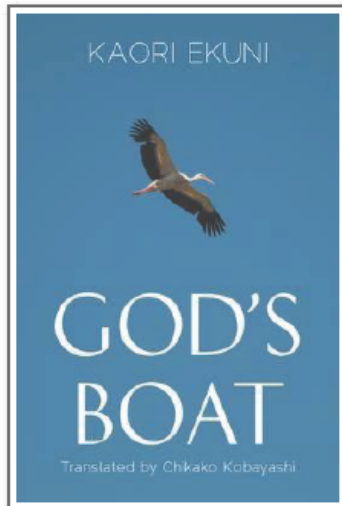


Readings in translated Japanese Literature

Tuesday, January 1, 2013

God's Boat by Kaori Ekuni



God's Boat/Kamisama no boto by Ekuni Kaori, in a translation by Chikako Kobayashi has recently been published Thames River Press, although quite brief the novel is striking for it's being narrated from two perspectives, that of Yoko and her daughter, Soko, opening with a memory of a holiday scene with parents it takes sometime to figure accurately which generation the opening narrator is referring to, throughout this incredibly well nuanced and resonating short novel there are passages where the narrative dips back and reopens again with recollected memories, provoking the reader into contemplating how memory serves us to form impressions of our past, and by turns illustrates how it informs the present as well as how it can map the future, at times the narrative can feel to overlap and begins to read as if it were possibly coming from Soko from a projected point in the future, this gives the novel an absorbing dimension and far reaching field of scope. Yoko and her daughter travel from place to place, Yoko works at bars and restaurants, supplementing her wages by teaching piano, the portrait of Soko and Yoko is a finely drawn one, the intimacies of their domestic life and relationship give the novel an endearing emotional depth, Soko's solitary nights when Yoko is out working she cuddles up with her dolls and rubber robots, setting the alarm so they can spot-switch throughout the night, something that Yoko and Soko do later in the novel with the imaginary presence of Soko's absent father. Slowly emerging through their alternating narratives a picture of Yoko's past emerges, a relationship and marriage to a man simply named as the professor, and also piece by piece, through recollection, information about a 'bone melting love affair' with Soko's father. The details of the dual narratives make an endearing contrast, as Soko goes from school to school we read of her relationships and temporary attachments to friends Rikako and also later with Numata-kun, an overweight boy whose clothes are chosen by his mother which gives him the appearance of being a middle aged man, but it's the simple descriptions and observations of each other that make Yoko and Soko's characters come off the page and stay with the reader each time whilst pausing in reading, appearing at time like diary entries, we read the two perspectives of their events and places that they stay.

As the novel progresses there are some enigmatic story lines that begin to appear behind their narratives, the oath that Soko's father made that he will find them again, suggests some abrupt and enforced end to their relationship, Yoko, feels that they have to remain on the move, being '*birds of passage*', that if they were to settle, he'd never find them. The analogy that they are adrift on God's boat was one that had me wondering what was being referred to, but Yoko observes, thinking back about her life with and without the man she had the affair with, she finds herself living in a sort of a B.C and A.D, he was my God she admits, the sense of lost love and longing to reunite pours off the page, as she imagines what he is doing in the present. Despite the potential religious impression of the book's title, the story is one wrought with human fragility. Another enigma that begins to slowly unravel behind the scenes of Yoko's narrative, is her estrangement with her parents, the details of the break with Soko's father remain in mystery, throughout the novel there's a pervading sense that Yoko, by keeping on the

move is running away from the social stigma of having an affair and also of her parents disapproval. The narratives follow Soko's journey through various schools as she gets older, from elementary to middle school and she begins to grow weary of constantly relocating and frustrated with her mother for not facing reality, as the two's paths begin to separate, Yoko decides to head back to Tokyo, back to the city and life that over the years she has become estranged from. Finishing *God's Boat*, comes the realization of reading of two absorbing, parallel rites of passage.

God's Boat is the second novel to appear in English translation by Ekuni Kaori, the other being *Twinkle, Twinkle*, she was recently awarded the Yasunari Kawabata Prize for *The Dog and the Harmonica*, this translation was selected for the JLPP.

God's Boat at Thames River Press

Many thanks to Thames River Press for providing a review copy.