

BOOK REVIEW

TWINKLE, TWINKLE

By KAORI EKUNI

Translated by Emi Shimokawa.

New York: Vertical, Inc., 2003. 176 pages, \$19.95

reviewed by Eileen B. Mikals-Adachi

Twinkle, Twinkle by Kaori Ekuni is an intriguing novel set in the lonely confines of contemporary Tokyo. The story line is seemingly straightforward: two single urban professionals, both past the respectable marriageable age, yield to parental and societal pressure and agree to an arranged marriage. Yet, despite appearances, these newlyweds are not the typical Japanese couple. Emotionally unstable, Shoko is a translator of Italian who relies heavily on alcohol to cope with reality, and her husband, Mutsuki Kishida, an established physician, is an admitted homosexual. As the young bride aptly explains, their marriage is, in short, "no simple matter." Neither is the structure of the novel.

Ekuni innovatively alternates the narrative between husband and wife in order to lure readers into the private world of this modern couple. The simplicity of Ekuni's choice of words and her nonchalant tone reflect current trends in the Japanese language and create a refreshing atmosphere seemingly free of the boundaries of gender and other social restrictions. With this carefree voice, the innocent nature of the couple's relationship is accentuated, and the stage set for what the author terms "a simple love story." Originally a marriage of convenience arranged in the traditional fashion, the Kishidas' relationship soon shows its ultramodern and liberating colors. From the beginning, the couple agrees that "it didn't make sense to say that a particular job was the husband's or the wife's. Whoever was better at it would be the one to do it." Many of the conventional gender roles are reversed, and Shoko and Mutsuki create their own "natural" order of things. Unlike their parents, who view this marriage as a facade behind which embarrassing family secrets can be concealed, the newlyweds seem oblivious to social norms and are content with merely fulfilling each other's needs. For Christmas, Mutsuki gives his bride a champagne stirrer, and she, in turn, invites his boyfriend into their home. Theirs might be an unusual relationship, but the warmth of Shoko and Mutsuki's affection for each other permeates the pages, and Ekuni's portrayal of a new kind of love, one not based on sex, offers pleasant relief from contemporary Japanese works that seemingly equate the two.



► BUY NOW

Comical and almost surreal at times, *Twinkle, Twinkle* is, however, not as simple as it at first appears to be. Indeed, much is left unsaid. The nature of the Kishidas' marriage raises questions about the meaning of love, and their parents' and doctors' repeated remarks about marriage and children curing all "abnormalities," including Shoko's alcohol problem and Mutsuki's sexual orientation, leave readers wondering about current standards of "normalcy." Criticism of the family system and the unchanging role of women in Japan is emphasized by Shoko's constant and unselfish desire to please her husband. A commentary on homophobic tendencies in present-day society is also implied through Mutsuki's boyfriend, who has "no tolerance for people who never ask themselves if some of their own acts might not be more embarrassing than being gay." And while the lack of action might prove wanting to some readers, the fairy-tale tone generated from Ekuni's early experience as a writer of children's stories adds an interesting touch to this picture of contemporary Japan and suggests that in this tale, too, there is a moral to be found.

In the "Afterword," Ekuni reveals that the title of the novel comes from a Japanese poem. Yet numerous scenes where Shoko stares at Mutsuki as he is gazing at the stars and tries to "reassure herself that he really did exist, that he really was her husband" will probably remind many a reader of Jane Taylor's nursery rhyme: "Twinkle, twinkle, little star. How I wonder what you are!" What could better express Shoko's feelings of insecurity about her identity as Mutsuki's wife. Perhaps the real message of this novel lies in the universality of Taylor's words? words that echo the question faced by the masses Ekuni describes as being "alone and lonely" in the vast metropolis.

Overall, Emi Shimokawa's translation works well. Most importantly, together with the book's publisher, Vertical, Inc., Shimokawa provides English audiences with an introduction to one of Japan's best known contemporary women writers and a glimpse at what is now being widely read by the nation: *ren'ai shôsetsu* or, in short, "simple" love stories. Both translator and publisher should be commended for this welcome addition to the limited number of contemporary Japanese novels available in English.

Eileen B. Mikals-Adachi is an associate professor of Japanese literature and culture at Ochanomizu University in Tokyo.