up a bunch of unappetizing images (and cements my spot on the FBI watch list, i'm sure).

Jessica says

One of the best short story collections I've read in recent years. It's a shame that Taeko Kono isn't better known and though she appears to have authored several books, this seems to be the only one translated into English.

The stories were written in the 60's but do not feel in any way dated. Each story creates a world as rich as any novel...The lives of women are explored, their relationships, the violence of their longing, the way pain and pleasure mix. Setting: a seaside town, an urban neighborhood, is equally important, evocative. One thing I like about the stories is that they do not follow a typical trajectory, though they build in tension to a sort of climax, often the ending is but a suggestion, an image, another moment in a richly textured and confusing life, a hardening or burnishing perhaps of all that's been building...much is suggested, nothing is spelled out. There is a bravery and boldness in the way that Kono depicts the complexity of women's lives and desires, no judgment passed on their wish to be whipped during sex, for example, or another's fascination with young boys, hatred for girls; another for the meat closest to the bone or shell: "All those varied bone and shell dishes began to give her the feeling that a sense of taste had been awakened throughout her body; that all her senses had become so concentrated in her sense of taste that it was difficult for her to move." (263).

Really I am surprised this author isn't better known. She should be.

Kenzaburo Oe writes: "At once the most carnally direct and the most lucidly intelligent woman writing in Japan." I believe him.

Marilyn Shea says

People seem to love this book and it's so called "dreamlike quality." If I had dreams like this, I'd wake up screaming. I actually tossed this book in the trash because I was so disturbed by it but fetched it out for the sake of Mrs. Jividen, my eighth grade English teacher, who admonished us to give books a chance to absorb us into their narrative world. I bought it at a thrift store because it was Japanese fiction, and therefore, I figured, must be interesting, and it was interesting all right, in the way seeing half dead animals on the road is interesting. It occurs to me that the very things about this book that I find repugnant may be things that

would recommend the book to people who tastes run in that direction. As in many works of Japanese fiction I've read, it seems to have an impersonal, distant quality, even and perhaps especially when it describes acts of intimacy. However, I get a sense of how dead the characters are since they seem to need to experience or inflict pain in order to feel that they are alive. Sorry, Mrs. Jividen. I don't want to be absorbed into this sick little world. Back in the trash it goes.

Gabe says

I was not prepared for this unsettling and unforgettable collection. These stories left me shaken and in awe; they are incendiary, beautiful, and terrifying confrontations of the lives we keep hidden from others. Taeko Kono fearlessly writes into the abyss, and there is no one like her.

Nikmaack says

Creepy and weird literary stories. Sometimes satisfying, sometimes not. They often contain a sadomasochistic aspect. These details are offered up with a casualness that is chilling. The title story itself is particularly powerful and weird. While some stories just left me baffled -- those cultural differences perhaps, getting in the way -- other stories were disturbing for their cold madness. Only the last story seemed dull. The rest were all deamy little nightmares.

I would read more by this author.

Ha Nguyen says

As expected from a Japanese female writer, delicate and its disturbingness is somehow stronger thanks to being halfway instead of full-blown. The characters are too repetitive though, one collection shouldn't have that many masochistic/girl-despising shotacon women.

Katie says

Excited to have discovered these stories. The big guns in Japanese fiction seem to be like 99% male, but Kono Taeko is all, you guys think *you're* weird? Will someone please translate more of her work, please?

David says

This is what I'm coming as on Hallowe'en:

Because she's fucking scary. A thing of horror can be a thing of beauty. Don't you just love Japan? Ban this filth, I want it too much.

Henry says

Read #7 WIT Month 2018 A book that wasn't quite to my taste, a little too weirdly sexual, and uncomfortable, and the stories didn't really have super compelling narratives, but the writing was very good, and it was certainly very unique. Also the characters were well defined, and in a character driven collection, that's a great thing. This one is getting reissued in October, so definitely check it out, it might not be your favorite, but you, like me, will be glad you read this relatively unknown Japanese writer.

Brittany says

This book was the subject matter for the best paper I ever wrote in college, or perhaps EVER, on the appeal of sadomasochism to Japanese women...so I admit I'm a bit sentimental toward this book. It's amazingly fascinating in that it defies your expectations, and makes you question what motivates the protagonist in her true and obvious hatred of little girls--or, if you don't want to think that far, you can be emotionally provoked by how she manifests her feelings in a very vivid sadomasochistic fantasy. Either way, it is a very interesting read, not only for *Toddler-Hunting* (the short story where all of this takes place), but the other stories as well, in which various forms of sexual sadism or masochism are used in quite interesting, and yet normative ways.

Rise says

The stories in *Toddler-Hunting and Other Stories* were originally written in the 1960s and concerned women and their unstable or uncertain marital relationships. K?no Taeko's genre of writing was classified as transgressive fiction owing to her use of elements of sadomasochism and aberrant behavior. The stories were often open-ended, which are really the best kind of stories; and they were propelled by ordinary details made to seem odd and entirely new, as if the outcome of the story was dictated by the way the characters *think* through these once-familiar details. In each story, the main character was either a middle-aged female (an obsessive, or on the way to becoming one) or a couple in a strained relationship. The story's telling will unravel a relationship or spell a kind of doom for the woman (wife or female partner). The writer was deconstructing the story through strange deployment of metaphors and symbols circling around a tragic event waiting in the wings or already hinted at even before the story started. For K?no, it's either the "shock value" of stories was revealed behind the scenes (all the more shocking and unsettling for being untold) or the partial or incomplete shock displayed in full in all its gross profundity, in front of a well-lit stage (all the more shocking for being brazen). The intelligence of these post-war "shock" stories derived from their ability to *transgress* the boundaries of narrative convention, to attain unpredictability in the mechanical relationship between the sexes. We were somehow given a restrained ending when we were perhaps expecting something earth-shattering, or we were treated to something nauseating when we were bracing for a tame plot development. The uncertain feeling was perhaps summarized by this paradoxical passage from the first story, "Night Journey":

Fukuko realized that she'd been in a particular mood for some time now, a mood that would keep her walking beside Murao into the night, walking on and on until they became the perpetrators - or the victims - of some unpredictable crime.

That "particular mood" hovered in every story in *Toddler-Hunting*, a mood that either implicated the reader as the guilty party or rendered him hapless victim of the story. A seemingly harmless mood that suddenly turned into a murky plot, twisting along a maze of menace and sick psyche. The reader of K?no will relish the gradual shifts of focus in a story's limited duration, the bombs being dropped very slowly but surely, the monomaniacal attitudes of narrators faced with their own dissembling, and the direct exploration of issues of femininity and sexuality: motherhood, infertility, marriage, family ties, and fidelity in relationships.

K?no Taeko, 85 years old, must be the grand dame of Japanese letters. Her outputs were praised, most deservedly, by writers like ?e Kenzaburo ("At once the most carnally direct and the most lucidly intelligent woman writing in Japan.") and Endo Shusaku ("K?no Taeko is the female writer I most admire among all the Japanese authors. Her unsparing gaze penetrates the depths of human nature; and she sets forth what she finds there with absolute precision."). The blurbs came from the back page of this collection of ten short stories, all translated by Lucy North (except for the last, translated by Lucy Lower), and published in 1996 by New Directions.

K?no's intelligence as a novelist was recognized in her country where she was a multi-awarded writer. However, with only a single collection of hers appearing so far in English, she was certainly under-translated and under-appreciated. Her transgressive short stories, superior in many respects to the ones put out by Murakami Haruki, deserve to be assimilated and widely talked about. They are fleeting stories that leave lasting aftereffects, very like the afterglow of sparklers in "Full Tide":

The children set about lighting their sparklers. Each time she brought a flame to the tip of one, the girl's fingers would tremble slightly. She had to be careful: she could never tell exactly where the first sparks would shoot out. Then the darkness suddenly would be ablaze, and transfixed, she would be in another world. The sparkler would make fiery, spitting sounds, fizzling away before her eyes. In those few seconds, though, she knew the sparkler was living for all it was worth - fiercely, keenly, in a beautiful world of color and light. Even when everything became dark and still once more, the girl would be sure that she still saw something there, glowing and fizzling away.

The internal combustion in a K?no story was lighted by the same inner explosions, the darkness and its recesses briefly uncovered by fireworks. The sparklers' glow never receded without being indelibly imprinted in a child's imagination.

For a sample of a K?no story, here is a full story that recently appeared in *TWO LINES Online* of Center for the Art of Translation:

"An Odd Owner", translated by Goro Takano
<http://catranslation.org/an-odd-owner>

(A draft of this review was posted in my blog.)

flannery says

3.5 stars? These stories are fucked up and I'm sure had I read this in the 60s would have been totally scandalized but the best ones in here are the least sensational, like "Snow," which is great, versus "Toddler-Hunting," which is perverse but also... maybe... boring? :/

Paquita Maria Sanchez says

Before the review, I wanted to drop in a quick question at the risk of perhaps sounding like some sort of prude: do that many gals really like getting whipped? Like, whipped. *Whipped*. Like part of the suffering Christians say Jesus endured for the sins of all mankind, whipped. Like, draw buckets of blood and leave ghastly scars, whipped. Like, medieval torture, punishment that no human rights embracing nation would ever still have on the books, whipped. You know, like...whipped. So many ladies in these stories just loooove that shit. Whipped. Fucking whipped?

I am seriously disturbed by this book, and that is saying a lot. Flannery (Jappanery) O'Connor by Takashi Miike. Only, contrary to Madame Catholicism's horrifying world, people actually do it. A lot. Roughly. Not "roughly" as in "approximately," but "roughly" as in "violently."

Whipped.

K?no Taeko was a writer in post-war Japan who gave voice to the confused position of many women; of the psychological implications of a blurred social status upon the influx of Western stylings, the desire for punishment for the wrong that is not quite knowing who you are but still feeling that something is seriously amiss, something about you feels a farce or a tilt-a-whirl, something is ugly or malformed deep within you, nothing seems to serve as gravity anymore, and the new expectations of you are dramatically out of tune with the centuries-standing cultural understanding that is your "place" (and then I sigh). The pain of identifying as if you are some sort of wildly astray helium balloon caught in a draft, deflating, wanting nothing more than to just be popped and put to rest. Cultures clashing, the assertive female emerging as some sort of "norm" right along with her confusion and vertigo at having obtained such a standing, wanting nothing more, at times, than to be smacked back down by the comfort of tradition, even if it leaves an actual bruise or draws real, red blood. Oh, and there is much blood and bruising in this book. Also, whips and...things. I won't go into that, though, because I try not to gossip. I'm a total "lady." Sure. Sure, I yam.

Also, I'm stupid, so don't take my word on culturally-sensitive matters, because I am speculating and conclusion-drawing like I'm the motherfuckin' Weekly World News. Only less intelligent.

This is a sick, sin-filled, horribly fascinating study of such a culturally shape-shifting time, and it's wonderful that K?no Taeko drew attention to the specific sufferings of the women suddenly finding themselves reflected in a newly-shattered mirror of previously structured feminine identity, now totally untethered, raging. They go for the groin, and it's awful hard to stomach. Look, free TWSS's!

I should stick my finger up my nose, because I know nothing. This book told me a couple o' thangs, though.

Seriously? Whipped?

Alan says

read two of these last night, excellent. Limpid, seemingly conventional but with a real subversive bite... (next day) and then I read the third - title - story, fuck me it's strong, repellent (her fantasy bit). Jesus Christ. Still reading on though, this is good stuff, but with caution now and wondering what else will come up.

update: I've stopped reading these for a bit. Not because they're bad, quite the opposite. I just need to go and lie down in a corner (with another book: it's like cheating on this one), and think about these gentle yet violent, obsessive yet conventional stories.

.. have gone back after a couple of days because the stories have a hold now. I won't be able to stop reading them again.

..finished on the train this morning. Quite a book. Review later...

Had to revise my star rating up from 4 to 5 because these stories have got under my skin and I keep thinking about them. They concern women in their 30s mainly, married or not, having to obey the strict conventions of 60s Japanese society but underneath seething (perhaps that's too strong a word) with obsession and usually with masochistic tendencies. Out of the blue will come a whip used on the willing woman. Or she is invited to join in sexually with another couple (one couple a male hunchback and female 'beauty'). More disturbing is the toddler fixation hinted at - no, spelled out - in the title. A fair few of the protagonists here have a 'thing' for little boys (and hate little girls). There is no actual physical or sexual abuse but there is (in one story) a fantasy sequence which was very disturbing. Mostly though it is left to the reader's imagination what these women would do given the chance - or maybe they wouldn't - maybe just fondling their (the boy's) clothes will do. That's what I liked about the stories, although they are very strong, there is no explicitness (hardly any), and no judgement. These things just are, and we have to live with the darkness inside.

Strongly recommended but beware can cause nausea.

Thanks Jessica for pointing out another great collection.

Andrew Fairweather says

There were two things which were constant in Kono Taeko's collection of stories—abrupt endings and the desire to be whipped. These stories which feature women who, for different reasons, are out at sea, whether by abandonment or unfulfillment. Though the stories often contain similar elements, their vocabularies express different forms of alienation. Indeed, I think it can be safely said that one of Kono's most prevalent interests is the swirling waters beneath the fragile meniscus of reality, which, at all times, remains quite similar.

I wouldn't say that the protagonists of these stories were trapped so much as they were insignificant—and felt themselves to be insignificant. How this ties in to a perverse enjoyment of little boys and hatred of little girls (another theme) I am not entirely sure for now. But there always seems to be a cry never realized in these stories, a dream deferred...

If things weren't so hectic right now, I'd have spent time separating the moments between one story and the

next. So many bits and pieces seemed important to me as I passed them by while reading on the train with some jackass playing his shitty music out loud. Something like, oh, I dunno, a trembling which would cause a hairline fracture in the moment which was to be revealed as a massive fissure the next.

The endings, always gorgeously underwhelming, bring us up short in a way that didn't seem gimmicky. Despite all of the references to sadomasochist thoughts and practice, all in all it is the monotony which is overwhelming in these stories. When we think of miracles, we tend to think of the unimaginable. Yet, what if the true miracle is the monotony everyday life? I can't help but think that Kono's stories reveal to us this miracle in all its weirdly more-real-than-realistic splendor, that despite the violence of the atomized subject, the depressing miracle of monotony manages to persist...
