

transforms into possibility; historical loss into future potential. Perhaps this is why the inclusion of Turtle's ghostly visitations seems at times awkward in the book. Rowtina's encounters with Turtle's spirit come across as solitary experiences; they don't carry a strong presence of Turtle. Despite the descriptions of affection between the ghost and Rowtina, a feeling that she really is alone—that she's imaging all of this—pervades the scenes.

While Turtle's memory leaves a strong impression on Rowtina's life, he doesn't leave nearly as strong an impression on the reader. And Rowtina's vacillation between choosing to submerge herself in a historical relationship that isn't clearly felt in the book and engaging herself in a transformative community with the Sisterhood makes it unclear who the real Rowtina is.

Yet this lack of clarity of identity isn't completely out of place because, for all of the choices Rowtina makes, none of them come off as her own. Finding her desire in this book is difficult. Despite her hesitations, it's evident by her choices that Rowtina wants to pursue a relationship with Picasso, the hairstylist that pursues her. But that desire is never fully felt on the page. It's as if Picasso's own interest in her has decided her feelings for him. The same holds true of her choice to move from Harlem. Nelda's desire for the apartment below her own seems to be the catalyst for Rowtina's choice to move into it. Rowtina comes off as a reflection of other characters in the book, distant from the reader, held back.

Wright excels grandly in his examination of Rowtina's emotional mechanisms for survival. His description of the moments after Rowtina first learns of her husband's death is exceptional. The tension between the external and internal creates the perfect subtle characterization of which Wright is a master. And his use of the Sisterhood as a mechanism of survival is both well placed and well developed. Through Rowtina's dependency on the Sisterhood and her relationship with Nelda, Wright explores the dynamics of need and its potential to create profound change. Rowtina's need for companionship allows her to move out of her comfort zone and away from her fears and be supportive when confronted by

Nelda's homosexuality. The potential for honest and courageous relationships is created—and the relationships between these women are the true strengths of *One Foot in Love*.

Alicia Kester is a writer living and working in California. She's working on a collection of poetry.

Quirky Beard

Reviewed by **Jim Gladstone**

Twinkle Twinkle

By Kaori Ekuni

Translated by Emi Shimokawa

Vertical

HB, \$19.95, 171 pp.

Must be like embracing water," is the way an incredulous father-in-law attempts to describe the awkward marriage of his gay son to a straight woman in the opening chapter of Kaori Ekuni's delicately quirky *Twinkle Twinkle*. While the unlikely partnership of Mutsuki—a reserved, steadfast young doctor—and Shoko—a mercurial, alcoholic Italian-Japanese translator—proves to have much more substance than Mutsuki's father assumes, his elegant turn of phrase is a rather apt description of the experience. American readers are likely to have with this novel.

Simultaneously seductive and elusive, *Twinkle Twinkle* is the urbane literary equivalent of well-made sushi: In bright bites of cool, gem-like prose, Ekuni serves up an array of subtly nuanced emotion. Readers looking for overt heartstring-tugging in the great tradition of American love melodramas should turn elsewhere for their sturm und drang and runaway brides and teary reunions around tumors the size of an eggplant; the sly charms of this book require a more poetic palate.

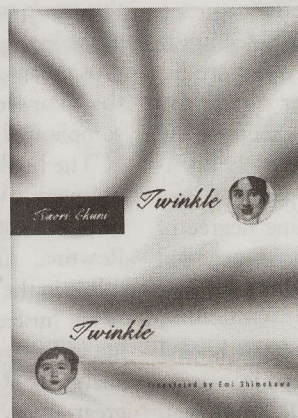
A spare 170 pages, *Twinkle Twinkle* is a lightly plotted affair among deftly drawn characters. Mutsuki—whose love for slim, sexy medical student Kon is overwhelmed by his sense of obligation to rigid Japanese social structures (and his mother's persistent matchmaking efforts)—agrees to marry Shoko, whose history of alcoholism and emotional instability have pushed her to the fringes of acceptable marriage-material. On the surface, their coupling up looks like mutual coddling and closeting, and their first-person narration, which alternates from chapter to chapter, is spoken in almost identical voices.

What's provocative about this pairing, however, is that once Mutsuki and Shoko have superficially committed to the status quo, they become exquisitely sensitive to each others' individual needs. Mutsuki accepts Shoko's passionate eccentricities like no one she's ever met; he seems nonplussed, even amused, when she sings to the paintings that hang in their apartment or rattles on with odd aesthetic opinions on subjects from Evian bottles to cream puffs. And he is calmly attentive and soothing in

the wake of her frequent outbursts of anger and tears, always nonjudgmental and genuinely forgiving. Meanwhile, Shoko nudges Mutsuki to be less secretive and withholding about his gay friends, encouraging him not to cut off his acquaintances or to live a double life. Feeling a tender mixture of grief and strength, she ultimately attempts to pave a way for him to reconnect with the med student, Kon. In

donning the shared mask of social acceptability, Shoko and Mutsuki gain the ability to nurture each other toward self-acceptance. Their marriage of convenience evolves into a partnership of compassion.

This personal evolution proves more anguished for Shoko, who, due to a past of willful self-centeredness and iconoclasm, has no Kon of her own waiting in the wings. Even as she coaxes Mutsuki forward, she clings to him, and along with her awakening sense of empathy comes an unexpected flip



and answer letters from gay men all over the country addressed to "Dear Woody" and answered by razor-tongued gay sex columnist and advisor Alvear.

It is organized into various chapters according to the general nature of the questions: "How Your Dick Works," "Safe Sex," "Milking Your Man," "Kink," "Relationships," "Drugs and Alcohol," etc.

This book is very much the queerer and bitchier stepsister of *Savage Love*, and lovers of Dan Savage's groundbreaking column should joyfully swallow this one whole as well... with nary a gag. However, Alvear deals with questions exclusively about gay men and their issues in and out of bed. He also has a bit more bite (and snarl) to his humor and the letters are less markedly absurd and "out there" than those *Savage* frequently fields.

This advisor is decidedly crass, offensive and downright abrasive on certain issues—beware if you take him to task. Common issues he tends to be prickly about are big (heavy) men as well as leather community theorists and men wanting to increase the size of their dicks. He's not terribly open-minded about changing his point of view and seems to find an unsettling degree of glee in fielding letters from disgruntled readers. Bedside manner is not his strong point.

Throughout the reading of this book I found myself laughing a lot and learning a lot, which is a very good (if not ideal) combination. I also found myself giggling sheepishly at points. In this collection absolutely nothing is taboo and loads of topics are covered—sex, dating, dermabrasion, cruising, STDs, drugs, sexual ethics (huh?) and so much more. Alvear handles them all with a quip and a good amount of attitude, and often a lot of wisdom and knowledge as well—though at times I tended to question Woody's priorities. Sometimes answering the question takes backseat to being sassy.

This book is smart, crotchety, politically



incorrect, sporadically offensive and frequently hilarious. This guy can be a real dick, but hey, what do you expect from a sex advisor named Woody?

Owen Keehnen's fiction, reviews, erotica and articles have appeared in numerous magazines, newspapers and anthologies. He is a Chicago-based writer.

Solace in the Sisterhood

Reviewed by Alicia Kester

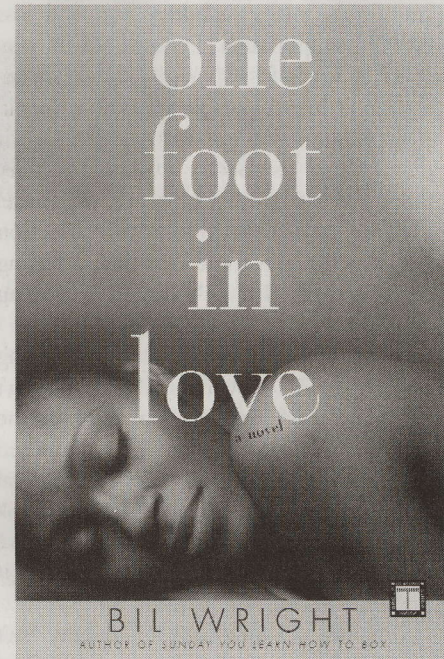
One Foot in Love

By Bill Wright
Touchstone
ISBN 0-7432-4640-3
PB, \$12.00, 210 pp.

I must say I was excited at the prospect of reviewing this book, having read Bill Wright's previous novel *Sunday You Learn How to Box*. While the characters in this book are not as subtly and exquisitely crafted as in *Sunday*, *One Foot in Love* does provide an equally engaging exploration of the consequences of loss and the complicated emotions behind desire.

The book begins with the sudden death of Rowtina Washington's husband, Turtle, a man who had been her emotional center. Rowtina, suffering through shock, finds solace in the seemingly corporeal visitations of her husband's spirit. As she examines her life in the wake of this tragedy, the always-analytical Rowtina starts to glimpse the great empty space in her life. When she goes to the small church where she was married and that has served as her only other passion outside of Turtle, the reverend doesn't know her. She comes to understand that the memory of her husband impacts her life more profoundly than her own actions. Although never explicitly stated, Rowtina seems to begin to see how fragile her grasp is on her own sense of self and independence.

Confronted by the constant nagging of her mother pulling her away from the life she's known—from the only rebellion she's



ever made—and toward the sorrowful life of a proper widow, Rowtina's supernatural visits from Turtle give her the strength to hold on to the little of her self that remains. At Turtle's funeral Rowtina finds the beginnings of a life outside of Turtle in the opportunity for friendship with Nelda Battey, a rumored lesbian, and Osceola McQueen, an older matriarch. Rowtina hesitates to start up a friendship with these two unfamiliar women, but her logical need to explain these visitations drives her to seek these women's counsel. She turns to Nelda and Osceola's "Leave Him and Live Sisterhood" for support and slowly finds the courage to leave Harlem, her mother, and the life she's known with Turtle.

Before his death Turtle was the only choice that Rowtina had ever made for herself. Now that he's gone Rowtina must find the strength to make choices again. This book presents an interesting analysis of self-determination as it juxtaposes the concept of decision-making with loss. From the moments where Rowtina plans Turtle's funeral to her choice to move to Harlem, the novel examines how memory and history are as vital to self-propelled growth as they are to sudden loss. With the *Leave Him and Live Sisterhood*, Wright brings the idea of community into his exploration of memory.

Through the Sisterhood, memory

classified

side: jealousy. Panicking over the possibility of losing her husband, Shoko frantically considers giving in to parental pressure to have a baby with Mutsuki.

Author Ekuni tells her story in calm, plainspoken prose flecked with deadpan oddball moments, as if the deeply felt Japanese domesticity of Banana Yoshimoto's novels (*Kitchen*, *Goodbye Tsugumi*) was bumping into Haruki Murakami's overt surrealism: "Here, try this... It tastes like blood," Shoko says to a houseplant as she waters it with tomato juice. (She then mixes herself a cocktail of tomato juice, vodka and Kahlua.) After proposing that they put a new pet fish in the bathtub to let it swim laps, Shoko hollers, "Mutsukiiii... You want to try some of this fish food? It's pretty gross and dry and stinky, but you can kind of feel what it's like to be a goldfish."

In a book that's full of intentionally off-kilter moments, it's a shame to stumble over occasional, awkward lost-in-translation moments, such as repeated mentions of Kon's sex appeal being epitomized by the fact that he "smells like coke." Translator Emi Shimokawa doesn't provide any context that would let the reader know whether these are references to soda, cocaine or coal.

On the whole, though, Ekuni herself does a lovely, luminous job of translating elusive feelings into written language. As the debates over same-sex marriage rage in the United States, *Twinkle Twinkle* is a reminder of the way in which love can transcend sexuality. This reader's favorite line in the book is a sentiment shared by Shoko, but spoken by Kon:

"It's not really 'men' I like anyway. It's Mutsuki."

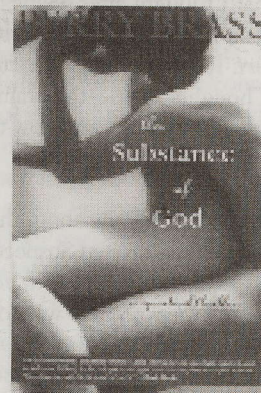
Jim Gladstone is a frequent contributor to *Lambda Book Report*.

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The Land of Misfit Toys

by Lisa C. Moore

A small publisher expanding in these times is news. That's what I thought after seeing a noticeable increase in the amount of Suspect Thoughts titles arriving at *Lambda Book Report*. Recently Greg Wharton and I talked about how Suspect Thoughts Press—the brainchild of Greg and his partner Ian Philips—came to be, and how their book babies are doing out in the world.

Lisa C. Moore: Tell me about the genesis of Suspect Thoughts.

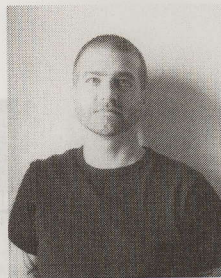
Greg Wharton: I started Suspect Thoughts Press as a web magazine (*suspect thoughts: a journal of subversive writing*) in 2000. Within a year, the site was so popular and the work so strong that I decided to publish a printed anthology with much the same themes (cross-genre pansexual erotica) and many of the authors (including Ian Philips). Despite the difficulties of publicizing cross-genre and pansexual erotica, since neither are easy sells, *Of the Flesh: Dangerous New Fiction* did get some decent press and won the Erotic Authors Association Award for Best Erotic Anthology. The title still sells, and the magazine is still alive and kicking at SuspectThoughts.com—most recently with a guest-edited issue by Dodie Bellamy that includes work by or about Kathy Acker, Dennis Cooper and Kevin Killian, among others, and even photography by Allen Ginsberg.

At the same time, Ian was starting AttaGirl Press as an imprint of Damron Company, publisher of the Damron LGBT travel guides—thanks to the encouragement of publisher Gina Gatta—as a way to birth his first collection *See Dick Deconstruct*, which went on to win the first Lambda Literary Award for Erotica. Ian and I shared details and support back and forth to help each other along, then decided to make an official partnership—in both business and life. All Suspect Thoughts Press titles since have been done by us together. And AttaGirl Press is now in the capable leadership of Krandall Kraus.



I Do/I Don't: Queers on Marriage (Sept. 2004)

LCM: Were there any roadblocks in your experience of book publishing?
GW: One of our major roadblocks in building the press has been the perception that we are solely an erotic press. While we totally embrace erotic writing and will always include it in our catalog, we include many other forms and voices as well. As far as roadblocks in the business of book publishing, the main ones are probably much the same for all startup and small presses: promotion and distribution. These things take time. It's hard to garner major press attention—with exceptions of course—until you've proven yourself, built a reputation, a name. And major distribution comes only with time. Suspect Thoughts Press is now nationally distributed by PDC (Publishers Distributing Company, a division of LPI Media), with distribution in Canada, Europe and Australia as well.



Greg Wharton (left) and Ian Philips are Suspect Thoughts Press

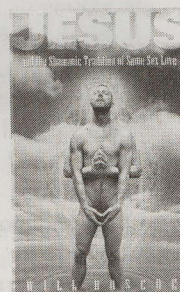
LCM: What do you love about book publishing? Any dislikes?

GW: We're both word nerds. We're both writers. We feel writing can be the highest of art forms and books are our favorite entertainment. We truly love being able to create books, to be a home for and publisher of other authors' words. Especially authors and words others won't touch. We like to think of our press as the Land of Misfit Toys for queer authors and artists.

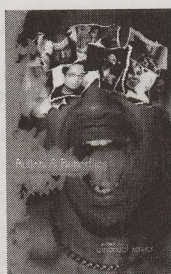
As for dislikes, our main one is that bookmaking and bookselling are now run on a very aggressive profit-driven model that favors large subsidized corporations [over] anything independent—independent bookstores, publishers, thinking. Worst of all, the majority of today's queer authors are having to self-publish. And these authors are unable to get their books reviewed, [or] even purchased or kept in stock in most bookstores.

LCM: How many titles are in your fall 2004 catalog? (It looks like you're growing exponentially!)

GW: We've published ten titles to date, including work by Dodie Bellamy, Patrick Califia, Wayne Courtois, Jennifer Natalya Fink, Matt Bernstein Sycamore and Emanuel Xavier. Our 2004 fall/winter catalog has six titles. The 2005 catalog has twelve scheduled titles. And twelve in 2005. We're definitely growing. But we're staying with twelve titles a year—for now. Too many books makes the baby go blind... but you gotta have enough to keep the money coming back. We're still hoping for a book to become the engine to drive the whole train. But right now, this little train is not only thinking it can but showing it can climb that hill.



Jesus and the Shamanic Tradition of Same-Sex Love (Dec. 2004)



Bullets and Butterflies: queer spoken word poetry, ed. by Emanuel Xavier (Feb. 2005)

LCM: Any advice for prospective authors?

GW: That's a tough one. There are many more authors writing than publishers publishing. It can be discouraging. Advice can seem meaningless from this side when you're an author looking for a publisher. The work is what's most important. Write what you need to write, what you feel. Don't try to bend it to make it more marketable. This will keep it strong and true, and hopefully it will find its readers.

Lisa C. Moore is the editor of *Lambda Book Report*.