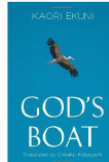




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Book review: *God's Boat* by Kaori Ekuni

Tue, 12/18/2012 - 09:25 — Bridget



This is a tale of true love and heartbreak, of fantasy and reality. A glorious narrative told by two different people; Yoko, a dreamer waiting for her true love to catch up to her, and Soko, her daughter and confidant. But Soko can't be expected to live Yoko's dream forever.

The story

Yoko left her husband the Professor after getting pregnant to another man. It wasn't a tawdry affair, this was true love, the kind that only hits you once in a life time. It was something she hadn't experienced, and couldn't pretend with the Professor any more.

But she didn't leave with her true love. He had left already, making promises to find her anywhere, but their great love was impossible for now. So she and her tiny baby, Soko, move from town to town, never wishing to settle in one place in case her true love doesn't look for her there. Yoko calls it being on God's Boat, as the two of them journey through Japan with only the stories of Yoko and her true love's stolen time keeping them going. Yoko and Soko, the birds of passage.

At first, Soko accepts this without question, their unconventional life, the idea that one day, her father will find them. But as she gets older, Soko realises she needs to forge her own path in life, she can't keep living her mother's romance. And Yoko needs to come to terms with the fact that she may have made a serious mistake.

The style

Originally published in Japanese in 1999, *God's Boat* has been translated into English for the first time by Chikako Kobayashi. Thames River Press are producing a selection of Japanese translations, which in my opinion is fantastic, because there's just something about Japanese literature that is so distinct. *God's Boat* is the first in the Thames River series I've read, and I'm so glad I've been given the opportunity!

That said, it's a slow-burner. When I read the first couple of pages, I wasn't sure if I was into it. The story starts so quietly. I wasn't expecting drum-rolls or anything, but I think the last Japanese story I read was translated in quite formal language so I wasn't expecting the casual chattiness in which *God's Boat* is narrated. I was also a little taken aback by the perspective switching; the narration jumps from Yoko to Soko every page or couple of pages and is indicated by asterisks, so for a little while I was trying to concentrate on who was doing what. When I got into it, I realised it's actually a smart way to run two narratives, because the characters are both so distinct. I've noticed that sometimes when a book writes from two different perspectives and does it in great big chunks, it can be very disorienting for the reader. So having Yoko and Soko each have a page to themselves and having each of them pick up where the other left off is sort of like sitting having dinner with the two characters while they narrate that time in their lives for you. It's intimate and homey but doesn't get you too comfortable, which is exactly like the story.

By the time I was about forty pages in I was hooked. The storyline is both beautiful and tragic without being in any way trite or predictable. It's a quiet love story that seethes underneath, where the love is so big that it takes over Yoko and Soko's lives and affects their every act. Yoko and Soko are such fantastic characters, so different and real in their humanity, that the reader is completely suckered in to their story and their frustrations and their quirks. Soko is especially well portrayed, as her story is told from when she is a very young girl and completely enamoured with her mother, to her becoming an adolescent with the realisation that she and her mother are separate entities, who need to live their lives differently. It's a story that works on heaps of different levels, with some effortless emotional sub-plots. Because, you know, everyone's searching for something.

Who is this book for?

God's Boat speaks so intensely of the mother daughter relationship, it's probably more appropriate for a female readership. Not that it couldn't be very revealing to a bloke, but more likely to be appreciated by your mum than your dad. It's a short read as well, there's nothing intimidating about the size of it, and it's very easy and accessible.