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Kawamata Chiaki , Thomas Lamarre (Translation) , Kazuko Y. Behrens (Translation)

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Death Sentences Kawamata Chiaki , Thomas Lamarre (Translation) , Kazuko Y. Behrens (Translation) Japan, 1980s: A special police squad is tracking down one of the “afflicted” to recover the “stuff.” Although the operation seems like a drug bust, the “stuff” is actually some kind of text. *Death Sentences*—a work of science fiction that shares its conceit with the major motion picture *The Ring*—tells the story of a mysterious surrealist poem, penned in the 1940s, which, through low-tech circulation across time, kills its readers, including Arshile Gorky and Antonin Artaud, before sparking a wave of suicides after its publication in 1980s Japan. Mixing elements of Japanese hard-boiled detective story, horror, and science fiction, the novel ranges across time and space, from the Left Bank of Paris to the planet Mars.

Paris, 1948: André Breton anxiously awaits a young poet, Who May. He recalls their earlier encounter in New York City and the mysterious effects of reading Who May’s poem “Other World.” Upon meeting, Who May gives Breton another poem, “Mirror,” an even more unsettling work. Breton shares it with his fellow surrealists. Before Breton can discuss the poem with him, Who May vanishes. Who May contacts Breton about a third poem, “The Gold of Time,” and then slips into a coma and dies (or enters another dimension). Copies of the poem are mailed to all of Who May’s friends—Breton, Gorky, Paul Éluard, Marcel Duchamp, and other famous surrealists and dadaists. Thus begins the “magic poem plague.”

Death Sentences is the first novel by the popular and critically acclaimed science fiction author Kawamata Chiaki to be published in English. Released in Japan in 1984 as *Genshi-gari* (Hunting the magic poems), *Death Sentences* was a best seller and won the Japan Science Fiction Grand Prize. With echoes of such classic sci-fi works as George Orwell’s *1984*, Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, William Gibson’s *Neuromancer*, and Philip K. Dick’s *Martian Time-Slip*, *Death Sentences* is a fascinating mind-bender with a style all its own.

Death Sentences Details

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From Reader Review Death Sentences for online ebook

Starburst93 says

3.5. Quick read, interesting premise, ended too abruptly. The author should have developed the plot further, climax was sudden and disappointing - felt like I read half a book, an unfinished painting that would have been fascinating, I suspect, if completed.

Suzanne says

A strange, but compelling book, this takes the "see me and die" theme of *Ringu*, or Pahlaniuk's "Lullaby" to new mysterious dimensions. Weaving in and out of time and place, from 30's Paris to 2030's Mars, the Surrealist movement of the early twentieth century is made responsible for the fate of the world, as some of them always thought they were. I thought the translation was a bit awkward, but it did leave an unreal feel to the novel, so maybe it was meant to be that way.

Stephen says

Very quick read with a good conceit and a somewhat lackluster ending.

The scholarly contextualization (in a forward by Takayuki Tatsumi and an afterword by co-translator Thomas Lamare might not be for everyone, but provides some insight into the Kawamata's place in Japanese SF and his interesting take on the continuum of surrealism and science fiction.

Decayke says

Pay no attention to the Bechdel Test. It's meaningless drivel. This is a good book, if flawed. Those flaws have nothing to do with gender issues however. *Reform School Girls* and *She Devils of the SS* both pass that test. Are you going to try and tell me that those films don't objectify women?

In fact, it's often harmful. If a book is dominated by males and a female character makes her mark, it fails the test. If a woman is an introvert, the book fails the test. Under the test, a woman's relationship concerns are dismissed and any woman who can't communicate also fails the test.

The Bechdel test is just a bunch of gibberish. And none of this "criticism" seems to understand the idea of conflict and that the world is full of it. If a novel doesn't conform to your ideas of what the world *should* be doesn't mean that it should be dismissed. I recall when "American Psycho" was released, how there were protests then about that book. Clearly those protesters hadn't even read it because it was a work of satire. But the bigger issue is that the text is a place for us to work out our problems in society. If those are Bowdlerized and ERASED, then there is no hope for us. We *don't want to look at ourselves.*

Acaciabee Blackwell says

Several things interested me about Kawamata's Death Sentences. One thing that stood out to me is that the narrative is highly concept-driven, without a great amount of characterization, imagery, or even to a certain extent, plot. For example, I was intrigued by the idea of a text which, when read, poisons or transforms its reader irreversibly, and how that concept, seen through the lens of mid 20th century surrealist sensibilities, alluded to the whole 20th century as a sort of unfinished project, in transition between representing the present and the past. To me this idea spoke to the whole tradition and practice of translation, how a work in translation is never completely finished...it is both a relic of the past and at the same time continually renewing itself.

However, I found certain aspects of this text to be problematic. Mainly, I was somewhat disturbed by the author's portrayal of his female figures. There are very few women in the book, while there are so many men it's hard to keep track of them. The only women are: the woman in the opening scene who, completely lacking any real character traits, is reduced to a rape victim, Keiko who is portrayed as constantly attracting the gaze of all the men around her and diminishing her own status by calling herself a secretary when really she's an editor before she pretty much disappears from the plot once she's married, the girlfriend of the young translator who gets maybe three lines in which she just appears as a naïve young girl, and the mother of the dead translator. None of these women have significant roles in the text. I know the book was written in the 1980s in Japan, which perhaps wasn't the most egalitarian place on earth, and only recently translated, but I imagine this book will receive a certain amount of criticism based on its gendered quality and bizarre/negative/ unfulfilling portrayal of its female characters.

Turnip says

I found the first third of this book utterly fascinating, but the book read a little like the camera was on the wrong character for a lot of it.

I found the idea solid, the execution felt curious in points, but overall it was a pretty compelling story. With that said, I don't feel the ending gave a whole lot of satisfaction. I think it's important that, regardless of the subject matter, this book is more literary than it is science fiction or slipstream, and the ending reflects that.

I would definitely recommend this book to someone else, with a caveat that the ending is positively bizarre.

Bethany says

While the lack of women as people and only as sexual objects did bother me as a woman, I was so engrossed in the idea and the atmosphere of the novel that it didn't detract from the experience. If you love poetry and surrealism this is a very fascinating read. I am gullible though and find it easy to sink myself into something so unrealistic and fantastic and I love it when I find a world that takes me to such a weird interesting place.

Karen says

Warning: minor plot spoilers & also some possibly trigger-y stuff about sex and violence.

The use of the word "masterpiece" to describe this book is to stretch the meaning so thin that you could read the classifieds through it.

This translation of Kawamata's sixteenth novel (which won at least one major Japanese genre prize) is out of the U of Minnesota, so it comes larded with critical hoo-haw on both sides (foreword and afterword.) In between is a novel that reads sort of like this:

The woman was reading the novel.

She had seen the book listed in a university press catalog, and ordered it specially in advance of its general publication date.

It was supposed to be a fascinating mix of Japanese SF, mystery, and literary genres, which she found intriguing.

But the novel itself was not enjoyable to read. It made every sentence or two into a paragraph. The critics seemed to consider this "explosive," and "daring," or something.

The woman found herself skimming.

No kidding, every sentence is pretty much a paragraph, and the sentences are oddly generic and repetitive. Apparently this is a stylistic tic of Japanese popular novels, designed to give the reader nothing to dwell on in any particular sentence, thereby propelling her onward into the story. To which I say: Jesus Christ, that's a bad idea.

The book was published in 1984 and I don't know the order of precedence, but the underlying concept here--a surrealist poem that intoxicates and poisons people, killing them or possibly transporting them to another dimension--is very *Ringu*. If Kawamata came first, good for him. That idea is about the only interesting thing about this book, which declines to sully its hands with things like character development or ennobling language.

This is also a book with major gender trouble, a fact that I didn't see addressed in its critical apparatus. It looks to me as though everyone involved with bringing this book to market has a y chromosome, which might explain why nobody calls Kawamata on his bullshit. In a relatively short book that strips the narrative down to the bare essentials, we nonetheless get the following scenes:

* A detective strips a woman and finger-rapes her to extract a hidden item from her vagina, then shoots her

in the head.

* Another detective tells a woman he's accosted that he'll let her go if she has sex with him. She has sex with him, dies anyway. (We get an explicit description of her genitalia before she dies.)

* The only female employee of a publishing company is repeatedly ogled by every man who meets her, complimented on her good looks, etc. She presents herself as the secretary of the boss for a business meeting, although she's an editor. She ends up marrying the editor in chief and quitting her own work, for no apparent reason. Not sure why she's in the book, actually.

* There are pretty much no other women in the book. There are basically no women with significant roles.

So. Maybe 1980s Japan wasn't the most egalitarian place, but this is a book translated and published in 2012. Seems to me like this is something worth mentioning, even if just to say, "Look, we think this is a great book but we know it has some weaknesses, try to take it with a grain of salt."

Anyway, if you're super-duper-into the Surrealist movement, enjoy bare-bones prose and nonexistent characterization, read mainly for concepts, and can put up with a lot of what the translators and editors consider challenging, bold stylistic moves and what I consider dropped plot threads, vague ideas, tense shifts, poorly-constructed scenes, and so on--and if you like a healthy dose of lady-bashing in your noir...this one's for you!!!

Sheena Carroll says

An amazing concept that was poorly executed. There's a strange sprinkling of misogyny and detailed sexual assaults that have no bearing on the actual plot.

!Tæmbu?u says

KOBOBOOKS

Reviewed by World SF Blog

Scott says

4.5 STARS

World Literature Today says

Written in the style of a fast-paced airport novel, *Death Sentences* surprises with its originality and conceptual depth." - Michael A. Morrison, University of Oklahoma

This book was reviewed in the November 2012 issue of *World Literature Today*. Read the full review by

visiting our website: <http://bit.ly/VBNDFt>

flum says

i did not experience a a magical poem, a 'vortical experience', as the forward to the novel might suggest. recommended for those who enjoy frustratingly long montages and stretches of little to no plot development.

Andrew says

For a book written so sparsely, *Death Sentences* is a dizzying experience chockfull of ideas, blending the hard-boiled with the surreal and shifting seamlessly from psychological horror to grand metaphysical statements. The resolution is perhaps a little underwhelming, though to Kawamata's credit this is because he builds a concept up so well that I found myself disappointed that it ended before going even further (perhaps he's unlocked a Who May mastery of language himself). It's ultimately a tightly wound tale, neatly told; an idea with limitless possibilities and the potential to become a sprawling beast that Kawamata instead fashions into a taut but nevertheless mind-bending thriller.

It's especially interesting for this to surface in English almost three decades after its initial Japanese release as *Genshi-gari* (something like 'Hunting the magic poems', or 'Poetic vision hunting'), as in the interim the motif of harmful sensation has been further popularised in SFF and horror, and it's done really well here, feeling like an insidious plague or revelatory cult of transformative words and ideas, with characters alternately addicted to it and intent on destroying it (it clearly owes something to classic word-policing and book-burning sci-fi tales).

Also of note: University of Minnesota Press have made a really handsome book and I'm grateful to see Kawamata's work in translation (hopefully more will follow, though it appears his subsequent work has veered more into military SF and straight-up military fiction), but the blurb perhaps gives away far too much. Womp womp.

Joux says

Quick, light read. Some style lost in translation but the short sentences propel you forward very quickly as meant to be. Book is sort of skipping genres; French art and literary history, drug heist, a possible war on humanity, all in different settings across space-time. So in that sense a lot of typical Japanese creation and viewpoint involved. Was a bit repetitive in the middle and then ending was abrupt but was fitting and nice, the short type where you either have to 'get it' immediately or otherwise think about after reading. Other reviewers commented on the objectification of women but it wasn't that central to the story so I didn't feel overly affected, it is after all a Japanese novel
