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Fuminori Nakamura , Allison Markin Powell (Translator)

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A young writer arrives at a prison to interview a man arrested for homicide. He has been commissioned to write a full account of the case, from its bizarre and grisly details to the nature of the man behind the crime. The suspect, while world-renowned as a photographer, has a deeply unsettling portfolio—lurking beneath the surface of each photograph is an acutely obsessive fascination with his subject.

He stands accused of murdering two women—both burned alive—and will likely face the death penalty. But something isn't quite right, and as the young writer probes further, his doubts about this man as a killer intensify. He soon discovers the desperate, twisted nature of all who are connected to the case, struggling to maintain his sense of reason and justice. What could possibly have motivated this man to use fire as a torturous murder weapon? Is he truly guilty, or will he die to protect someone else?

The suspect has a secret—it may involve his sister, who willfully leads men to their destruction, or the "puppeteer," an enigmatic figure who draws in those who have suffered the loss of someone close to them. As the madness at the heart of the case spins out of control, the confusion surrounding it only deepens. What terrifying secrets will this impromptu investigator unearth as he seeks the truth behind these murders?

Last Winter We Parted Details

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From Reader Review Last Winter We Parted for online ebook

Susan says

A writer visits a convicted murderer, photographer Yudai Kiharazaka, in prison. He is awaiting execution for burning two women to death and photographing them as they were on fire. Now, the author wants to write a book about him and his crimes and begins to investigate what happened. During his investigation, the writer is constantly warned off. He discovers that the photographer and his sister Akari were raised in an institution, the children of neglectful parents; one of which abandoned them. When he finally meets Akari, he finds she is a promiscuous woman, who seems to bring tragedy to her lovers.

We follow the story through interviews, meetings, letters and even through twitter, as the story jumps from character to character. There is the first victim, Akiko, , the photographer and his sister, Yudai's friend Katari and the rather creepy 'doll creator'. This is a dark and disturbing crime novel, dealing with obsession, stalking and fantasies. As the story unfolds we wonder whether Yudai's confessions are actually true, for nothing in this book is straight forward.

Although I enjoyed this book, I felt slightly distanced from the characters. That may have simply been the style of the writing, or it could have been due to the translation. However, it was certainly an intriguing read. Lastly, I received a copy of this book from the publishers, via NetGalley, for review.

Jolene says

2.5 Stars

The basic story is very much like *In Cold Blood*. A writer is sent to interview a convicted killer. The killer is a photographer who has been found guilty of burning two women to death. There is no doubt that he is guilty. He stood there and photographed the women as they burned. But the more time the writer spends on the story, the more he starts to question this. Did the photographer really kill these women? Or is there a important piece of information missing? A piece that could change everything?

I used to read a lot of mysteries as a older teen/young adult. I don't remember why I started shying away from the genre, but it probably had something to do with predictability. Just recently I've started reading them again, and this was a great "jumping back into a genre". The story full of twist and turns and predictability is nowhere in sight. I didn't love it, but I didn't hate it either. The story is told from multiple POVs. You're not always told what POV you're reading. Add that to the fact that a few of the characters have very similar names, and you have a recipe for extreme confusion in parts. Something that should have really bothered me but didn't, was the fact that none of the characters are likable. They're all awful, despicable people. I think the reason it worked for me was because the author didn't try to hide how awful they were. He didn't try to say "yeah, that was a really fucked up thing to do, BUT they meant well". He let them be exactly who they were.

I would read another title by the author.

Rebecca says

“It’s safe to say you killed them...Isn’t that right?” Our narrator is writing an *In Cold Blood*-style exposé about two murders committed by a photographer now on death row. In two separate incidents, he set a female model on fire and watched her burn, unwilling to help but also unable to take photos. Add in the prisoner’s manipulative sister, an obsession with butterflies (a stab at the Nabokovian?) and a doll-maker with creepily realistic creations and you get a twisty thriller that’s a bit like *Memento* or *Gone Girl*.

It's a super-quick read and the documentary approach (letters, transcripts of video clips, etc.) is interesting, but I could barely tell some of the characters apart and I wanted much more of the present action. You never get a clear idea of who the narrator is or what his story has to do with the novel.

If you like mysteries that continually make you second-guess the characters, you might enjoy this one. “Amid the overwhelming monotony of the everyday, it’s the rare individual who enjoys lying, who indulges and revels in it, who relishes treating others with malice.” Not so rare here, though.

Barely memorable for me. I much preferred the superficially similar *The Investigation* by Jung-Myung Lee.

Topu Apple says

[illegible][illegible]

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☆?♥☆ Unsolved Mystery ☆♥?☆ says

- My Description -

Would you ever want to write a book about a cold blooded killer?

A young and aspiring Japanese author wants to do just that.

Photographer Yudai Kiharazaka is on death row.

He's accused of burning two women to death.

On top of killing them, He snapped photographs of their burning bodies. Pretty brutal.

He tells anyone who will listen that he's the guilty one.

Did he really do it?

Is the real killer behind those steel bars?

- My Review -

I was so excited to begin reading this book.

It sounds so dark and twisted.

Well, It was dark and twisted.

That's the good news.

This book had so much potential to be a heart stopper.

The way the book was written, either through bad translation, bad editing or something else, it was lost on me.

I understood what occurred and how it happened.

I get that.

It was difficult to decipher who was talking in areas of the book.

There were certain parts that when I thought was one person, it turned out to be someone else.

It wasn't clear.

I was never sure who it was.

Sometimes I had to read certain paragraphs over and over to understand, and still wasn't sure.

This book would have received a solid 5 if it had been clear in the wording.

This is an un-corrected copy, so maybe (hopefully!) it all gets corrected in the final edition.

It's dark and twisted. Bonus!

It has an ending you won't see coming. Score!

Andy says

Read in a day! Not sure Ive done that before but 2 sittings & it was done, mind a fair few of the pages are blank

Engaging enough story with the first half laying out the groundwork & introducing the characters both dead & alive, whilst the second half is more the reveal & ultimately the twist(s).

Worth a read if yer in the mood for a short story

3.5 stars for me with that rounded down although it's better than it's current rating on here in the low 3's.

Neko Neha (BiblioNyan) says

Last Winter, We Parted by Fuminori Nakamura is an #OwnVoices Japanese psychological crime thriller novel about a young writer who arrives at a prison to interview a man convicted of burning two women alive. The suspect, a renown photographer named Kiharazaka, has a sensationally disturbing portfolio with an acute obsessive quality surrounding each subject. As the writer learns more about Kiharazaka, he begins to understand that the crime is far more complicated than he ever thought possible.

Last Winter, We Parted is the quintessence of a psychological thriller. It is crafted around a number of mental health illnesses, explores the differing levels of obsession, and homes in on the more dangerous sides of aesthetics. Coupled with grisly murders, an interesting prose style, and altering perspectives, you cannot help but get chills and a sensational air of discomfort while reading—vital facets in an all-encompassing psychological thriller experience.

As I mentioned earlier, the key to making *Last Winter, We Parted* so bloody psychological are the conditions that it explores in dark and twisted ways. One of the more prominent conditions that we see represented in the novel is Borderline Personality Disorder, specifically with an aspect called “The Chameleon Effect,” which when coupled with sociopathic behavioural patterns makes for a terribly creepy protagonist. The condition is revealed to the reader in a plodding sense with altering perspectives that questions the very disposition of “identity” and if our personalities are ever truly *our own*, or just bits and pieces stolen from people that we wish we could be. There were multiple instances where I had to place the book down for a second and ponder these inquisitive moments because they did an excellent job of getting inside of my head, to the point where I couldn’t help myself. The very contemplative nature of what it means to be an individual is astoundingly brilliant, and oft times neurotic.

Obsession is also something that stems from phobias, or fear. For example, a person may get obsessed with whom they are infatuated for fear of never being noticed, or never having their feelings reciprocated. That obsessiveness can lead them to kill the object of their focus so as to not lose them to someone else. That is an extreme example. Another simpler example are basic every-day phobias. Spiders terrify the living hell out of me to the point that I cannot even be around the smallest spider. Yet, I am obsessed with learning more about them. I cannot take my eyes off the screen when I come across a picture or video of one. My spine will be tingling with anxiety and paranoia the entire time, with my skin crawling, nevertheless, I will continue to gawk at it with an unhealthy interest. This novel takes that notion of fear and obsession and presents it to us in an almost surreal means.

The characteristics that make it so dreamlike are the same ones that make it so realistic. In the novel, one of the characters becomes obsessed with protecting his disabled girlfriend. I won’t name the character or the disability because they play to the psychological effects of the reading experience and plot, but his inherent inability to separate himself from her and to see her as an independent person, regardless of her condition, turns him into this monster. It stems from love and compassion, and the fear of seeing her get hurt by something that would have ultimately been prevented. All of the interactions between them and the revelations of his thought processes that go into his erratic behaviour came off as unreal to me for two reasons. Firstly, I don’t understand how a person can allow themselves to become so fanatical with elements that feel like common sense to me. Secondly, I recognised this type of behaviour within myself—making it all the more real and creepier—in different aspects than the one described.

Oft times the patterns or actions that we read about or see on television that creep us out the most, the ones that blow our minds with how impossible they are, are the very things that we as humans are most capable of

doing. However, accepting that we have this potential and going further to see that potentiality inside of ourselves as people, is fucking terrifying. That is the core of *Last Winter, We Parted*.

I stated earlier that the book is told via multiple perspectives, which is a utilisation of the polyphony prose style. I will admit that initially the changing of voices can be a bit disorienting and out-of-place, more so because they are from unnamed views. Once or twice I nearly DNF'd the novel. Yet, after I reached a critical plot point, about one-third of the way through, I started to understand that these variations were part of the psychological effects the author was going for and I was completely hooked afterwards. It is, in fact, a spectacular ploy of mind-fuckery that I honestly never seem to get from any other types of psychological genres aside from those in Japanese literature. These point-of-views are all woven into one another in a complex web of deceit that, if I wasn't paying attention to the smallest of details, would have been easy to miss on my first time reading through the novel. When I reached the conclusion and everything was revealed, it startled me in waves at the most random of times, such as while I was grocery shopping and one of the scenes came barging back into my mind. I began to ponder how this specific perspective really correlated to one of the climactic events and I was stunned to silence; impressed by the sheer brilliance of it.

Due to the way that it is crafted, the story is expressed in a gradual manner, making it a bit challenging to stay focused on the content for extended periods of time, but simultaneously, the essence of the crime and Kiharazaka's eccentricities make the narrative so bloody compelling that in the end it was nigh impossible for me to walk away.

All in all, I highly recommend *Last Winter, We Parted*, especially if you enjoy psychologically fucked-up crime thrillers that is far more about the characters than the actual crimes committed. Nakamura definitely understands what a thriller is supposed to entail and is a fabulous contributor to the genre. But know this: **this book is not for every reader.** Fans of Y?ko Ogawa's *Revenge*, and people who like Osamu Dazai and Ryunosuke Akutagawa will enjoy the content of this book far more than folks who prefer fast-paced, action heavy reads. It is an intelligent and profoundly pensive sort of book. I would not recommend this to impatient or moody readers, and I definitely would not recommend this as a first-time Japanese literature novel. That being said, if you want deep-rooted analyses of the darker parts of psychology, obsession, and identity crises, then give *Last Winter, We Parted* a try.

4 portraits outta 5!

Noor Hanis says

Japan is one of the country I loved besides my own country. So no surprise there when I picked out this book out of thousands book in my library. I was drawn in by the mysterious synopsis (yeay murder case!). I don't even remember the last mystery and thriller book I've read. That reason alone enough makes me excited to start reading the book.

While I was reading the book, I found out the similarity among Japanese literature. But if it's not, maybe it's just a coincidence. You see, I've read Haruki Murakami book, *The Colourless Tsukuru*. It has a lot of sex! So does this book. I'm completely speechless when it comes to stuff like that. From my point of view, it's unnecessary to include such thing. The story would still be enjoyable without sex scene. So, what do you think about that?

What I love about Japanese book is it makes me think deeper than I supposed to. I'm barely 17 years old and

all the philosophy seemed to get more and more complicated. I ought to think more so that I could digest what the author trying to deliver. I love thinking but doing so during exam week isn't what I should do, right?

What I'm trying to say here is the book was quiet good. I should stop reading for exam week. Maybe not.

Nancy Oakes says

The first thing I'll say here is that this book is not really geared toward cozy mystery readers or people who enjoy action thrillers or whodunits. It's much more complex, it's very dark and frankly, it's weird in a very pleasing aesthetic sort of way that appeals to me. The second thing I'll say is that I've decided to reread this book -- I'm positive there are a number of things I missed the first time around. Certainly a reread isn't a requirement for this book -- but it's just how I do things when I really want to get to get the most out of a novel. So I'm not really leaving a review for now -- that will come later.

For right now, I'll leave it at this: if you're into darkness in your fiction or books that explore the dark side of human nature, you will certainly be rewarded here. I can also vouch for the quality of Nakamura's writing now, having read all of three of his books that have been translated into English. When I have finished reading the novel again, I'll post my final thoughts.

As it so happens, I was given an ARC by Soho (for which I am grateful), but I bought a hardback copy of this book for my library, so if anyone is interested in the ARC and you live in the US, I will gladly pass it on - and pay postage. I certainly don't need two copies. Just leave a comment.

Liz Barnsley says

This one was a bit hit and miss for me – the story was intriguing for sure and there is some dark obsessive traits to the flow of the novel that do keep you reading – however, whether something was lost in translation or whether it was just me, the whole thing felt a little disjointed.

On the plus side it is a compelling tale – A writer preparing to write a book about some grisly murders begins interviewing the killer – but some dark secrets start to emerge which changes his outlook on the whole thing and leads him down a dark path. I particularly loved the themes relating to creativity and when it becomes obsession, the dangerous nature of the protagonists becoming clearer and some of it is really quite frightening.

However I found it hard to separate the characters on occasion – the writing style didnt really change, and sometimes the plot lost cohesion and you were not really sure where you were. Whilst the killer and the writer are well drawn, I found the women to be too caricature for me – over the top and unlikely, which sometimes took me out of the moment. It also suffered from a rather convoluted (in my opinion) resolution and a tendency to pull plot threads out of nowhere. To be fair that is likely to be translation issues rather than anything else but still it grated somewhat.

There is definitely a great book in here, the premise is clever, the execution may be hit and miss as I said but still I read to the end because I absolutely had to know what was going on and what the outcome would be.

Overall, good not great, but worth a try if you like your fiction with a dark heart.

Happy Reading Folks!

****Actual rating 2.5 stars****

Diane S ? says

Dark and twisted with some very creepy characters bent on revenge. When a young writer goes to the prison to meet a famous photographer who has been convicted of the murder and burning of two girls and sentenced to death, his life changes immeasurably. When he tries to back out of the project he finds he is unable to extract himself from this story.

Shifting narratives at times made this a challenge to read, sometimes it was hard to tell who was speaking. Yet the characters were compelling and the story one in which I wanted the answers. A strange doll maker who makes life sized dolls for customers who want to replace a real person for a variety of reasons, plays an important part and this practice needless to say I found very strange. It is a novel full of twists and turns, revelations with every chapter. While I can't say that I liked or even sympathized with any of the characters I did find the story itself appealing to me in its very strangeness. The ending more than satisfied.

ARC from publisher.

Maciek says

I admit that I was quite excited at the prospect of reading this book - I first noticed the cover, with the pure image of a powerful ball of fire against a stark, black background; then it's poetic title, and the premise: a young writer put against a murderer convicted of committing a heinous and terrible crime. I was looking forward to reading a morality play combined with a mystery, witnessing a clash of personalities - but walked away disappointed, in the end barely caring about the novel. What went wrong?

Reviewers have compared the plot of this novel to *In Cold Blood* - which is obvious, since it's even directly referenced by one of the characters. However, ultimately the novel bears little similarity to *In Cold Blood*: lacking the qualities of both the author and the crime he chose to cover.

In *Last Winter We Parted*, the writer confronts a photographer turned murderer; he is convincing of burning two women to death, and taking photographs of them when they were on fire. As he tries to understand the reason for this crime and gain insight into the murderer's character, the writer begins to doubt both himself and what he is told - his investigation brings him to the photographer's sister, who is just as enigmatic as her brother and seems to be just as dangerous.

The story is relayed through a number of ways: diaries, transcripts of recordings, letters, etc. Despite the amount of possibilities these means provide for an author, they just didn't work for me - I didn't feel more interested in discovering the story because of them, and they distanced my interest rather than draw it in. I couldn't be bothered to care about any of the characters, who I thought were ultimately simply uninteresting and rather hastily drawn (the moment one character reveals an obsession with butterflies, I couldn't help but be reminded of *The Silence of the Lambs* which I thought was a vastly superior novel). In the end, I simply didn't care who killed who and what for - which isn't exactly the best recommendation for a mystery novel, and the reason why I'm not recommending this one.

Apparently the author is quite popular in his native Japan and elsewhere because of his previous book, *The Thief*, which was well received, and might be a better starting point than this novel. It does sound interesting, and i'm willing to read it - hopefully my gut feeling will turn out to be right this time!

Greg says

Here's a surprise book.

I don't know why I picked this up to read. It was in a pile of books that I've gotten free copies of recently and there are a bunch of books in those piles that I've been looking forward to reading, but for some reason I'll just grab something I don't know much about instead. I think it's partially a desire to want to read something that I can get rid of once I'm done without feeling like this is something I should hold on to. I'm only speculating about what goes into my thought process of picking books.

This was very good. It made me quite happy that I chose this short looking 'crime' novel to read after the two week enjoyable but time consuming trek through Marlon James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings*.

This is a Japanese crime/mystery/psychological suspense novel by a young writer who has his fingers on the pulse of existentialist writers like Dostoyevsky, Camus, Sartre and Kafka; and on the sort of pacing one finds in a Hitchcock film but without ever showing his hand that he's writing a 'literary' novel (except that some novels and writers are mentioned by characters).

The story revolves around a photographer who is waiting to be executed for the burning two women alive. He's on death row and a writer comes to visit him in order to write a book about his crimes. The photographer gives little about himself and only offers to give a glimpse into his psyche if the writer will share his own demons with him.

As the novel unfolds the photographer turns out to be what I always pictured Andy Warhol to be like, and which I've heard Lou Reed wrote about Warhol in the Velvet Underground song "I'll be Your Mirror": (which would be a mirror of other people's desires, the spectator creating art out of the pathos of those around him).

The book is much more psychological than a mystery/crime novel. And it's not really accurate to use the word suspense. It's a study of the photographer, the writer, the crime and other participants in what has unfolded.

For mystery/crime fans the book might be a bit of a let-down. The big reveals happen off page, and the final

scenes have a kind of artificial feel to them that harkens back to the way that some golden age Hollywood films would handle the big reveal. It comes a little suddenly, and might feel forced, but I think that it fits in the novel which is about the psyche of those involved more than the crimes that have been committed.

Before I sat down to write I thought that maybe I would write something about how crime / detective fiction had been a favorite of some well-respected smart authors, and that it's regarded as lowly, or an ironic foray into low-brow by some people now, but that's beyond what I have the energy to write right now. I'll just say that I thought this was full of the good stuff, and it's proven once again that some of the author's writing in the 'ghetto' of the genres write some amazing fiction and could probably go toe-to-toe with their more respected counterparts.

I'd recommend this, and if I were in a more excitable mode lately I might have decided to give this five stars, but since I didn't give Marlon James's book five stars, it's tough to give it to this either, even if both books I'd whole heartedly recommend.

Himani Agrawal says

3.5 stars

I should learn to submit to the judgement of the good folks reviewing books on this platform rather than expecting to discover a depth hitherto unseen by the common populace.

I really wanted to like this one, but that might just be because I wanted to read a nice psychological thriller and the description for this one hit all the right spots (btw..any suggestions in this genre are welcome!). And while it touched on a lot of potentially exciting pathologies of the psychopath none were sufficiently explored to a depth to make them as powerful as they could have been. All in all, the book has a lot of potential to be a very good book. It's just too short to do justice to its content. What a pity.

Marvin says

In many ways, Japanese suspense and mystery novels are an acquired taste. They tend to be darker than American and European novels of the same genre and more likely to be inundated with strange, unlikable and, dare I say, inscrutable characters. They also tend to be amazingly imaginative and philosophically oriented. Fuminori Naklamura's *Last Winter We Parted* is certainly all of that. Yet as a whole it is not all that exciting.

The basic plot involves a journalist who is interviewing a man, a photographer by trade, on death row who killed two women by setting them on fire. He admits to killing them but blames the women. The journalist's investigation leads to the the commended man's sister and an artist that makes dolls resembling the buyer's loved ones. Quickly the journalist becomes intimately involved with the sister and is pulled into their twisted relationships. He begins to regret his involvement in the investigation. This all leads to a surprising and satisfying twist at the end.

So what's the problem? While the protagonist becomes overly involved and entrenched in the story, we do not. There is very little to involve us. All the characters are too unlikeable and we know very little about them even after a few convoluted back-stories. But the main culprit is the poor structuring of the story. There

is a mix of first person narrative plus narration through letters and even Twitter. It is often nearly impossible to figure out whose perspective we are looking at. The result is a disorienting mix of viewpoints that blunt any chance for involvement. When we get to the end we can appreciate the strange twist but it is a cold appreciation of style over emotion. In foreign language novels, it is easy to blame the translation and I do think there is some blame headed that way. But mainly the author's obsession with literary style becomes as relentless as his allegedly murderous photographer's obsession for his art. Overall, it was an impressive attempt to tell a different type of thriller yet not a successful one.
