

LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF BOOKS

Inheriting a Life

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MY FATHER GREW UP in Pusan, South Korea, during the Japanese occupation. As was the case with many Koreans of his generation, living under colonial rule left him with some lingering resentments toward the Japanese, so much so that when I went to college and majored in Asian Studies, he questioned why I only seemed to bring home books by Japanese authors.

“What about the Koreans?” he’d ask. “Where are all the Koreans?”

At the time, English translations of Kōbō Abe, Yasunari Kawabata, Haruki Murakami, and Banana Yoshimoto were simply easier to find in the United States than

Rainbirds

By Clarissa Goenawan

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English translations of Korean authors, for whom there was less demand. But beyond the practical matter of availability, I also found myself deeply intrigued by the strange characters, surrealist nods, and recurring themes of emotional and geographic isolation rendered in these Japanese authors' works — the same qualities that drew me to Clarissa Goenawan's atmospheric debut novel, *Rainbirds*.

Rainbirds opens shortly after the brutal stabbing death of 33-year-old Keiko Ishida, an English-language teacher living in a small Japanese town named Akakawa. Her younger brother, Ren, travels to Akakawa with the intention of quickly settling her affairs and returning home to Tokyo. But while collecting her belongings at the cram school where she worked, Ren stumbles into a temporary teaching job, effectively replacing his dead sister on the school's faculty. If the prospect of this seems far-fetched, there's more coincidence to come. After Ren visits the room that Keiko rented from Kosugi Katou, a shadowy local politician, Mr. Katou offers Ren a free place to stay in exchange for some minor caretaking duties for his invalid wife, Haruna, who doesn't speak or leave her bedroom due to a past trauma. The only catch? Ren has to live in the same room that Keiko once occupied.

If inheriting his sister's past life disturbs Ren, he doesn't fully seem to register it at first. Upon moving into the Katous' home, he clears a shelf in a wardrobe and places the urn with Keiko's ashes inside, eerily whispering, "Welcome back to your room." Soon, however, Ren's dreams begin to unsettle him in a way that his common sense initially didn't. In several vividly described dream sequences, he sees recurring images of a little girl with pigtails, a school of giant

goldfish, black birds frozen in midair, and a gathering of men in dark suits. He also hears his late sister's voice, calling out to him with an ominous warning: "*Ren, you shouldn't be here.*"

"Here" is a rain-soaked small town where very little happens and newcomers are quick to stand out. Goenawan is at her best when she's world-building, creating a place that is as sinister as it is sleepy. Ren's scan of a local newspaper reveals:

Two masked men on a motorbike had stolen a purse, but the owner reported that the only thing inside was a bible. An article on road safety, and another one about the opening of a shopping mall. Nothing memorable. As the detective had said, Akakawa was a safe town.

Despite the detective's assurances, Ren knows that someone murdered his sister in Akakawa, viciously stabbing her during one of the rainy season's many storms and leaving her to bleed out in the street. The cast of possible suspects that surrounds him is large. In addition to both of the Katous, there's Keiko's troubled former student, Rio Nakajima, whom Ren refers to as "Seven Stars" because of the brand of cigarettes she smokes; the too-good-to-be-true Honda, a fellow teacher at the cram school who withholds the fact that he and Keiko once dated; the beautiful Anzu, a model who repeatedly implies that she knows Ren from a previous encounter that he can't remember; the "Kimono Lady," Natsumi Katsuragi, who runs the near-empty and allegedly cursed Katsuragi Hotel; and many others.

Although mysterious characters seem to lurk in every corner of Akakawa, Ren is arguably the most curious

of them all. At 24, he's just finished his graduate studies at the prestigious Keio University, following in his sister's footsteps right down to the same field of study, yet he still seems ill prepared to "adult." He's listless and unmotivated, unable to commit to his long-suffering girlfriend back in Tokyo, guilty of cheating on her with multiple women, and slow to even alert her to his whereabouts after moving to Akakawa. He wanders through life with little sense of agency or urgency, and occasionally responds to stress by letting his mind and body detach, as they do when he receives an anonymous envelope containing his sister's medical records and a bombshell revelation:

Soon, I found myself standing in front of another me, the physical me, who had lost his spirit. The man sitting on the floor holding the photocopies had empty eyes. The shell of me was disturbed by the content of the medical documents, yet he remained in a daze. He read the photocopies again and again, without even a hint of expression.

I shook him. "You need to show these to the police."

He stared at me.

Rainbirds employs frequent flashbacks to demonstrate Ren's closeness to his sister as a child and how he clung to her due to the emotional and sometimes physical absence of their parents. But the act of stepping into Keiko's life not only heightens his sense of nostalgia, but it also exacerbates his grief. Ren realizes how distant they'd allowed themselves to become over time, not sharing the important details of their lives or even seeing each other during the seven years before her death. When the police detective

suggests that Keiko was involved with a man, Ren is quick to deny it since she never mentioned a boyfriend during their weekly phone conversations. However, the birth-control pills in her bag, a scarf with her eyelash on it, and old marks on her wrists from being tied up with rope suggest otherwise, possibly something involving sadomasochism or bondage, which is difficult for him to imagine. Even stranger is the lovestruck handwritten note that Ren finds in her room, confirming that Keiko had developed feelings for someone during her time in Akakawa, but chose not to tell him.

Love comes when you least expect it. That's why people call it falling in love. You cannot learn to fall, nor do you ever plan to. You just happen to fall.

It captures you like a pitcher plant, in a split second. There's no room to think, let alone react. When you realize what has happened, you know there's no way to escape. You've already fallen too deep.

Goenawan deftly draws the reader's eye to a myriad of red herrings that ultimately have nothing to do with Keiko's murder. And to the author's great credit, the murderer is not someone whom readers are likely to suspect. However, the novel tends to over-rely on events and coincidences that seem to happen for no other reason than to advance the plot. The envelope of medical records is one example. Another example is when an old friend named Jin, who is about to be married, persuades Ren to return to Tokyo for one last bachelors' weekend of sex, booze, and debauchery. It is during this long weekend that Ren has sex with Anzu, the model, who later calls and provides the key piece of information that leads him to the discovery of Keiko's murderer.

Throughout *Rainbirds*, Goenawan constructs numerous parallels between the characters, the most significant being the one in which Ren falls into the life that Keiko lost. Another parallel involves Natsumi Katsuragi, the hotel owner, who fails to help her sister, just as Ren believes he failed to help his. Still another relates to Keiko and Ren's father, who had an affair many years earlier that cost him deeply, much like Keiko. And then there is Ren's involvement with the annoyingly infatuated 17-year-old Seven Stars, a parallel reversal of the affair that Keiko had with her married math teacher, Mr. Tsuda, when she was 17. This escalating flirtation with Seven Stars highlights the occasional awkwardness of the novel's narration and dialogue.

I let her tongue slip into my mouth and touched her hair as she gave a sensual murmur. Hadn't she told me she'd never had a boyfriend? But she was such a good kisser, I felt as if I was being dragged into a raging sea storm, with no chance of escape. I let the waves pull me down, deeper and deeper into pleasure.

Later in the same scene, after Ren realizes that he's playing the role of Mr. Tsuda, he second-guesses himself and tries to break off physical contact with Seven Stars.

"We need to stop," I said. I couldn't look at her.
"This isn't right."

"Are you afraid to admit your feelings?"

"Neither of us has real feelings for each other. It's just lust. A universal biological need."

By the time Keiko's murderer is revealed and Ren learns the identity of the pigtailed girl who keeps appearing in his dreams, I felt certain of the influence of the Japanese writers whose work I so enjoyed during my early years of college. Throughout this novel, numerous moments pleasantly evoke the surrealism of Murakami, the nightmarish descriptions of Abe, the alienated youth of Yoshimoto, and the ill-fated lovers of Kawabata. But *Rainbirds*, suffice it to say, is a different beast, a contemporary work of noir that draws readers into an eerie landscape that is hard to forget and offers a surprising payoff for those who can look past its occasional failings to see the love story at its strange and lonely heart.

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Jung Yun is the author of Shelter.