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[main](#)

[features](#)

[reviews](#)

[columns](#)

[blog](#)

[about](#)

[contact](#)

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Big in Japan: Rings and Things

by [Sanford May](#)

The most obvious - perhaps the only except for a precise descriptive style - similarity between Koji Suzuki's *Ring* and Kaori Ekuni's *Twinkle Twinkle* is that they were both originally published in Japan in 1991. Here it is 2003 and we are just seeing English translations of these unique works. I am, as I hope you will be, grateful that neither work suffers from the more than decade gap between original printing and Western distribution.

Ring will immediately be the more familiar work to American audiences. Before you die, you see the ring. You can't beat that for a film tagline, as it was indeed the tagline for the American remake of the Japanese adaptation of Suzuki's novel. Good news: while *The Ring* and *Ring*, respectively American and Japanese, were passably entertaining supernatural suspense films, neither does justice to the underlying complexity and understated terror of the novel *Ring*. If you've seen the American version of *The Ring* and have expectations that the Japanese *Ring* will maintain greater allegiance to the novel, don't waste your time. *The Ring* is an exceptionally faithful remake of *Ring*; both differ greatly from Suzuki's novel.

Ring revolves around the unique but unbelievable notion of a videotape that kills those who watch it - don't bother suspending your suspension of disbelief. A Tokyo reporter named Asakawa, a man with a penchant for the bizarre, connected to one of the victims by marriage, attempts to unravel the mystery of the diabolical tape. Straightforward enough for you? Of course. Yet Asakawa is aided by his high school chum Ryuji, an eccentric college professor who claims rape as his hobby and pastime. Don't underestimate Suzuki's knack for seamlessly integrating a special kind of perversity into what is already an extraordinary story.

Indeed, Suzuki's ability to constantly up the ante without making you laugh out loud is *Ring's* greatest strength. It's impossible to detail particular elements of *Ring's* plot without spoiling the whole endeavor: but things change, characters mutate, new elements crop up, disparate lines twist together like serpents in a caduceus, and unsatisfactory loose ends knot with a satisfying nod and a compelling flip of the page. You'll do yourself a great disservice if you stop at either film version of Suzuki's *Ring*. Read it. Stay up late and finish it. You'll soon reject your sterile and hygienic

perception of Japan and find yourself, well, creeped out.

Twinkle Twinkle is nothing like *Ring*, though perhaps you might be able to stretch the theory that as opposed to the horror of supernatural terror, Ekuni's celebrated novel - it won Japan's Lady Murasaki Literary Award - is about the horrors confronted in living a lifestyle against the norm without running afoul of the status quo contingent.

Ekuni's protagonist, and often overwrought basket case, is newlywed Shoko, married to young, handsome and decidedly gay physician Mutsuki. Surprise, surprise: she knows all about it. This isn't one of those arranged marriages in which one partner is continually deluding the other or himself. Though Shoko and Mutsuki by mutual agreement don't -- and have never - made love, they conduct themselves more or less as any contemporary Japanese couple. Except, of course, for Mutsuki's ongoing, passionate love affair with his long-term paramour, Kon, and Shoko's serious and almost equally as passionate flirtation with alcohol. Otherwise, they cook together, lounge around on days off; and Mutsuki, dutiful and doting, seldom neglects to call Shoko when he works a nightshift at the hospital. She's drunk or half at it most of the time; and he's off several times a week for clandestine meetings with the artful Kon, he of anatomical concinnity and, as Ekuni notes, the delicious scent of Coca-Cola. What's wrong with this picture? Well, actually, absolutely nothing.

Shoko is a delightful girl who despite an exceptional inner charm and the capacity to love beyond all measure is forever hobbled by her own emotional instability. She was born sad, she grew up sad and she has matured into the very definition of sadness. She clings, she weeps, she throws herself away in disarray. Shoko is so tragically flawed that the aggregate effect of all those tiny cracks and imperfections is a creature of extraordinary beauty. But in the heterosexual dating scene she bears one brilliant flag: run do not walk. Pick an angle, but either Shoko is not cut out for the rest of the world, or the world isn't cut out for her.

Enter Mutsuki, an arranged date as an entrée to an arranged marriage. And he just so happens to be the perfect guy for Shoko. Only Mutsuki has the depth of understanding, the unique capacity for caring, forgiveness and attuned level of compassion that is fit for this wayward girl. Mutsuki's parents are aware of his homosexuality, but gladly passed it off as a youthful dalliance and are thrilled to see him make a match. Shoko's parents, though initially in the dark about her physician beaux's real love life, are equally enamored with their marriage; after all, they had serious doubts she'd ever find her place alongside a husband.

Unfortunately for the in-laws on both sides, the only way Shoko and Mutsuki's marriage is going to work is the rather unique way in which it does work. Pleas from both sides for Shoko and Mutsuki to

produce at least a single child create new difficulties. Mutsuki can't bring himself to sleep with a woman, even if only for the mechanical act of reproduction. It's a sexless and physically awkward union, but it's a relationship centered around companionship rather than the other intrigues that usually plague human couplings. Between Mutsuki and Shoko are elements of the kind of innocent, bewildered love close siblings feel for one another.

As the pair becomes embroiled in family politics, Shoko forbids Mutsuki to end his affair with Kon, though he is willing to do just that to protect the détente established with his parents and, in the bargain, likely spare Shoko's sanity over the break up of her marriage. Shoko investigates artificial insemination as a possible solution to the increasing baby pressure; and she proposes that Mutsuki engage in a little white lie regarding his status with Kon. But Mutsuki strives to be faultless, perhaps too faultless, and rejects both counts of subterfuge: it's up to exquisite, unbalanced Shoko to formulate a quirky plan to keep them all together, husband, wife and dear lover Kon.

Twinkle Twinkle presents itself as a novel of contemporary Japan, gently embracing edgy lifestyles and the distinct, offbeat curios that rattle around in our own heads, making us human. In that Ekuni succeeds, but her novel is more simply about loneliness and the lengths to which we will go to defeat that emotion, binding ourselves together in any way that best suits us.

Ring by Koji Suzuki
(translated by Robert B. Rohmer and Glynne Walley)
Vertical, 2003

Twinkle Twinkle by Kaori Ekuni
(translated by Emi Shimokawa)
Vertical, 2003

[Return to index >>>](#)

[Return to main page >>>](#)