

The first collection from Maynard & Sims since 2002's *Incantations*, the fourteen tales in this collection, ten of them previously unpublished, represent something of a return to their ghost story roots for this talented duo after the more visceral horror of their novella *The Hidden Language of Demons*.

Opening story 'Images' is a classic example of what these writers are about, a well crafted supernatural tale with strong atmosphere of menace, believable characters and adroit plotting, as a photographer taking pictures of an old house on spec finds that what surfaces in his developing tray is slightly different from the building he's seen through the eye of his lens. The reality of the situation creeps up on the reader just as it does on the protagonist with a denouement that comes with a satisfying reversal of fortune.

Unhappy relationships are central to many of the stories, with the suggestion perhaps that these ghosts take their substance and grow fat from human misery. In 'Dead Men's Shoes' the protagonist's jealousy of his wife's previous husband takes tangible form and causes the idyllic life he has dreamed of to unravel. 'A Victorian Pot Dresser' crosses Jamesian terror with the cosmic awe of Lovecraft, to give us a beautifully constructed story in which an antique piece of furniture is the conduit through which eldritch beings enter into our own world, the tale's verisimilitude bolstered by subtle foreshadowing, countless tiny details of the dresser's provenance and the broken marriage of its owner. In 'Sand Castles' we meet Ben Maddern, a masterly depiction of yuppie pretension on its uppers, who retreats from his high flier lifestyle to the countryside, but brings the ghosts of his past with him, finding a kind of solace in their company. A similar protagonist, a man self-obsessed to the exclusion of everyone else, meets a somewhat less happy end in 'Shortcuts' as he is lured into one of those old curiosity shops beloved of ghost story writers and comes away with more than he bargained for, the emotional tension in his relationship with his girlfriend and the strange events of his dream life playing off of each other to powerful effect. 'October Cries' is another tale of city folk moving to the country, a chilling Pied Piper variation, with a couple's child lured away by a woodland spirit of some sort, the palpable air of menace the story contains intensified by hints of paedophilia. The splendidly named

'Flour White and Spindle Thin' was my second favourite piece in this collection of gems, a story every bit as elegant as its title. A man seeking a new start as a marsh warden and his wife are lured to their doom by a spirit of the wilds that appears as a young child, both characters and place perfectly evoked, the bleakness of the marshland setting reflecting the wife's barren condition, her desperation for a child the engine that drives the story on with such conviction, and so much more suggested than is actually revealed.

These writers know the form inside out and everything they write reveals the same care and delicate craftsmanship. There are no bad stories here, though some are perhaps less good than others, as for instance 'Calling Down the Lightning' in which the finely judged prose and characterisation almost convince that there is more to the tale than the familiar account of a spectral curse coming home to roost that it actually is. And 'Caviso Gamo' was a bit too enigmatic for my liking, as a man returns to Africa on an annual

pilgrimage to revisit the sacred cave where his parents died in mysterious circumstances, the prose gaining a vivid hallucinatory quality as the story reaches its climax but, for me at least, the whole lacking a bit in focus.

Maynard & Sims are seasoned entertainers, and like all such they know how to bring down the curtain. The last story in the book, 'Sliding Down the Slippery Slip', is a showstopper and one of the finest horror stories I've read recently. The first person narration of a disturbed soul, its obliqueness brings to mind the rituals and ceremonies of Machen's classic tale *The White People*, but tainted with a perverse sexuality that is thoroughly modern, the story made all the more effective by the narrator's unreliability, with the hint that much of what happens could just be in her mind. It is a virtuoso performance, insidiously suggestive and rich in ambiguity, the ideal note on which to close this collection and proof of what these much underrated writers are capable of producing when at their best. ☐

DARK WATER by KOJI SUZUKI

Vertical hb, 281pp, \$21.95

www.vertical-inc.com

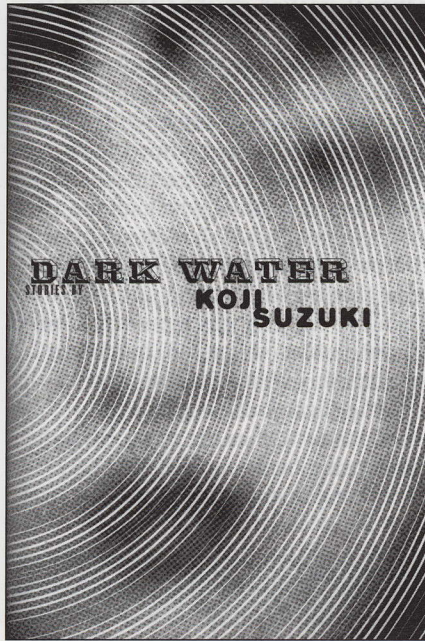
Suzuki is being hailed as Japan's answer to Stephen King, but here in the west he is best known for the novel upon which classic Horror film *Ring* was based. This collection of seven stories, constructed around the idea of an elderly woman who tells her granddaughter stories inspired by the objects they find washed up on the beach and with the stories linked by water, is named after another film made from his work.

Opening story 'Floating Water' is a fine example of Suzuki's talent and probably the best of what's on offer here. When a woman and her daughter move into an apartment block the girl makes an invisible friend, but as her mother explores the history of the building and learns of the tragedy that took place there several years before events take a more sinister turn. This is a classic ghost story in the mould of M.R. James, playing out in a modern urban landscape and, while the resolution is telegraphed, Suzuki doesn't put a foot wrong in telling, with all the clues deftly inserted and a growing sense of menace that holds the reader's attention. 'Solitary Isle' has a more modern feel to it, as a man gets the chance to visit Battery No.6, an abandoned military post in the middle

of Tokyo harbour, and discover for himself the truth of a tale told him long ago by a now dead friend. The story cleverly blends the past with the present and offers ambiguity in its resolution, with hints of both terrible abuse and heavenly transformation, leaving the reader to decide which scenario holds more water. 'The Hold' while still very well written is a bit more routine, the story of a man who cannot remember what has happened to his missing wife, followed by her revenge from beyond the grave, the grotesqueness of the closing scenes not really overcoming the burden of a plot most will have seen many times before.

'Dream Cruise' is almost surreal in the menace it presents to the reader as a yacht cruising in peaceful waters encounters an inexplicable obstruction, with the story's strength lying in the antagonism between the three people onboard the yacht and dialogue packed with subtle hints of greed for material things and a terrible price that has to be paid. Another strong story, this time with echoes of Hodgson, 'Adrift' begins with the discovery of an abandoned luxury yacht at sea and ends with the fate of the sailor who volunteers to pilot the vessel, learning to his cost what

happened to the original crew. The atmosphere and sheer emptiness of the sea, its indifference to those who float upon its surface, is powerfully conveyed in this story, with the traditions and superstitious nature of sailors put to deft use in fleshing out the tale's backdrop. 'Watercolors' is an ambitious piece, a story that takes risks, with sudden shifts of perspective. A theatrical performance in a former nightclub that was the scene of a terrible fire is threatened by an eruption of supernatural manifestations, but these are cleverly incorporated into the play itself so the reader is cast adrift, not knowing where theatre ends and terror begins. Lastly there's 'Forest under the Sea' in which two men become trapped on a potholing expedition, cataloguing the efforts of one of them to get a message to his young son and then moving forward twenty years to show the son himself visiting the site where his father died so tragically. While containing no real surprises, this is an absorbing story of hope crushed and human perseverance against all the odds, its underground setting strongly realised. In an epilogue



to the collection, the grandmother tells of how she found and delivered this father's message in a bottle, perfectly rounding out an excellent collection from a writer whose work I look forward to seeing much more of. ☐

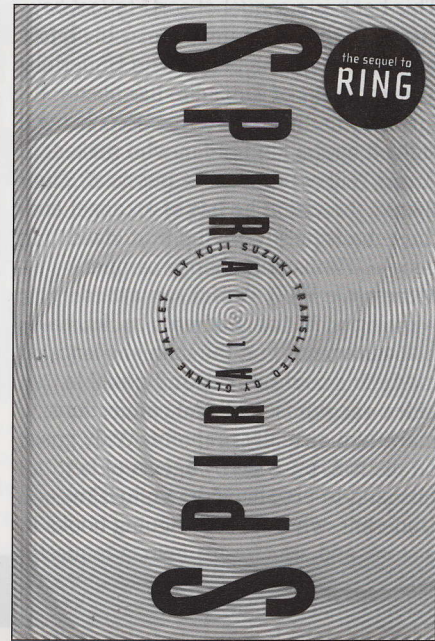
SPIRAL by KOJI SUZUKI
Vertical hb, 281pp, \$24.95

www.vertical-inc.com

The central character in this sequel to the acclaimed *Ring* is Ando, a forensic scientist whose marriage has broken up after the death by drowning of his son, an accident for which he still holds himself responsible. Ando is asked to perform the autopsy on Ryuji, a brilliant philosopher with whom he went to university, who has died in mysterious circumstances. His findings make little sense and the issue becomes even more clouded as the results of various tests conducted on tissue samples taken from the body arrive. Mai, one of Ryuji's students, tells Ando that a journalist called at the philosopher's apartment to enquire about the whereabouts of a certain video tape, and from following up this lead he becomes acquainted with the story of murdered Sadako and the video to which she gave life, a tape that causes the death of anyone who watches it. Sceptical at first Ando is convinced as the evidence mounts, but a new and even more terrifying possibility takes shape as hospitals around Tokyo report deaths similar to that of Ryuji, but with no known link to the lethal video. The ring virus is evolving into new forms and may well be unstoppable.

This is an impressive novel, with a plot

borrowed from the great body of supernatural fiction but told from a scientific viewpoint in a story where gene sequencing and DNA, cryptography and forensic medicine all have a vital part to play, so that what we get reads like a cross between M R James and Michael Crichton. *Spiral* is cleverly constructed, with each part slotting neatly into the whole and compelling the necessary suspension of disbelief as the reader is drawn along, every bit as credulous as poor Ando but forced to accept the evidence as it piles up, each step in the drama taken with a flawless logic at its back. Suzuki's quiet and effective prose is perfect for what is being related, the very ordinariness of much that takes place only serving the better to emphasise the horror and unnaturalness when it occurs. So much of the plot is character driven, with Ando the consummate professional, but also a deeply troubled individual, one for whom the sins of the past recur in the present, which is perhaps a leitmotif of the book as, for all that what she does is horrific, Sadako herself is almost a sympathetic character, so that it's impossible for the reader not to feel some identification with the terrible fate she



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suffered, raped and imprisoned in a well, and to almost applaud her will to grasp a second chance at life. The secondary characters are every bit as rounded, especially the young Mai, impressionable and in love with Ryuji, and Ando's best friend Miyashita, his faithful companion on this voyage of discovery.

Spiral transcends its distinguished predecessor in so many ways, with enough shocks to please the most jaded Horror aficionado and a sense of wonder to refute those who believe shocks is all the genre has to offer. As the story draws to its conclusion Suzuki introduces an element of the metafictional, with the publication and success of *Ring* becoming a vital ingredient of the plot, a step that is both logical and unnerving for the reader. In the final pages *Spiral* addresses the vital questions with which the Horror genre more than any other is qualified to deal, asking what we as individuals are capable of and pondering what the future holds for us as a species, embracing a fatalism that borders on the profound and hinting at even more revelations to come in the final volume of the trilogy, *Loop*. ☐