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## Ringing

By: Yuki Allyson Honjo

Disillusioned with the economic “miracle,” the pundits have all but dismissed Japan as a world financial center. However, popular Japanese culture remains vibrant—Japanese animation, fashion, and design have had a global impact. Any American eight year old is savvy about Pokemon or Yu-gi-oh and the demimonde of prepubescent monster gaming. Generation Xers have a fondness for Play Station and Speed Racer—and who doesn't know Godzilla?

Japanese popular literature is often only translated when it reaches mythic status. Yukio Mishima and Junichiro Tanizaki remain staples of modern Japanese literature in English. In America, known living Japanese authors are essentially limited to Banana Yoshimoto and Ryu Murakami: both winners of prestigious literary prizes. In contrast, American “entertainment” fiction instantly finds a Japanese audience in translation. Stephen King, Tom Clancy, Sidney Sheldon—their movies and books have a loyal following in Japan.

Given its impact on global entertainment, it is especially odd that [Koji Suzuki](#)'s book, *Ring*, has waited over twelve years for an English translation. The Japanese movie (made in 1998 for a mere \$1.2 million USD) found a world wide cult following as well as spawning a successful franchise of films. DreamWorks' Americanized version was a hit for the studio, earning \$135 million in the US alone. The internet is rife with rumors for a possible American sequel. BR> Entertaining movies do not always make great books, and vice versa, but usually the book is published first. Suzuki's story, translated by Robert B. Rohmer and Glynne Walley, sounds initially like the stuff of urban legend. Four kids in a cabin in the woods find a mysterious video of disturbing images. They watch the tape and are warned that they will die in exactly one week unless they perform a certain action. They fail to do so, and the four healthy teenagers die of heart failure. A reporter, Kazuyuki Asakawa, and uncle to one of the dead teenagers, finds the tape. Unfortunately for Asakawa, the instructions that could save his life are not on his tape: he has one week to unravel the mystery.

While the film was mostly popcorn fodder for the Blair Witch aficionado, Suzuki's book is **deceptively complex**, which makes for a fun but more substantial read than the average horror paperback. Rather than just a paranormal who-dun-it, it is also an oblique discussion of social ills, and is far more nuanced than the films. Rather than an ancient and primordial evil, Suzuki depicts Sadako, the auteur extraordinaire of the video tape, as society's forgotten bastard offspring. Suzuki paints in shades of grey which results in something more than a mere set piece of good versus bad.

For much of the novel, the deaths of the teens, and then the tape itself, is treated as organically occurring disease. His first reaction? “ ‘A virus that causes sudden heart failure? Come on.’ He climbed the stairs, muttering to himself, ‘a virus, a virus.’” When he visits that cabin in the woods, he wears rubber gloves and drinks straight whiskey (rather than water) to protect himself from germs. The leitmotif of disease echoes throughout the book: evil is the symptom of a sick society as much as it is of a disturbed mind.

Suzuki depicts the protagonist as a grab bag of conflicts and weaknesses: Asakawa is a good man, but self-serving. We experience his glee when he catches the first whiff of a story; with “the buoyance of a child on a treasure hunt,” he starts his search. He had skipped his niece's funeral claiming deadline pressures, but given the opportunity to nose through the dead girl's things, he deftly takes advantage of the family connection. Asakawa at one point has to reassure himself. “But it was for a good cause—defeating evil. . . Sorry.”

One of the most successful parts of this book is the friendship between Asakawa and Ryuji Takayama, a philosophy professor who becomes his sidekick. Again, good and evil are not polar opposites: the line blurs. In high school, they became friends when Ryuji confided to Asakawa about raping a college girl. Asakawa clearly loathes Ryuji as much as he admires him: “Set a thief to catch a thief. What do I care if Ryuji ends up dead?” Asakawa is jealous of Ryuji's brilliance: indeed, it is Ryuji's meticulous detective work that unlocks the logic behind the landscape of Sadako's

troubled mind.

Asakawa and his obsessions are a snapshot of Japanese notions of masculinity—Suzuki has written extensively on the issue of modern paternity and childrearing in Japan. Unlike the film versions in which Asakawa mysteriously becomes a single mother, Asakawa ruminates on his role in society as father, protector, and provider. Thus Sadako's hermaphroditism, in which none of society's roles fit, was another cause of her anger toward society.

Extended metaphors and weighty themes aside, even with Rohmer and Walley's sadly substandard translation, the novel is **intelligent entertainment**. While the economic bubble may have collapsed, Ring is an indication that Japan as an entertainment center still has much on offer to the world.

**Yuki Allyson Honjo. *International Herald Tribune-Asahi.***

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## Koji Suzuki

**S**uzuki Koji, a best selling author in Japan, is often called Japan's answer to Stephen King. After graduating from Keio University, he worked a number of jobs, including working at a cram school, where he told scary stories to entertain his students. While taking care of his two daughters while his wife /worked, he started to write. In 1990, he won the Fantasy Novel Award with *Rakuen* [Paradise]. In 1991, he published the novel *Ring*, which was made into a successful feature film. In 1996, with *Rasen* (Spiral), the sequel to *Ring*, he won the Yoshikawa Eiji Young Writer Award. The *Ring* series included two more installments, *Loop* and *Birthday*. In 2002, Dreamworks SKG remade the *Ring* for American audiences. His most recent book, *Kami kami no Promenade*, (The Gods' Promenade) was published this April. *Ring* is the first of his novels to be translated into English.

Mr. Suzuki has also written extensively on fatherhood in Japan, criticizing traditional absent salarymen fathers. He has written a number of books the subject (*Fusei no Tanjo*, *Kazoku no Kizuna*, and *Papa-ism*) and has spoken in front of the Japanese Diet on the subject. He has translated Simon Brett's children's book, *The Little Sod Diaries*, into Japanese as well as writing his own children's book, *Namida* [Tears]. In addition to writing and translating, he is an avid motorcyclist and expert sailor.

A Japanese national, Mr. Suzuki resides in Tokyo. He is fluent in English.



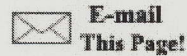
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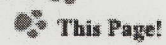
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### Interview: April 25, 2003

**The main story of the Ring (arguably the most famous of your works due to both a Japanese and Dreamworks SKG movie versions) is of a videotape of jarring discordant images that mysteriously kills people who watch it in exactly one week. What sparked this story?**

When I started writing this novel, I didn't have a specific idea in mind. It was more or less an inspiration that literally commanded me to write this novel. I didn't know in advance what this story **would be about and I didn't know** where I would go with this novel.

In some ways, it was just like composing music. I was listening to a story told in my head and I wrote it down. It was kind of like Mozart—it was said that symphonies and concertos went through his brain, and Mozart wrote them down the notes. But Mozart didn't know where the music came from. I didn't either. It just came.

**Well that's pretty mysterious. . . This book, Ring, seems to touch on a number of themes: misanthropy, hermaphroditism gender issues, disease, the media, morality, utilitarianism to name a few. What do you feel are the most significant themes and ideas contained in Ring?**

When I was writing this novel I was taking care of my two daughters. I wrote this novel fourteen years ago—1989. At that time my elder daughter was only two years old and my wife was high school teacher of Japanese history. So I was taking care of my daughters instead of my wife.

### Which is unusual in Japan. . .

And so the theme of the *Ring* is really about the love I have for my daughters. In my book, it's not a heroine, but a hero, Asakawa Kazuyuki. He is a father. He has a daughter and he has a wife. And like many men, his greatest fear in life is losing his wife or daughter.

Me too. For me the biggest fear is to lose my daughters or wife. So in my novel, Asakawa, the protagonist, fought for the life of his wife and daughter.

**What informs your work, consciously or unconsciously? Books? Folk tales? TV? Movies? Steven King or Edgar Allen Poe? Religion? Philosophy? What inspires you? Or is it all out of your psyche?**

From the most part, my writing is product of my personal experiences. But, to be fair, I think I am influenced by what I read. I studied French Literature in my university days. And I have read lots of American, French, and German literature.

The thing is, I don't read horror: I don't like horror novels. I once read Stephen King, but not so much. I don't watch TV, and I don't watch horror movies. I am most influenced by my experiences—most of all, my daughters.

I like to think of myself as a tough guy though—Japanese macho macho man [laughs]. I may look Japanese but I have a lot of sympathy with American archetypes of manhood. I like the Hemingway men— and I like to sail so Hemingway suits me. The Old Man in the Sea and all that. . .

**What is “evil”? The word seems over used these days. . . Unlike Steven King and Western religion, whose themes generally focus on the idea that it is generally ancient, primeval evil and merely exists--the evil in Ring is very much created by human will—Sadako's hatred of mankind. Is hell to you, to borrow from Satre, other people?**

I believe in the human consciousness. Yes.

I don't believe in evil. I think of myself as very much an optimist. So it follows I'm not so interested in the concept of evil. But for a novel, it is necessary to have evil: you have to have good things and bad things for a novel to work. I strive to write the good parts of the human experience. If there is no dark, there is no contrast, and it doesn't highlight what you are trying to show. Dark and light.

**Do you yourself don't believe in a hell, devils or ghosts?**

No, I don't. I don't believe in devils, demons, or evil.

**It's often that what is imagined in books never lives up to what is shown on the movie screen—no matter how good the film. A book is a medium that allows you to create a private and tailored world of terror, where as a film adaptation has to depend on more generic/universal conventions of fear. How do you feel about the film adaptations of your book in both cases?**

Novels are different from movies—I know that. If readers read a novel, there is a buffer between the written word and the text. If a man read a line of text, his instinct, his imagination, his circumstances shapes the image in his brain of the hero or heroine. This is the nature of the novel.

But movies are a direct experience. Movies go straight into the eyes and ears so imagination is not necessary. It goes straight into the head.

I know this difference exists between moves and books. Novels need imagination.

**But how do you feel about the adaptations?**

Well I think I'm very lucky. The original Japanese Ringu and Hollywood Ring are very good. And I'm lucky to be the author of them. If I didn't think so, I would be unlucky. The Hollywood Ring is a very good movie. . .but the novel is very different.

**Ring appears to be an homage to meticulous detective work that unlocked a disturbing mental landscape. The Japanese movie seemed dependant on Asako's intuition, and her connection with psychic phenomenon. Was that a shortcut to get to the conclusion in the film? Do you feel that it weakened the ideas of your book?**

I think it was a short cut—a movie is only two hours. It's impossible to get all of that on film. If they had ten or twelve hours, maybe then it's possible.

**Why do you think the sex of the protagonist was changed from male to female in both the Japanese and US films? Asakawa Kazuyuki, the reporter, was changed to Asakawa Rieko. It seems that in general horror/slasher movies (at least from Hollywood) have had female protagonists. Take for example, Jamie Lee Curtis in the**

**Halloween series, or Neve Campbell in *Scream*. Was this your choice?**

In the original Ring movie—I wanted the director to use my situation. A male Asakawa, Asakawa Kazuyuki. I wanted to write a “father story”, a father who protects his lovely daughter. But that’s not customary in Japan because the instinct to protect a daughter is considered more a maternal, a mother’s task. So in the Japanese movie version, the heroine is a woman, Asakawa Reiko.

But I don’t really think it’s the way it has to be. I wanted to write a new type of novel because I was a new type of father in Japan—like the way I took care of my daughters. And I think it was very important for a novelist to write about his own experiences.

I wanted the American Ring to have a male, not female hero. I think American father figures are so strong so a male lead was not so unreasonable. For example, Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Commando*. [laughs]. His whole purpose was to fight for his daughter.

**One of the most poignant aspects of the book is the exploration of male friendship and loyalty between Asakawa and Takayama Ryuji. Was this inspired by a real friendship?**

IHmmm. . . I know keep saying it’s important for a writer to draw on his experiences. I made two characters, one is Asakawa and the other Takayama Ryuji. They are actually two aspects of my character.

**Split into two?**

Asakawa is ordinary and has a very serious outlook on life. Takayama Ryuji is very strong but rather peculiar. I myself have these two types within myself. I divorced my own character so these two very different people could be born.

**Is there such thing as a “Japanese” horror genre? Or does horror have universal appeal? Do you think what scares people is culturally based?**

I think it is necessary for human beings to be sensitive for fear. It’s a very necessary instinct for existence. If there is no sense of terror or fear, you won’t live long. An original instinct. For example, if a mouse has no sense of fear, then it won’t live. If danger comes, and it does not know to run, it will be killed.

**Were you pleased with the American Dreamworks version of the Ring movie? How active were you in its “translation” for an American audience?**

I like the Hollywood version of the Ring. I read the scripts and made some comments after reading it. First: No blood. No splatter. No slasher action. I don’t like blood because kills the need for imagination. Second: it has to fully capture the awful events—by fully engaging the viewers imagination.

**Why the delay in the translation of Ring—the book was published in 1991, it has been over eleven years. How did you choose your translator?**

I wrote this a long, long, long time ago. A lot of American novels are imported to Japan. Only a few Japanese novels go to America, few are translated into English. I feel that I am lucky—if there is an eleven-year delay, so be it.

**You seem to be a man of many hats: you are a writer, translator, expert on child care, expert sailor, adventurer, devoted father—who are you? Are you all these things?**

I think I am Koji Suzuki.

**What are you working on now?**

I have a new book now—*Kamikami no Promonade*—which went on sale today. This story is about cults, like Aum Shinrikyo. A mystery about women, and I think readers will get energy from reading it.

**What are you reading right now? What do you like to read?**

I am interested in every subject. I like to read French and American literature, as well as good world literature. Right now I am interested in science. I’m reading about DNA as well books about relativity and quantum theory. Everyday I try to read good literature, science and history.

**What do you think is required reading in Japanese fiction?**

[pauses] Hmm. Not American fiction?

**Japanese fiction. Japanese literature.**