



Somersault

Kenzaburō Ōe, Philip Gabriel (translator)

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The first new novel Oe has published since winning the Nobel Prize, Somersault is a magnificent story of the charisma of leaders, the danger of zealotry, and the mystery of faith.

A decade before the story opens, two men referred to as the Patron and Guide of mankind were leaders of an influential religious movement. When a radical faction of their followers threatened to unleash an apocalypse, they recanted all of their teachings and abandoned their followers. Now, after ten years of silence, Patron and Guide begin contacting their old followers and reaching out to the public, assisted by a small group of young people who have come to them in recent months.

Just as they are beginning this renewed push, the radical faction kidnaps Guide, holding him captive until his health gives out. Patron and a small core of the faithful, including a painter named Kizu who may become the new Guide, move to the mountains to establish the church's new base, followed by two groups from Patron's old church: the devout Quiet Women, and the Technicians, who have ties to the old radical faction. The Baby Fireflies, young men from a nearby village, attempt to influence the church with local traditions and military discipline. As planning proceeds for the summer conference that will bring together the faithful and launch the new church in the eyes of the world, the conflicting agendas of these factions threaten to make a mockery of the church's unity—or something far more dangerous.

Somersault Details

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From Reader Review Somersault for online ebook

Alison says

Moves pretty quickly for what is a very slow build of a book. It has sort of a lulling, meditative pace and most of the action comes in short bursts around lengthy dialogues that are sometimes sermons and parables and sometimes just read like sermons and parables. My sense is that this book conveys a kind of equivocal philosophical state that I am too unfocused to truly appreciate. Some fine dialogue and shades of Murakami in the weirder moments if you're into that sort of thing.

Andrew says

One of the more frustrating books I've ever read. This is hardly a story of a cult, hardly a story of "the human spirit" nor of repentance. There's bits of those things in there, but nothing stuck out in this book of interest to me. Dialogue, which is almost the entire book, is non-realist, banal and constantly focused on describing past events, relationships, etc. with a detached air. The characters are emotionally flattened, the "cult activities" described are (and I don't mean this figuratively) like being at a board meeting, and what little glint of transcendence comes through is often cliche and shallow. Oe isn't a bad writer, and the story could've been engaging, if only it was given a little life. Some positive reviews I've come across suggest that the book is lifeless to evoke a meditative, somber tone. Possibly, but "boring" works well enough for me.

Sean de la Rosa says

This was a very different read. Oe tackles the issues of current day religion, philosophy and ethics with beauty and grace. His characters are unique and interesting to unravel. Although the piece is large and dense, it is a rewarding read. Somersault is my first encounter with a Japanese author. Oe won the nobel prize for literature in 1994.

A quote near the end I re-read a few times: "Is it really so bad that you can't hear God's voice? You don't need God's voice, do you? People should be free."

Mello says

Perhaps not the right Oe to start with.

Meandering, almost tedious, yet oddly compelling throughout.

And every once in a while there'll be a scene of such incredible power that I'm done and have to stop for the day.

An update, three months afterwards:

I finished this a few months back but it's still bothering me.

The dialogue was painfully sincere but oddly bland, the conversations and events had a weird internal logic that I rarely had access to, people changed their minds based on empty comments- in fact they found those comments revelatory, powerful emotions happened but somehow divorced from the person expressing them,

no one acted like a real person but they still felt like real people, I didn't understand their religious ideology at all, the book was interminable but I couldn't put it down
And I still can't stop thinking about it
Oe what have you done to me?

David says

Oe's magisterial novel tells the story of the rebirth of an extremist millennial church whose leaders had apparently abandoned the movement ten years earlier in a successful attempt to thwart terrorist activity by some of the church's most radical members. Widely criticized when the English translation came out in 2003 for its flat characterization and stilted style, patient readers will nonetheless find this a richly suggestive fantasy on post-war Japanese history filled with compelling situations and beautiful images. The reflective, often blandly sincere speeches and conversations that comprise much of the book do get tedious. But our cast is largely one of lost souls; restlessness is one of the book's themes; and the drama does build steadily to a powerful--though weird--climax. Oe's execution is mostly a match for his vast ambition, and I'll certainly be reading more of him—even if part of me thinks I should give this 3 1/2 stars instead.

Cliff says

Oe, in his breadth of ideas, and in the way he develops character, is in league with the likes of Dostoevsky and Thomas Mann. His clear, mature intelligence is suitable for this story of how people frame their lives in relation to each other, to notions of love and memory, and to a disquiet pursuit of something more.

Andrew says

I'm having a very hard time with this review and it should not be reviewed dryly. Who Oe is doesn't matter, or where he's from or where this lies beside his previous works, or who the autistic musician or self terrified surgeon with the suicidal mother is. This is not a book to review from historical context.

You can. Religion, Japan by train, effigies, beer and whiskey beside saki, the desperate shame of a man dying of cancer tearfully pulling himself up to the first and only penis he'll ever have inside him. Who is Patron, who is Guide, why the primary characters have so little to do with the God they're parading around, what was the goal, was Jonah Yonah – these aren't answered. And they stagger on a wrought stage of soliloquies, snowy boughs, a man's stomach in the sun and improbabilities and farces.

The book is impossible. There is one dash, one interpretation in a book with page long monologues outnumbering one-liners. Then what's going on here? I've told you before this is not the question. It is troubling, the sonorous seamlessness, the inexcusable boredom of reading this book. It is unforgivable.

But I read this and, yes, it is the snowy boughs, the half parted mouth, the hungry man pulling apart his ass as colon cancer pulls at his stool. That's what it is. Yes, I've said, there's more, if you need it. But don't look for it. It will do you no good to compare wounds of absence and excess, repetitive Giis, or feudal Yakuzas in the guise of repentance. It is there. But it's not what you get or what stays.

What sticks is the atmosphere, the ineffable. I know that sounds above. I'm sounding like Kizu maybe, or anyone really, lost in this book that's so clear and so empty, so vast. There are pockets and small findings, dips in the savannah.

You're right. I'm not clear. Let me be, then. It's a difficult book to read because it's boring and frustrating when no one responds in conversation as people do. Explanations and backstory are stumbled on like logs in tall grass and the story resembles so little a story. It sprawls slowly, thinly, with people who are real until they talk and places that are stronger than the people. Is this what he means when he discusses the 'power of the place?' I don't know. I don't think I need to know. Everything I need to know from this book, from Aum Shinrikyo to pianos and triptychs, is in the atmosphere, and the images that live beyond any of the rambles or the philosophy.

This book is a glacier – slow, clear, awesome, tedious and beautiful.

Lisa says

I really liked *A Personal Matter*, but I couldn't read more than about 20 pages of this.

Carl Waluconis says

Just finished this challenging book. While describing a contemporary cult religion in Japan, a kind of Christianity, but definitely different culturally, Oe explores the Japan of today heavily influenced by non-Asian ideas. At the same time, as with *Death by Water*, the focus also contains the attachment to the land of indigenous Japanese religion. There are references to the kami right beside important elements of Jonah and the old Testament. Mix this with convincing homosexual and heterosexual relationships (including summer/winter), musical compositions by a young savant composer (familiar in Oe), trances, mass suicides turned ribald, and a visionary's last sermon quoting Dostoevsky. How the author keeps all this in the air becomes even more problematic with the levels of specific detail and repetition that he uses. One more note—I did not count the words, but well over half of this book is delivered in conversations between the characters. Though it is true that many times a person speaks at much greater length than a person normally would, that becomes a part of the way that repeated details become a theme of the book. Oe has one character explain this use of details: "We experience things without really knowing what they mean and how they'll end up, right? That being the case, all you can do is write down as much of what you saw and heard just as you experienced it. Maybe it's a case of God being in the details." Judged as whether it works as a novel by American readers, this book probably pushes too many borders for many. However, exploring ways contemporary Japan interacts with the contemporary world, this seems to be the most effective way to do that and fully explore the complex themes involved.

David says

Sadly, I struggled to enjoy this.

Ryan Thistlethwaite says

I took forever to read this (as a quick reader) and found it terribly frustrating. It's beautiful and I still think of it regularly years later. I think I hate it and would highly recommend.

Hard work in many ways but I'd argue worth the effort.

Yonu says

me alegro haber leido el post underground de murakami (siento que ayuda a tener una idea más clara de los creyentes de la secta) antes del salto mortal. lectura densa y tortuosa (por partes) pero que muestra , y esto lo digo personalmente, la cicatriz que significó el atentado de aum.

flum says

i enjoyed engaging with the analogy for spirituality/nationalism/subculture in a post-ww2 japan, but found it to be lacking in the empathy and profundity often found in ?e's other work.

i also hope to happily navigate the rest of my life without reading another explanation of who/what/where/when the somersault was and how x/y/z feel about it.

Brian says

I liked this book, but it was super long. I think that the treatment of the subject of religion vs. spirituality was interesting, and the author did seem to paint a very vivid picture of the direction that religions can take (and how dangerous religious sects can be when so much of what is done in them is symbolic for different groups of people in different ways). The book did a good job of slowly involving the reader more and more into the back story of each character and filling out many of the characters that appeared through out the book in some more than simply flat presentation. Ultimately this book was a struggle for me, because much of the writing was a bit dry (never really lingering on events too long, but laboring in it's point a bit longer than I think it needed to). This book was a challenge for me to get through and did not grip my attention for long periods of time (until the last 100 pages or so which were interesting but would have been welcomed about 150 pages earlier). I would read another book by Oe, but not for a while. I can tell that he has a way with words that piqued my interest from time to time, but I can't say that would recommend this book to anyone for any particular reason or another.

Daniel Fulmer says

THIS IS PROBABLY THE STRANGEST BOOK AROUND BUT TOTALLY CAPTIVATING IN THE

WAY IT DELVES INTO THE MYSTERIES OF INNER LIFE AND SPIRIT...VERY DIFFICULT TO SLOG THROUGH, HOWEVER, BECAUSE OF LONG PASSAGES THAT OTHERS FIND REDUNDANT THO I HAVE NOT MINDED THEM AT ALL
