

May/June 2003  
Rue Morgue

Japanese horror first successfully breached the North American market in 1998 with *Ringu*. Now we're facing a full-scale Asian horror invasion designated as "J-horror" that is indebted not to a videotape, but to a book. Author **Koji Suzuki** discusses his literary milestone on the brink of its North American premiere.

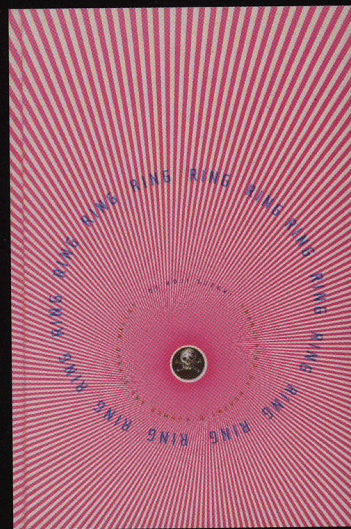
ON THE ORIGIN OF THE

R I N G

V I R U S

by Jen Vuckovic

A haunted well, a cursed videotape, a dooming telephone call - all symptoms of a supernatural disease set to bring about the end of the world through viral epidemic. Cause of death: acute heart failure or, literally, being scared to death. By now you are all likely familiar with *Ringu*, the Hideo Nakata-directed Japanese box-office-hit thriller that propelled Asian psychological horror to international status as the cream of the narrative crop in the genre.



**DARK WATER**

Starring Hitomi Kuroki, Rio Kanno and Shigemitsu Ogi

Directed by Hideo Nakata

Written by Koji Suzuki

Kadokawa Shoten Publishing Co.

“I believe scary things lie beneath everyday things.”

- Koji Suzuki

But what lurks just beneath the surface of those films is something even more fascinating. *Ringu* was based on a novel of the same name, and an author's chance idea that set in motion a chain of events that would change the course of film history forever. That book was *Ring*, Koji Suzuki's first horror novel which is the genesis for the J-horror coup that has the world spellbound – a book which will finally see English language publication on April 15th from Vertical Inc. This is where it all began.

“There was a video tape in my room,” reveals Suzuki of the inspiration for his story. “It just hit me that it might be scary if you died seven days after you watched a videotape. People watch videotapes in everyday situations. What if it's a tape that's cursed? That was the idea. I believe scary things lie beneath everyday things.”

While the motion pictures captured the frightening essence of *Ring* in their own ways, Suzuki's novel poses more profound concepts. *Ring* is a genuinely scary tale that proposes that the young girl Sadako is in fact a plague unleashed upon humankind; the result of an unlikely marriage of a woman's destruction by ridicule and her child's telekinetic rage against her unfortunate congenital abnormality and her untimely death.

Not surprisingly, Suzuki's story is much more complex and focuses heavily on the virology of the Ring virus, something that was diluted considerably in the films. The protagonist here, unlike in the movies, is male and later discovers the cabin was built above an old sanatorium that once housed small-pox victims – a much more fitting locale for the narrative to unfold.

Originally published in 1991, *Ringu (Ring)* didn't exactly fly off the shelves at first, but like the infamous videotape in the story, it caught on by word of mouth and spread like a virus through Japan, selling almost three million copies – enough to capture the attention of a battery of producers in the television and film industry. It didn't take long for the book to proliferate and generate a multimedia outbreak including a radio drama, a Manga comic, two television dramas, a prequel, two sequels and, of course, the feature films: *The Ring Virus* (Hong Kong), *Ringu* (Japan) and the Gore Verbinski-directed American remake *The Ring*.

*Ringu* gained so much momentum in Japan and at the international festivals that, before long, many other Asian countries followed suit with their own brand of atmospheric spectral tales. North American horror audiences have since welcomed the onslaught of genuinely creepy and original J-horror films like Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Kairo* (2001) and the Pang Brothers' *The Eye* (2002). Although original in their own right, they are clearly influenced by Suzuki's stylish ideas and sense of atmosphere.

While Hollywood was busy remaking *Ringu* (1998) into *The Ring* (2002) for North American audiences, the writer-director duo of the original Japanese box office hit were uniting once again to bring you another bone-chilling psychological horror story from the Far East. Koji Suzuki, who penned the *Ring* trilogy, and director Hideo Nakata had already completed the sequel – *Ringu 2* (1999) and decided to team up once again for *Dark Water* – a dark and eerie film that visually lives up to its suggestive name but that ultimately bears too close a resemblance to *Ringu*.

Although beautifully filmed, *Dark Water* (a.k.a. *Honogurai Mizu No Soko Kara*) marks a return for Nakata, following a three-year departure from the genre. The story revolves around Yoshimi (Hitomi Kuroki, who appeared in the *Ring* TV series), an unemployed single mother in the middle of a messy custody battle and on the brink of a nervous breakdown who moves into a haunted tenement in urban Japan. To make matters worse, there is a growing sinister leak in the ceiling that seems to be moving toward them and long strands of human hair coming out of the taps! Additionally, a mysterious red children's bag keeps appearing along with the ghostly image of a little girl in a yellow raincoat. Yoshimi and her five-year-old daughter Ikuko soon find out that the water in their new, eerily unoccupied habitat is much more than just filthy and unrestrained.

In keeping with the tradition of the illustrious atmosphere of Japanese horror, *Dark Water* is an ocular extravaganza of colour and sombre tonality. The building possesses a menacing quality as a result of the dark and musty lighting and relentless downpour of rain. This is location horror at its best, evocative of *The Shining* in more ways than the obvious, including a gushing elevator scene near the end of the film. Nakata is a master at transforming the banal to the frightening. Here the water itself is an entity to be abhorred, along with going to school, urban living and even Hello Kitty bags. But where *Dark Water* fails to deliver is in its motif.

Unfortunately, the thematic and plot devices are too similar to *Ringu* to make *Dark Water* stand out – a single mother troubled by a supernatural force stemming from the untimely death of a girl in a circular watery grave. Sound familiar? The spectral girl is also too strikingly similar in appearance to Sadako. While visually stunning, *Dark Water* doesn't seem to be offering us anything new thematically, despite Nakata's effort to express new ways to direct horror films.

**The Rue Morguette**



## THE CURSE CONTINUES

### THE RING DVD

Starring Naomi Campbell, Martin Henderson  
and David Dorfman

Directed by Gore Verbinski

Written by Ehren Krueger, based on the  
novel *Ring* by Koji Suzuki

DreamWorks Pictures

So where are Chris Cooper's scenes? The Oscar nominee (for *Adaptation*) had his cameo role as a child killer cut from the theatrical version of *The Ring* (apparently it confused audiences), and I was fully expecting the inevitable Special Edition DVD to include those scenes, not to mention a filmmaker and actor commentary, a making-of doc, maybe even featurettes on author Koji Suzuki's *Ring* series of books and a side-by-side comparison of the original Japanese film, *Ringu* (also available on DVD through DreamWorks) and the American remake.

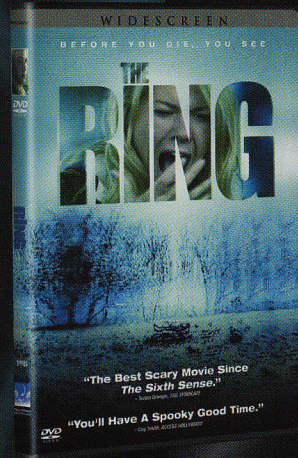
Except DreamWorks decided against a Special Edition DVD, despite *The Ring's* impressive American box office gross (over US \$135 million) and the almost immediate announcement that a sequel was under development. Instead, according to the official press release, director Gore Verbinski would craft an "experimental short film" for the DVD release which would "bring viewers closer to understanding the mystery of *The Ring*." Accessed by clicking on the Don't Watch This button on the Extras menu, the 15-minute film amounts to little more than a mini-version of the finished movie with a few extra scenes thrown in (the most interesting of which reveals what Rachel Keller did with the copy she had her son make at film's end).

So is this the definitive DVD version of *The Ring*? Don't count on it. DreamWorks' decision to release such a relatively bare-bones version of a box office hit (again, from the press release: "they wanted to create something that enhanced the film experience and did not want featurettes that would 'demystify' the story or explain away the plot") will likely get rethought in the wake of first-day DVD sales in excess of two million units. But maybe I'm wrong. We'll see.

As bereft of extras as this version is, it does include one easily found Easter egg: the cursed video itself! And here's what is really interesting: when you watch the video, notice that the Stop and Play/Pause buttons on your DVD remote do not work. The result is that you have no choice, you have to watch the video from beginning to end! Clever.

Say, is that the phone I hear ringing?

Sean Plummer



"People might think I am a horror writer, but I don't think I am," says *Ring* author **Koji Suzuki** of his milestone novel turned movie.

"Each one has its own taste," the author notes of the many films inspired by his story. "I do not like the splatter thing. What I like is something that works on your imagination, like the movie *The Others* – you see no blood, but fear comes into your mind. Both *Ringu* and *The Ring* have great atmosphere. However, I enjoyed seeing some effects that only movies can make. For example, the twisted faces on the photos, that's something you can't write."

It's hard to believe the movie that ignited an explosion of psychological horror films in Japan can be traced back to, of all things, children. But Suzuki reveals that, ironically, his inspiration to pen *Ringu* came to him while tutoring young kids.

"I wanted to write something very interesting," he says. "I was kind of a tutor at that time, and I often told scary stories to children. I knew they loved it so I thought to myself: people might actually seek something scary."

Now here's the real shocker: Suzuki's body of work before *Ringu* consists mostly of resource books – believe it or not – on child-rearing, something he is an expert on after raising his two daughters at home as a struggling writer and house-husband. He is also a self-proclaimed jock and yachtsman who loves the sea, which is not surprising, considering that his stories revolve thematically around water.

"Water carries supernatural power," notes Suzuki. "Maybe I feel it because we have a lot of rain and humidity in Japan. If it's a widespread dried place, for me it just doesn't seem scary!"

The author admits he didn't even have an idea for a horror plot at first, given that he does not consider himself a horror novelist (his literary inspirations include Albert Camus and Ernest Hemingway).

"People might think I am a horror writer, but I don't think I am," he confesses, adding that he devised the book's plot as he went along. "I just want to write exciting and interesting stories. Actually I don't like to read much horror."

Whether he acknowledges it or not, one thing is for sure: Suzuki has become a prolific horror writer. His stories have a unique, alchemical quality to them and he has demonstrated a miraculous power for transmuting the very common into the very frightening.

This notion carries forward into all of his work including *Dark Water* (see sidebar), his most recent collaboration with Hideo Nakata, just one of the many Japanese films that are lined up to be remade by Hollywood in the wake of the success of *The Ring* remake (others include Wes Craven's plans to remake *Kairo* a.k.a. *Pulse* and Sam Raimi's adaptation of *Ju-On* a.k.a. *Grudge*).

Make no bones about it, Suzuki has now transcended the role of gentle house-husband to become the most sought-after horror author in his country and has even been called "the Stephen King of Japan." And rightly so. The literary *Ring* virus has recently spread to North American book stores... are you ready to be scared to death? ☠

