

Questions & Answers

with

MAHOKARU NUMATA

author of **NAN-CORE**

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Q: What inspired you to write this book? Is it based on any actual event or events?

Numata: A newspaper article suddenly brought into focus what had only been a vague idea in my mind. The article described a criminal's confession, which included the comment, "It started with illustrations in a magazine I read as a child. I felt excitement and pleasure when someone died." It made me wonder if within these "abnormal" individuals whom the rest of society rejects, there actually exists something beautiful or warm. And if there is this something, what form would it take?

Q: The reader can interpret the concept of "nan-core" as a lack of a moral center or, taking it a step further, the lack of a soul. Was there anything in your own experiences with Buddhism or in other Japanese religious/spiritual traditions that drew you to this idea?

Numata: I think that no matter how hard someone struggles, they won't discover the nan-core, that immovable truth, for which the soul longs. I don't have what you could call training, but to me, Buddhism might be about a fundamental defect, or the act of staring fixedly at an ontological emptiness. I don't know how much of that sort of sentiment still exists in Japan today, but by writing a novel, I hoped to create even a small resonance among my readers.

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Q: The story is told in two voices: Ryosuke, the narrator (a man), and writer of the notebooks (a woman). Did you find it difficult to switch back and forth, and did writing from the perspective of one character come more easily than the other?

Numata: This was my first experience with split narratives, and I enjoyed it very much. The notebook sections are a bit disconnected from reality and were easy to write. For the parts from Ryosuke's point of view, I wanted to emphasize ordinariness, which in fact was exhausting to write.

Q: Are there elements or issues in the story that you feel are uniquely Japanese while others are more universal?

Numata: I can't think of anything in particular that is specific to Japan, but I believe the loss of one's anchor is probably a universal phenomenon in any civilized culture. Many people in countries all over the world drown in a sense of emptiness, and suffer because they blindly cling to temporary or artificial anchors.

Q: The writer of the notebooks exhibits psychopathic behavior. Did you do research in order to create this character so effectively? Have you ever encountered a real person or persons similar to her?

Numata: I didn't do any particular research or model the character after a specific person. The word "psychopath" has a uniquely terrifying ring to it, but everyone, myself included, has the capacity for brutality and abnormality, so I think the issue is whether or not someone realizes or activates that aspect of his/herself. There are all kinds of factual, faithfully represented examples throughout history of people who have liberated that part of themselves.

Q: Guilt – or the lack of guilt – is an important theme in the story. Why did this idea interest you?

Numata: I had hoped to capture something like the unexpected flashes of clear light that appear within sinful, broken people, because I felt I could discover the power that allows these people to keep on living under such circumstances. I have resisted drawing a hard line between "bad people" and "good people."

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Q: Who are your favorite authors? Have they influenced your own writing? How so?

Numata: I still think the works of Scott Turow and Thomas Harris are interesting. I like John le Carré, Thomas H. Cook, Cormac McCarthy. And George R.R. Martin. I'm waiting on tenterhooks for the next book in the *A Song of Ice and Fire* series. My reading taste is all over the place, but I greatly admire these works, and they've blended together in my mind. If I'm going to write at all, then I want my work to be at least a *little* interesting.

Q: *Nan-Core* is fundamentally a mystery, as Ryo tries to figure out who wrote the notebooks and how the people described in them relate to himself and his family. Why do you think mystery and crime fiction is so popular with readers everywhere?

Numata: These types of stories can include a wider range of elements than are usually found in other genres, including those that stimulate such reactions in the reader as curiosity and fear.

Q: Are there one or two basic "take-aways" you'd like readers to have from *Nan-Core*?

Numata: I simply wanted to explore that beautiful something that must lurk within people who are disdained by others and labelled "psychopaths." I don't have any specific message that I want to convey using words, but if the many people who haven't found their anchors could feel their hearts gently swayed by this book, then that would make me happy.