

The complete review's Review:

The Shadow of a Blue Cat is narrated by Yuki Yajima, who has already: "slid right on past the big five-oh" and who is struggling a bit in coming to terms with his "fifty-something self". He begins at something of a new crossroads, explaining that he has two children, one daughter, Ryo, who is seventeen (and recently dropped out of school), and another who is just two months old; this is not so much the starting point of the novel, but rather the point he finds himself at that sets off his reflective mood: The Shadow of a Blue Cat is, more or less, the story of how he got to this point in his life, and this particular situation.

Yuki assesses his life, and describes what he's been through. There are several main narrative threads here, the dominant one being that in which he describes the past year or so, concentrating on his family life and especially Ryo, a budding artists who had trouble adjusting to her new school and whose rebellious streak occasionally flares up. In this period he not only faces the addition of a new member to the family -- the baby -- but also the decline and death of a former colleague and friend, Ogita, whose betrayal still bothers him. Ogita was married to Momo, whom Yuki remains close to, and as Momo is drawn back somewhat into Ogita's orbit as he faces his terminal illness Yuki dredges up some of the past between them.

Yuki's account isn't one of simple reflection: he allows several tracks to slowly unfold. He chronicles his career, for example, and how he wound up running his own business -- with Ogita's betrayal both undermining and freeing him -- a slightly unusual entrepreneurship-tale. He also goes further back, to a summer he spent with an uncle who introduced him to books by authors such as Oe, Henry Miller, the Marquis de Sade, and Tsutsui Yasutaka (author of books such as [Hell](#) and [Salmonella Men on Planet Porno](#)) -- and, for a stretch, a significant portion of the narrative is then devoted to the uncle's account of an unusual situation he found himself in, a story he told the teenage Yuki. This much more daring bon vivant died when he was was only thirty-nine, some three decades earlier, but he -- and his life -- still cast a long shadow over Yuki.

The story the uncle told was one of those life-changing ones: "My life basically came to an end during those three days", the uncle told young Yuki. Yuki also finds himself in emotionally wrenching (if not quite so luridly (melo-)dramatic) situations -- though typically it is a job-related incident that is the most affecting, leaving him still: "unable to refill the void that opened inside me that day". Yuki is not solely defined by his work, but his identity is clearly shaped by it. He feels great pressure to be a proper provider to his family, and carefully weighs risks in what steps he takes. Yet he does take risks -- perhaps not on the scale his uncle did, but nevertheless -- and with risks comes both failure and success. It also leads to somewhat of a disconnect from his family: The Shadow of a Blue Cat is, ultimately, a domestic novel, and Yuki does try hard to be a proper guide and help in his role as father, but he is also away from home a great deal, misses family dinners constantly -- and seems to be more attentive to Momo than his own wife. He comes across, ultimately, more as a manager than family-man, even in his dealing with his family. In part this reflects Japanese culture -- as in his dealings with Ryo's school and her boyfriend's family --, where things are done as much for appearance's sake, but nevertheless it feels odd how carefully he plans many things: when it comes to the baby, for example, he has it all figured out like in a PowerPoint presentation.

At one point Yuki reflects on "family dysfunction -- the problem that afflicts our own era", yet he

seems oblivious to how he contributes to the dysfunction of his own family. He is not entirely self-absorbed, but his perspective is limited. He proves creative and he has a bit of ambition -- he is willing to think 'outside the box' -- but he remains consistently too managerial in his approach to everything. A very deliberate man, his caution has also left him unfulfilled: typically already during that summer he spent with his uncle he fell in love for the first time -- and it went nowhere. Indeed:

Kanoko and I exchanged addresses and promised to write. "We'll see each other again, okay ?" I said, and she nodded in assent as she squeezed my hand. But I never wrote a single letter, nor did I ever get one from her.

The Shadow of a Blue Cat falls similarly short, too much of it just pottering along, without sufficient follow-through. Most notably, after his sensational story is recounted, the uncle doesn't figure prominently any more. Yuki's account of his professional path is of some interest -- The Shadow of a Blue Cat is also a career-novel of sorts -- but stands somewhat at odds with the domestic part of the novel. And in the domestic part the underdeveloped figure of the wife, and Yuki's obliviousness to much of day-to-day life at home -- for one reason: because he so rarely seems to be at home -- weaken that part of the story.

Yuki is a sympathetic narrator, and his story isn't uninteresting, but the telling is a bit too bland and unfocused. Bit by bit it's all quite interesting, but the whole remains somewhat shapeless. The social critique that bubbles throughout the text -- Ryo's difficulties with her art in particular, as seen both in the issues she has with the establishment at her school as well as her sense that: "it's more about painting as a medium of expression being out of whack with the pace of things these days" -- is interesting, too, but it too fails to properly coalesce.

A decent read, The Shadow of a Blue Cat nevertheless feels very much like a near-miss rather than truly successful novel.

- M.A.Orthofer, 8 July 2011

- <http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/japannew/iin.htm>