



Returning My Sister's Face and Other Far Eastern Tales of Whimsy and Malice

Eugie Foster

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Enchantment, peril and romance pervade the shadowy Far East, from the elegant throne room of the emperor's palace to the humble teahouse of a peasant village. In these dozen stories of adventure and magic from the Orient, a maiden encounters an "oni" demon in the forest, a bride discovers her mother-in-law is a fox woman, a samurai must appease his sister's angry ghost, strange luck is found in a jade locket, and dark and light are two sides of harmony.

A striking debut collection from Eugie Foster.

Returning My Sister's Face and Other Far Eastern Tales of Whimsy and Malice Details

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Melutopia says

Very lovely descriptions of characters and settings, particularly clothing. Interesting stories, but all seem to have a sad edge. It seems that this may be a characteristic of the traditional Asian folktales upon which the stories were based. Keeping that in mind, this wasn't necessarily the light energetic reading I normally enjoy digesting as a reprieve from my busy life. I look forward to reading more of Eugie's work that may more appropriately express her fun, loving personality - these stories strongly express her respect and honor of the lovely intricacies of Asian culture.

Gail says

This is one of very few short stories collections where I actually like every single entry and I ended up loving several of them. They vary in tone, some are dark and bittersweet, others joyful and humorous, but they're all worth reading. Foster has a talent for giving her stories depth and charm in short format and her notes on the inspiration for the various tales are interesting to read at the end of each story.

One side note to anyone considering buying this book. The small press that publishes the print edition of this book is apparently a mess at the moment and hasn't paid out any royalties to its authors in some time. So if you're going to buy it, please buy the e-book so that Ms. Foster receives your support!

Christina Vasilevski says

Review previously published at www.christinavasilevski.com

About the book: *Returning My Sister's Face* is a collection of short stories that revisits or reinvents tales from Chinese, Japanese, and Korean folklore. Some stories are retellings of fairy tales both Asian and European, like "The Tiger Fortune Princess" and "Shim Chung the Lotus Queen." Others are stories that offer completely new takes on events in East Asian history, like the longest story, "A Thread of Silk."

What I liked: The book was a good introduction to East-Asian folklore, although Foster did tweak some elements in her reimaginings. There is also great attention to detail, especially in discussing religious rituals and the shades and shapes of clothing; these added a wonderful sense of texture. The content of the story "Returning My Sister's Face" is macabre enough to match its gruesome title, and others in the collection deal with supernatural beings and betrayals in a similarly memorable fashion. Foster is willing to insert new themes into the folklore, though, as "Year of the Fox" is a tale of both wily animal spirits and lesbian attraction. My favourite in the collection is "The Tanuki-Kettle." In it, the heroine is active instead of passive, and the main character, Tanuki, a Japanese trickster-spirit similar to Coyote in Native American folklore, is clever and resourceful. I wish I had a tanuki-shaped teapot of my own, now!

What I disliked: Many of the stories made use of terms from other languages that it took a while for me to understand in context. In particular, the story "Honor is a Game Mortals Play" assumed a knowledge of

Japanese demon-hunting terminology that I don't think many readers know off-hand. More frustrating, though, was the fact that in a significant portion of the stories, the heroines within them fell in love with the men who crossed their paths almost immediately. I realize that this is a problem infesting European folk stories as well, but they were still noticeable. This is part of why I liked "The Tanuki Kettle" so much - instead of immediately falling in love with the first eligible male she ran into, the heroine berated him for his arrogance.

The verdict: I've been somewhat wary of other stories of Foster's that were aired on both Podcastle and Pseudopod. However, I loved some of the stories in this collection, and appreciated the introduction to East Asian folklore that it afforded me.

Loren says

"Returning My Sister's Face" is comprised of twelve short stories. While all the stories were enjoyable to read, there were only a few stand outs (see "The Tanuki-Kettle"). This felt like the writing of a relaxed author who is not interested in pushing themselves further. The apparent disinterest in the stories by the author kept me from really caring about them myself. On more than one occasion it felt like the author crammed too many details into the last page, possibly because of a word limit or because she became bored with the story. Eugie Foster has potential, but I don't think the short story format is where she'll do well.

Zoe Aleshire says

Delicately woven together in my mind forever, these stories have the seemingly charming simplicity of fairy tales with the dark undercurrent of complex moral fables going on. I'm haunted by some of the images in this collection, and since many of the stories are retellings, I can't get them out of my subconscious!

My favorite things all come together here, too: clearly written by a woman, in that she references femininity and the cultural standpoint it creates, totally willing to write queer characters who are just...queer, it's not a thing, and the inclusion of little tiny after-the-fact explanations about why the story was written, or what she was thinking about at the time. Beautiful little perfect storm, this collection.

This review is weird, but this is an excellent collection of short stories.

Debbie says

I had intended to ration Eugie Foster's stories to make them last longer. Instead, I found myself bingeing on them this weekend, finishing two collections and her Nebula Award-winning novella. On one hand, I have no regrets; the stories were amazing. On the other hand, this means my ability to read all of Eugie's stories for the first time is that much closer to its end.

This series of short stories are all influenced by, based on, or retellings of Chinese or Japanese folktales, mythologies, and history. I much prefer novels to short stories, and it is the odd short story that I end up enjoying. Most short story collections or anthologies contain a handful of pieces I enjoy, with the majority feeling a bit ho-hum. It is the rare collection where I enjoy almost every story. It is nearly unheard of where I

loved each one.

So it is very high praise that I give this collection five stars, because each story was a lovely, nuanced gem. These are stories which reminded me of the tales I read when I was a child, comforting in their familiarity, but with an added edge of darkness and sensuality that held adult-me enthralled. Without really meaning to, I sped through each story because I wanted more. And when I finished, I fell into a post-book depression that only hits after finishing a really good book.

Hesper says

The best thing about the collection is Eugie Foster's genuine love for Chinese, Korean, and Japanese folklore. The problem was in the mannered approach to retelling. Further, the choice to italicize every non-English word, and either provide no good contextual clues to its meaning or explain the life out of it without regard to POV, destroyed my immersion.

Seriously, let context do its work. If congee is rice porridge, for instance, then convey that information through character actions, since its purpose in the story is to be eaten, and the characters eating it know what it is. In places, this happens two or three times in the span of a single page; in others, the words just sit there without any other obvious purpose than the addition of atmosphere. This struck me as lazy. Plus, it denied me the fun of figuring out unfamiliar words or concepts based on surrounding clues, and that's just rotten.

Also rotten: tragic lesbians! One story ("Year of the Fox") goes there, but all other pairings in the collection, all of them straight obviously, get some sort of satisfying resolution, in addition to falling for each other within microseconds of meeting. Without weird pseudo vampiric side effects to their lovemaking, even. Imagine that.

Overall, this was disappointing. It's a great introduction to East Asian folklore, held back by the author's stylistic choices.

Jamie says

This book had been sitting in my to-read list for a long time because it's not available at the library and I was hesitant to buy it since the cover looks so... Photoshopped. But I downloaded Kindle for a trip and figured I'd check it out, and now I've ordered the physical copy because holy mother of foxes had I been missing out!

Rabbits are magical children of Bótù, the immortal Jade Rabbit, and practitioners of the Eightfold Path of Buddha. In a gracefully retelling of *The Little Mermaid*, one *Daughter of Bótù* finds love and changes her form to join him. But in the human world she must face danger and treachery both from her new love's life and of her old one. A charming story where the heroine hangs onto her independence and family ties and battles the monsters when her husband is swallowing every malicious lie they offer.

The Empress of China is given a bad fortune for her unborn child from an irate soothsayer, but takes the ominous future in stride. She raises the princess in the country to hide from the bad luck demons who would be looking for her, and when the prophecy comes to pass she gives her daughter everything she needs to face her future head on and come out of it gracefully. *The Tiger Fortune Princess* is a subtle retelling of *Sleeping*

Beauty, and one that will absolutely charm you with how good-natured and peaceful it is. Despite all the trouble the sour-tempered soothsayer causes, the princess and her mother are obedient to the teachings of Buddha and accept their lot with unparalleled grace.

A young woman receives blessings from the *kami* (Gods) to avenge her family's deaths at the hand of her cousin. But the line between love and hate is as fine as *A Thread of Silk*. This one was interesting, the young woman's personality was refreshingly fiery, and the conclusion was a nice touch, but the action slowed down considerably in the middle.

A monster of ice and snow falls in love with a woodcutter, and visits him in the form of a human woman to become his wife. But when he breaks the promise he made her and loses her forever, he raises their daughter alone and won't speak of her mother until the day of his death. Armed with the knowledge of her heritage, the daughter must decide if she will remain human or become frozen out of her father's world as *The Snow Woman's Daughter*. There're a lot of stories of monsters or transformed animals who fall in love with humans and are driven away by the human breaking a promise, but this was the first I've seen where both the reasoning behind the rule makes sense and the breaking of the rule came about by it being too vague. The rule in question is the basic one - 'don't tell anyone about the time you met me as a Snow Woman' - but she'd failed to explain that the rule *also* extended to discussing it with *her*. And the reason the rule exists make perfect sense within the rules of this universe. The actual plot with the daughter's choice, though, was a little dull.

The Tanuki-Kettle is my favorite story in a book full of wondrous tales, because it's the most comedic. A tanuki is being hunted and disguises himself as a tea kettle to escape, and the tea girl who finds him is content to let him stay as long as he behaves himself. This one was a little *Puss in Boots* and a little genie magic and fairy godmother meddling, all combined into something new and adorable.

Another Snow Woman story where *Honor is a Game Mortals Play*. A demon slayer dies and his granddaughter must take up his mantel, starting with the *oni* (demon) who killed him. But her skills aren't as honed as they should be and she is trapped by an *oni* and brought to the den of a dangerous creature she can't hope to defeat. Now this was a romance I actually enjoyed. None of the sappy, drippy romance that shows up in the other stories. In this one, the granddaughter has all the power in the relationship, but she's more intrigued than in love at this point. They've only just met, and the story gives them some room to let things develop.

As mentioned, animals changing into maiden forms only to be betrayed by their husband's curiosity is a common trope in folk tales. *The Raven's Brocade* takes this route and gives us a story about a beautiful woman and the husband goaded into wanting beautiful things to sell so he has the money to give her the fine gifts he thinks she should have. A pretty straight use of the common 'bird weaving with its own feathers' trope. Specifically, the author reports that this was a retelling of the Japanese tale *The Crane's Gratitude*. It's a simple story that I enjoyed very much.

In *Shim Chung the Lotus Queen*, a blind man accidentally promises a holy messenger of Buddha 500 bags of rice in exchange for his sight back, and his daughter quickly seizes this opportunity and requests the rice as payment for becoming a human sacrifice to the underwater Dragon King, who's not been allowing boats to leave their port. Based on the Korean folktale *The Blind Man's Daughter*, the story rewards the daughter's obedience and fealty to her parent and creates a lovely story in the process. It's small, but I also love how Foster's retelling changes the title to be about the girl. Something I notice often in fairy tales is how the story can be about a woman, but still be named after a man.

A young man raised by monks witnesses the face of his father in a crab's shell, and is taught the fate of his family line and ordered to avenge it. His feline companion supposes he'll come along to help, providing the boy is patient enough to listen and wise enough to judge the hearts of others. *The Tears of My Mother, the Shell of My Father* had something of a twist ending that was enjoyable, and the plot was solid and decently interesting.

Fox siblings set out to cause mischief and misery among humans in revenge for their mother's death, but the fox-daughter's plot to steal the virtue of a young maiden goes awry when she falls in love. After a *Year of the Fox*, she faces the judgement and vengeance of the brother who returns to find her sworn revenge unfulfilled. It was a bittersweet love story that I enjoyed, but liked more for the sympathetic portrayal of fox spirits than for the relationship.

In the story of the creation of the Mid-Autumn Festival, *The Archer of the Sun and the Lady of the Moon* are celestial lovers who come to odds and are doomed to live apart forever. This appears to be a retelling of the traditional story of the Lady in the Moon, as I've heard similar versions before and the day is in fact a day of celebration in China. It's a good story, but not one of the book's best.

Another favorite, *Returning My Sister's Face* tells the tale of a young woman betrayed by her husband and the brother she demands restore her honor (the title is a play on words because not only has she 'lost face', but the poison she was given also literally destroyed half her face). The visual descriptions of the murdered woman's spirit are gruesome; hers was not a peaceful or quick death and it's left its mark. While the brother does a good job at exposing her betrayal, the aspect I liked most was how the dead woman wouldn't leave well enough alone. In the previous stories, the dead would pass on their message and that would be that, but this woman keeps bossing her brother around and forcing her way back into the narrative. As living woman she was obedient and peaceful, but as a wronged spirit she's pushy and bloodthirsty.

EDITING:

No editing issues, and plenty of Chinese/Japanese vocabulary as a bonus.

ENJOYABILITY:

I bought this book on Kindle and had to turn right back around and buy the physical copy so I can reread more comfortably.

THEME:

All the stories have heavy Eastern influence if they aren't retellings outright.

OTHER ASPECTS:

The writing is amazing. Foster has such a way with words that I've added her other short story collection, *The King of Rabbits and Moon Lake* (which has cover art by Ursula Vernon, one of my favorite artists) to my to-read list.

THE VERDICT?

An amazing short story collection full of stories sure to be looked at as classics in their own right.

Sean Locke says

I borrowed this book from a good friend of mine, and now I am loath to give it back. These stories are lovely! Anyone with an interest in a contemporary take on classic Asian fairy tales would enjoy the heck out of this collection.

Cathy says

This book was a lovely dream that I didn't want to end. This is the first collection I've read by an author who was unfamiliar to me, basically an author who I wasn't following because I read their urban fantasy books already, where I liked every story. Loved every story. Jim Butcher and Patricia Briggs come to mind as urban fantasy authors who always get it right. And Catherynne M. Valente is the author who kept coming to mind as the short story author I've discovered this year who's the most like Foster, with her use of myth, magic and history, but Valente still has some near misses. As much as I enjoyed *The Bread We Eat in Dreams*, it still wasn't a breeze to read, sometimes I felt like I was working my way through it. But this book, oh this book, it was a dream, a magical, beautiful, dark and haunting, frequently sad, often hopeful, occasionally funny, wonderful dream. I honestly loved every single bit of it. Every story was a gem. Maybe it helped a little that I have an interest in Asia, having family from several of the countries featured in these stories. But I don't think that has much to do with it. More relevant may be that I love stories that incorporate mythology and history, from Ilona Andrews to Kevin Hearne, Rick Riordan to Steve Bein. Even though some were sad, it was sad with a purpose. But my constant awareness of Foster's recent passing made the vein of sadness running through many of the stories so much more poignant. I wanted to rush through the book, but I wanted to savor every minute as well. Everyone who passes away is a loss to the world, everyone who goes too young is a terrible loss to their loved ones. But when an artist, or a scientist, someone who creates, goes too soon, it's an extra blow, because the world has lost not only them but everything they would have created as well. But they leave the legacy of their work. And Eugie Foster's work is something very special.

Raj says

I first encountered Eugie Foster via the Escape Artists podcasts, mostly *Podcastle*, where I knew that a Foster story was probably one that I was going to enjoy. I was sorry to hear of her death last year and that was one thing that pushed me toward getting this collection, which I've finally got around to reading.

It's a collection of retellings of, or stories inspired by, far-eastern myths, with no other real unifying feature. But the far-eastern link is enough for me, and I enjoyed just about every story in the collection. Stand outs include *A Thread of Silk* about a woman who vows to kill the man who killed her father; *The Tanuki-Kettle*, a whimsical fairy tale about a mischievous tanuki spirit who hides in the form of a tea-kettle; and *Year of the Fox*, telling of a rash promise made in childhood and its consequences.

Foster is a confident storyteller, building great worlds. Her afterwords after each story are a nice way into the author's mind, telling how each one came about. I'll definitely be looking out for more of her work.

Claudia Piña says

"Tales of Whimsy and Malice", una apta descripción para el libro.

Pocas veces encuentro antologías donde todos los cuentos me gustan tanto. Tienen ese toque de cuento de hadas más lo novedoso de historias -probablemente- poco conocidas en este lado del mundo. Las historias son nostálgicas, inquietantes, sorprendentes y graciosas, todo contado en un estilo muy poético y con bellísimas descripciones. Además después de cada una, la autora explica la inspiración original de ellas y parte de su proceso/experiencia de escritura, lo que le agrega otra dimensión a la lectura y la enriquece bastante.

Noté que algunos de los cuentos parecían algo apresurados al final, pero no se fijen mucho.

Kurt says

A selection of fairy tales inspired by (or possibly reworked from) myths and legends from Asia. Eugie announced in October that she was being treated for cancer and that if people were interested in trying to help with the bills they could buy some of her collections in ebook form. I hadn't read any of her work before, but the descriptions were intriguing and they were ridiculously cheap. I'm delighted with the first collection. The stories are old-school myths, hence the "whimsy and malice" of the title. Highly recommended if you like Grimm's fairy tales, Aesop's fables, or the like.

Emma says

A quirky yet elegant collection of Asian folktale retellings. I am so happy I found this by chance while searching amazon. Some stories made me want to cry, while some just made me want a time machine (and a travelling machine. A...tardis? ...not important).

From funny to chilling, romantic to vengeful, there's something for every fairy tale lover, and admirer of Japanese culture and folklore. Foster gives uniquely human voices to some of my favourite fairy tale characters (kitsune, tanuki, yuki-onna, and Oiwa's yurei, among others), and introduces others I've never before had the pleasure of meeting.

Athena says

There were a couple of stories here that I enjoyed but for the most part I felt that the collection wasn't my cup of tea. I'm not very familiar with Japanese folklore, which may be part of the issue. Two or three of the stories hinged on a 'reveal,' but the reveals seemed obvious coming up on them and so they lost a lot of their punch for me.

The writing was quite readable and I finished the book and all the stories but it's not something I'll reread (the gold standard for me of any book/story). Just not my thing.
