

er character, is not so much a monster as a character so weakly grounded to any personal moral code that he becomes capable of monstrous acts. His crimes are unspeakable, his personality without any redeeming qualities of

admitt are capable of wreaking on society. It may be an unrepentant Fujio Uno who mounts the gallows at the end of Sono's novel, but it is society, she seems to imply, that is the real culprit in the crime.

on the same page," says Newsweek. His work, says the New York Times, "gets better and better." But his books are not for everybody. He writes straight-ahead-on of the nitty-gritty city where some people

deaths. He writes of worked heroes and villains of all backgrounds. In "Hard R" he tells of Derek's out-of-s brother, Dennis: "Dennis Alvin Jones from nine years through Kenneth, but it se

TO LOVE AND BE BOLD

A different kind of matrimony

The Asian Bookshelf

DONALD RICHIE

TWINKLE, TWINKLE, by Kaori Ekuni, translated by Emi Shimokawa. New York: Vertical Inc., 2003, 172 pp. \$19.95 (cloth).

This is an excellent translation of Kaori Ekuni's 1991 novel, "Kira Kira Hikaru," a popular best seller that was made into a very good film by Joji Matsuoka the following year.

It is, like most comedies of manners, about a marriage — though of a rather different kind. Neither bride nor groom is marriageable material. He has a boyfriend to whom he is faithful, and she is an alcoholic, faithful mainly to her bottle.

When the two discover, during their "arranged" meeting, their mutual lack of qualifications, they both decide that this is an excellent reason for marriage because it at least gets their parents off their backs.

Both sets of parents know of their own child's undesirability, but not that of the marriage partner and so the stage is set for a farce. And most amusing are the results, too, but at the same time Ekuni ensures that we begin to believe in the happy couple as much more than figures of fun.

Her means are various. One is to tell the story from two points of view, his and hers, each perfectly consistent within its own limitations. The bride soon comes to love her undemanding and considerate husband. The groom learns to love and care for his emotionally needy wife. At the same time neither of them makes any attempt to "reform."

"So you see how things stand," she writes. "Yes, alcoholic wife and gay husband —

real partners in crime!" He tolerates the drinking, knowing it is necessary for her. She likes the boyfriend and goes to some lengths to ensure a happy trio — such as trying to mix their sperm for a *ménage à trois* artificial insemination.

Yet, such details are never off-putting in this delectable novel. Medical matters are a part of the story, just as they were in Junichiro Tanizaki's superb "Kagi" of 1956, translated in 1961 as "The Key," a possible inspiration to Ekuni. Here, too, husband and wife alternate chapters but with a

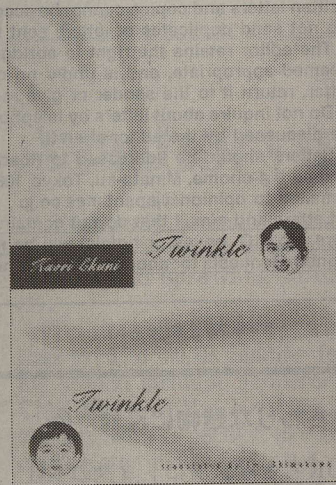
sorship. Forty years later, Ekuni encountered no such obstacles, but the film version of the novel has never been accorded the praise it deserves nor the showings it merits.

There are some differences between the novel and the film, but no accommodations were made to popular prejudice. Indeed, some of the differences are improvements — such as a magical sequence when the married couple and the husband's boyfriend, while out for an evening drive, go into a safari park and silently gaze at the animals illuminated by their headlights.

Now, another kind of translation, one different from film adaptation, makes this fine work available to a different audience. Here both novel and author benefit from an English translation that seems uncommonly right.

It captures a consistent tone. "Why did it always have to be like this? Mutsuki [the husband] was so kind and sweet. It was kind of hard to take at times." Here, the wife speaks the way she would if she were a native English speaker: the hypothetical question, the banality of "kind and sweet" and the forthrightness of "hard to take," which is so typical of a would-be independent person. We recognize the tone and it is convincing.

The publication of this translation is also something of an experiment. Vertical Inc. is a new house that is devoting itself to the publishing of popular Japanese literature — popular in distinction to the "pure" literature of *junbungaku*. One of the results of the publication of this book, however, is to indicate that the distinction is perhaps academic. Good books are good books.



further layer of their diary accounts. An amount of ironic paralleling occurs in both novels. One such parallel is the arranged meeting of the couple in "Twinkle Twinkle," set during the Tanabata Festival in July, when the celestial lovers — ideal, just made for each other — mythologically meet.

Also, in both novels, socially dreaded "aberrations" are treated as what they are — normal. This calls for some authoritative bravery, and indeed Tanizaki ran into heavy criticism and attempted cen-

3/21/2004 Kaori Ekuni
(Japan Times)

lishers, 2004, 340 pp., \$26 (cloth)
Reviewed by

MARK SCHREIBER

A full listing of novels and stories set in the International Settlement of Shanghai between the first and second world wars, and again up to China's 1949 revolution would fill a book in itself. The reputation as a paradise for adventurers, however, largely masked it as a haven for waves of refugees who fled to the city from Chinese internal strife; from the civil war in Russia; and from Nazi Germany. Most lived in abject misery.

"Shanghai Station" tells the story of two members of the Russian aristocracy who fled to Shanghai in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. In the autumn of 1918, Young Alexander abandons his family estate as approaching Bolshevik forces close in, and he accompanies his mother and

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SHANGHAI, by Donald Richie. Lincoln, Nebraska: iUniverse, 2003, 218 pp., \$24.95 (cloth).
ROBERT LUDLUM'S THE ALTIMAN CODE, by Robert Ludlum. New York: Dutton, 2003, 496 pp. (paper).

Brand-name thriller

"Robert Ludlum's The Altiman Code is part of a growing trend in which publishers harness the name of a veteran writer to market works in a similar genre, while Ludlum's case would be spy thrillers.

A renegade member of the House of Representatives, Standing Committee has a plan to supply Iraq with a shipload of chemicals for manufacturing w