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## THE ASIAN BOOKSHELF

### The literary perfect crime

By DAVID COZY

**SAYONARA, GANGSTERS**, by Genichiro Takahashi, translated by Michael Emmerich. New York: Vertical, Inc., 2004, 311 pp., \$19.95 (cloth).

A poet is talking to a refrigerator. The refrigerator with whom he is conversing is Virgil -- yes, that Virgil, author of "The Aeneid" and later Dante's guide through the inferno. Virgil the refrigerator, Virgil the bard, is telling his young interlocutor about the calling they share: "A poet is always aiming to commit the perfect crime. But what, you ask, is this perfect crime? It is to create an entirely indecipherable work of art."

Thus the question arises: What, in "Sayonara, Gangsters," a novel in which Virgil is reincarnated as a refrigerator, has Genichiro Takahashi given us? Has he committed the perfect crime? First, let's dispense with what will be another mystery for those who don't read Japanese: Genichiro Takahashi -- who is he?

Born in 1951, Takahashi was an active participant in the radical student movement of the 1960s and early-1970s. Indeed, he was such an active participant that he ended up spending half a year in prison, a harrowing experience from which he emerged with a sort of aphasia.

Fortunately, over the next 10 years his ability to use words not only returned but flourished. A prolific and important writer and critic, he has given us several novels of which "Sayonara, Gangsters," originally published in 1982, was the first, and is now the first to be translated into English. His influences, as he noted in an interview with The Review of Contemporary Fiction, have been "Japanese high-modern poetry and . . . metafictional novels from overseas."

With that, we can return to the conundrum of whether Takahashi has committed the "perfect crime" and given us an indecipherable work of art. The short answer is, he has not. But he has given us something that, like the high-modern poetry he enjoys, requires of the reader a certain amount of work, and a certain amount of education -- at least if the reader hopes to squeeze from the novel all it contains.

Like many of the postmodern novelists who have served as models for him, Takahashi has dispensed with the commitment to realism that

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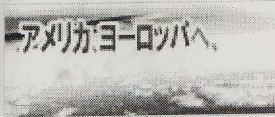
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↑ 1,151.16  
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seems to inform most Japanese fiction in favor of a richly playful style of storytelling that -- while serious in the best high-modern manner -- is fabulous, funny and fun. Think of Pynchon with an editor, Donald Barthelme but funnier, or Italo Calvino just as he is.

Takahashi's blend of the high-modern with the postmodern places him well outside the Japanese literary mainstream, a creek that stretches roughly from the realism of Ryu Murakami -- gritty, but in the end cartoonish -- to the realism of Haruki Murakami -- gently fantastic, but in the end, and in the best sense, mundane.

Takahashi is concerned less with giving us naturalistic accounts of the world than with having a laugh at the pratfalls that ensue when such attempts are made. "True life as it really is," he has noted, "often involves suffering. Therefore, at least in novels, why not have fun?"

And there is fun here for all. Those who enjoy literary hijinks will appreciate not only Takahashi's account of the refrigerator-poet but also revel, for example, in a disquisition by a character called "The Fat Gangster" on his calling. This occurs during a poetry class and is cast in Wittgensteinian propositions.

"It seemed to us," the gangster declaims, "that gangsterism was a relative concept. We believed that we were gangsters only in relation to the world, and that nothing but change in that relationship could transform us into anything other than gangsters."

Those who prefer their fiction more tightly tethered to the quotidian will enjoy Takahashi's witty description of every TV soap opera ever made: "A couple that was in love at the beginning broke up at the end, and a man and a woman who weren't in love at the beginning either fell in love or passed that stage and broke up at the end, and the main character either found or lost himself either in his room or in the park or while sitting at his desk writing a letter, and the pregnant heroine was either sobbing or in a dither or in a slump and either got dumped by the man or dumped the man, and whenever a sexy scene got under way the camera always zoomed in for a closeup shot of a curtain or a doorknob in a manner reminiscent of the self-centered delusions of a schizophrenic."

Those who recognize that the above description is, at least in part, affectionate will not be surprised to find that "Sayonara, Gangsters" has a sentimental streak running through it a mile wide and that, along with the haughty high-modernism and the ironic postmodernism, this novel about death and loss can reduce one not only to laughter but also to tears.

The narrative, for example, which underlies the metafictional fun of the first section of the novel, could almost be derived from the above catalog: The beloved child of a young couple dies and they attempt to cope with that loss. Of the mother who goes out to look for her dead daughter we read: "The woman never returns" and thus the section ends. The sadness with which this line is freighted is as sincere as the emotion the reader feels upon encountering it.

Although Takahashi's postmodernism is ironic, he has also spoken about

the need to be, at times, unironic: "To say something you actually believe with sincerity -- what a truly bizarre notion. But I must admit it is an idea I definitely agree with."

One hopes that more of his sincere and intelligent passion for life, for literature, and for language will make its way into English.

*David Cozy is a writer and critic, and teaches at Showa Women's University.*

**The Japan Times: July 18, 2004**

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