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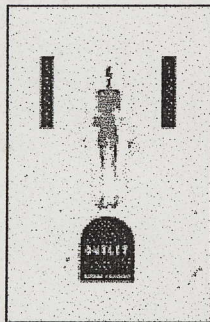
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Genre: Science Fiction
Publisher: Vertical, Inc.
Date Published: 2003
Review Posted on: 11/21/2003
Reviewer Rating

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Outlet, by Randy Taguchi
Review by James Michael White

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Randy Taguchi's novel, Outlet, a best seller from Japan, possesses qualities both peculiar to Japanese SF and what in western circles is known as "chick lit," which may mean that my disappointment with the work reflects more a matter of personal taste than one of narrative or stylistic failure...

But first, what is it about?

Well, there's this young woman, Yuki Asakura, who abandoned her study of psychology to become a finance writer, and she has this mean bastard of a brother, Taka, who seems to have holed up in his small apartment and starved himself to death - seems to be because, although his death is striking for its apparent oddity, Yuki knew that Taka wasn't well, and wasn't well in a way that might lead to tragedy...

Obsessed with such spare clues, Yuki strikes out to unravel the mystery of her brother's death even though she informs us, via first-person narrative, that she really didn't like Taka that much.

The plot later resolves this inconsistency, but along the way Yuki meets her brother's ghost (several times), discovers that she can "smell death," has sex, dreams, pisses people off, has some flashbacks, meets old acquaintances, and eventually seeks the help of her former lover and psychology professor, Mr. Atsuo Kunisada...

And this latter dichotomy, the split between the rational and the irrational, between her scientific background and her emerging perception of that which is seemingly supernatural, comes across not so much as a "secular exploration of heightened awareness" (as the back-cover blurb assures us) as simply a

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Left Hand of Darkness

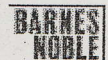
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failure to take a declarative stance on the issue, that being, is this to be science fiction, or is to be a variety of horror, fantasy, or magic realism? This failure to take a declarative narrative stance creates the impression of a vacillating author who wants to have her cake and eat it, too, at once wanting to bait readers with the possibility that there might really be something supernatural going on in this story, but hedging the bet most heavily on the side of, no, not really, there's a perfectly valid scientific explanation.



For instance, we have only to consider these words from Yuki to see this cake-having-and-eating feature in action:

...Maybe I am being obstinate, maybe I am in denial. I don't know why, but I'm afraid that if I start accepting ideas like souls and gods now, I'll be evading the real reason for my brother's death. I don't want to do that. I want to know why I smell death, why I see my brother, and I don't want to find the answers in the occult.

At this point Yuki's brother is dead and she's seen him, as real as can be, more than once, yet she denies the possibility of the supernatural and seeks instead a rational explanation. In a metafictional (or psychoanalytic) sense, this looks like a conflict between the kind of story the author wants to tell (a rational, scientific one) and the kind of story the text actually produces (a paranormal one). In the end, it seems most clearly a variation of science fiction in which the matters that other genres would treat as paranormal are here reduced to the phenomenal or, dare we say, mundane.

What might have been an interesting and dramatic exploration of this dichotomy instead becomes one long, relentlessly internal, muttering over whether or not Yuki is going bonkers or, by means unknown to her, becoming a shaman. Since the bulk of the novel is presented primarily through the filter of Yuki's psychological training, indeed, her science, the dominant impression is that she's going nuts, never mind the **駭**ouement and its attempt to convince us otherwise.

This, of course, is where the "chick lit" seems most apparent as herewith we have another example of a woman suffering a nervous breakdown and madness, a common enough theme among women's literature, and yet this is also where matters of taste become involved. Lots of people like such fiction. I don't. I especially don't when three quarters of a novel seem spent belaboring the point in a plot structure raising more questions about the necessity of its scenes than it answers.

Ah, but there lies the Japanese SF nature of the tale. In his introduction to Kono Tensei's "Triceratops," reprinted in *The World Treasury of Science Fiction*, editor David G. Hartwell (three-time Hugo Award nominee, with a Ph.D. in comparative literature, Columbia University), observed:

As is common with Japanese SF, there is not the kind of narrative force or plot to hold the story together that we expect in Western literature. Instead there is a succession of set pieces leading up to a culminating image.

Such is the case for *Outlet*, and as a result my perhaps all-too-Western desire for clarity of narrative purpose, something the

novel's fragmentary episodes do not always satisfy, is left frustrated.

Equally frustrated is my desire to find an appealing character to root for, a human-seeming one as opposed to narrative functionaries. Yuki consciously avoids emotion and so comes off just as flat and featureless as the prose, and though we eventually discover why Yuki remains emotionally closed, the revelation comes so late that many readers simply won't care. Indeed, the most strikingly drawn character is Yuki's old school chum and fellow psychology student, Ritsuko, who helps Yuki explore her shamanistic capacities at no little risk to herself.

The uneven nature of the characterizations makes the reading tedious, as most of the peripheral personalities appear more as caricatures than well-rounded characters. In another fashion, the utterly even nature of the prose diminishes scenes that should strike readers as high points, yet don't. The first person narrative is rendered with a kind of objective detachment that makes scenes of Yuki's internal musings just as unmoving as her sex scenes, the latter rendered with a clinical fastidiousness seeming prudish though these moments, we are led to believe, are the very ones during which Yuki should seem most alive, most natural, most human, and most sympathetic. That even these moments fail, despite being necessary expressions of the novel's central conceit, makes one question the efficacy of the author's choice to maintain a narrator's lack of emotional appeal even during scenes that might otherwise succeed on, at the very least, a lascivious level. When this happens, the reader's engagement is pushed even farther away.

In additional, the novel's elementary handling of its Freudian underpinnings, layered upon all-too-ubiquitous comparisons between people and computers, comes off as absurd and unintentionally comic. Certainly a case can be made on these points to defend the novel as "darkly comic," yet just as strong a case can be made that it isn't working, and that the intention of the text is not one to produce such readings.

But perhaps this merely points to my Western inability to decode the Eastern-ness of this particular text. After all, though it is plainly about transforming perceptions, on one level transforming the perception of ghosts and spirits and gods into a perception of such things as scientifically explainable manifestations of different kinds of energies, and though on another level it is about how different cultures perceive and respond to madness or enlightenment, that still doesn't mean that it works. Or, at the very least, that it works for all readers.



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