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#### memoir

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#### ow She Does It

columnist Pearson hit larious contemporary ; mother. It is a kind of ich, time-poor days of

paranoid raptures of Bin Laden that the nature of the threat became clear.

# THE DAILY YOMIURI MAY 18 2003

## A short, sweet tale of unconventional love

**Twinkle, Twinkle**  
By Kaori Ekuni  
Translated by Emilyanno Kaw  
Vertical, Inc. 174 pp. \$19.95

By Sonia O'Regan  
Daily Yomiuri Staff Writer

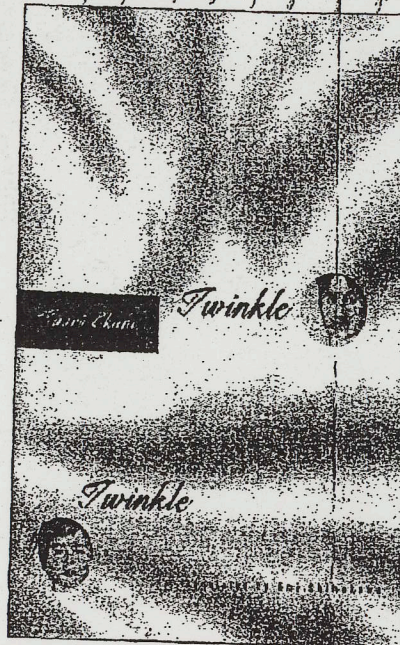
**M**utsuki and Shoko have just got married. He's a doctor, she's a freelance translator. They live in an apartment with a balcony on which they spend many evenings drinking and looking at the stars through the telescope that Shoko gave Mutsuki for Christmas.

Actually, Shoko drinks rather a lot. While her father berates her husband on learning that he is gay, she placidly sips whisky on the rocks from a tea cup. Kaori Ekuni's first novel, *Twinkle Twinkle*, is aptly named. The story of one couple's life behind their apartment's frosted windows is ethereal in its simplicity, yet sparkles with humor and quiet insight.

While the premise of a gay man and an emotionally unstable woman marrying to keep up appearances would seem incongruous in these times in many countries, the author makes it seem not unnecessary in her native Japan.

Ekuni helps the believability of the concept simply by not lingering over the justifications. The marriage, she explains briefly, was a plan to get Mutsuki's and Shoko's parents off their backs, to boost his chances of promotion, and to test her shrink's advice that she would "get better" if she married.

The relationship may be unconventional, but Ekuni has Mutsuki and Shoko alternately tell their



story in first person to reveal the love that holds their vows fast.

Indeed, Shoko, whose quirky behavior and alcoholic tendencies provide most of the humor in the story, appears to have found an ideal husband in Mutsuki: a man who buys low-alcohol champagne for breakfast, never gets angry at her changing moods and even helps out when she insists on re-

leasing the goldfish from its bowl into the bathtub.

Mutsuki, meanwhile, is married to a woman who likes his boyfriend and is not bothered if he doesn't ever want to do more than hold her on occasion.

But, predictably, just as the final brush strokes are applied to the pretty picture of marital bliss, the painting begins to crack and peel.

The summer festival of Tanabata proves the catalyst for the inevitable, when Shoko wishes everything will stay the same and Mutsuki realizes it never can.

Mutsuki's pathological honesty at this time raises a discrepancy in the story. Shoko, who has no problem with altering the truth to ensure smooth relations, describes him as "like a little hedgehog, his honesty standing up on end like tiny prickles." But within a few chapters Mutsuki, who earlier lied by omission, is willing to lie again, telling Shoko's parents that he has willingly cut off ties with his boyfriend.

Without taking the focus off the twin protagonists, Ekuni deftly weaves a range of characters into the story, including the spiky tree Mutsuki's boyfriend gave the couple as a wedding gift and the purple man in the painting that dominates the living room where so much of the story unfolds.

*Twinkle Twinkle* was first published in Japanese in 1991 and went on to win the Murasaki Shikibu Literary Award. The English translation by Emi Shimokawa retains a fresh, light style, although a few oddly worded phrases did slip through the editing process in a disservice to smooth reading.

However, by translating Ekuni's work into English, Vertical, Inc., has provided English-language readers with a sweet, memorable nibble from the menu of contemporary Japanese fiction.

## Science and suffering

**A Few Short Notes on Tropical Butterflies**  
By John Murray  
HarperCollins, 280 pp. \$24.95

By William Hathaway  
The Hartford Courant

**I**n his first collection of short stories, *A Few Short Notes on Tropical Butterflies*, John Murray uses language so polished and pure, there is very little to deflect the moral punch of his message.

And in story after story, his sharply etched characters find reason and science are of little use in helping them understand the mysteries of their own natures.

heels of harrowing visits to a cholera clinic during a visit to India.

A man who has lost two brothers to the sea journeys to Florida to seek a reason his fisherman father deserted his mother to operate a fishing boat. The landlubber son gains the insight not so much from his father, but from the experience of his father's mistress, a nurse who tended to the sick and suffering of a strife-torn African nation.

In the most complex and intricate tale, the one that gives the book its title, a late-middle-aged alcoholic surgeon struggles with his estrangement from his wife, a younger neurosurgeon. The thread that ties their emotional turmoil together is the life of his grandfather, an adventurous butterfly collector.

The grandfather is a believer in using classification to impose order on the wondrous diversity

## Deathless in Manhattan

By Tom Baker  
Daily Yomiuri Staff Writer

**Forever**  
By Pete Hamill  
Doubtful Brown  
615 pp. \$25.95

**O**ne reason for the success of Anne Rice's vampire novels is the feeling they give many readers that living forever would be, for lack of a better term, really, really cool. Now, novelist Pete Hamill has come up with something even cooler: a character who lives forever without having to drink any blood to do it.

Cormac O'Connor, born in Ireland early in the 18th century and living in New York for a very long time after that, gets his gift of immortality partly as a reward for being a decent person (most of the time) and partly as the result of luck. Bestowed by an African tribal priest, the

**B** Toward form, vexing its author's design, Confounding his nonchalance easily. The music will out—the meter will beat, Assonance sound, alliteration lit, Cadences tumble and elisions slip. But music too can be cacophony Unshepherded lambs bleating as they stray From the corral of the pentameter Whose gate, unhinged, grates and squeaks in the wind.

Windiness is a quality unprized In poets, and Mr. Wallace Gagne, A Canadian poet who lightly Admits to being a heavy drinker In the blurb on the back of his new book *Inside the Kamakura Buddha* should Be advised that there is a difference Between that first fine careless rapture and A rapture that is more careless than fine. But in the 40 poems in *Buddha* There are lines that sing, images that ring True—listen: "Mugged incinerator skys" (but at the risk of sounding pedantic, it's "skies," Wallace, not "skys" for goodness' sake), Or these lines from "After the Gay Parade": "The King, now hoarse, fat and wrinkled, attired in wornout blue suede shoes; Wearing a silk bathrobe with cigarette burns and stains from long-ago eskimo pies." Now you're in the groove, but what to make of This: "The British and French dislike one another, just like brothers.

Camus and Sartre were heavy smokers. Because there are no 'poop and scoop' laws, the sidewalks of Paris are covered by outdoor cafes and dog turds." So? Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso (two Beat poets whose names you drop into your poem "Entering New York City") Could disinter from the quotidian Jewels of meaning to illuminate The link between the sacred and profane. I see no satori in these pages, Just doggerel barking up the wrong tree.

cameo appearances by historical figures. Hamill's choices range from George Washington to the relatively obscure John Peter Zenger.

He presents a favorable view of 19th-century New York kingpin Boss Tweed, which will not surprise readers of Hamill's memoir, *A Drinking Life*. In that book's description of his Irish Catholic childhood in Brooklyn, "corrupt" pals who helped their down-and-out constituents find work are portrayed more favorably than priests who, in Hamill's memory, merely collected offerings and spread the fear of hell.

Some of the author's wearisome novels—at least