

Japanese author engagingly writes of loss, self-discovery

Last week, in celebration of the Independence Sister City Association's upcoming Cherry Blossom festival, I promised to write a pair of columns about Japanese novels.

To recap a disclaimer I made already: I've only read a few novels by Japanese authors, so I don't have an abundance of educated opinions about Japanese literature. However, I've enjoyed the few Japanese novels I've managed to read, and this week, as promised, I'm going to talk about another one. The book is "Kitchen" by a Banana Yoshimoto.

Every copy of "Kitchen" I've seen includes a second, shorter story called, "Moonlight Shadow" in addition to the main title. Both are engaging pieces of fiction.

"Kitchen" is the story of a young woman who loves cooking and, by extension, kitchens. It's an interesting premise around which to build a character and a story, and Yoshimoto makes it work very well. The protagonist is Mikage, a young woman struggling to re-establish a sense of self-identity after the fresh loss of her last surviving family member.

I won't give too much away, but the story has plenty of quirks and poignant moments, not to mention cooking and,



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in the end, it involves extra helpings of self-discovery and inner strength.

"Moonlight Shadow," the second story, has a similar theme of coping with loss, this time presented through the voice of Satsuki, a young character who has lost her first love to a tragic accident but discovers that she has a chance to catch a final glimpse of him. This story was sadder to me: the sensation of loss was more sharply sketched, and felt a little fresher than in "Kitchen." "Moonlight Shadow" too, though, is ultimately about successful survival, and for better or worse, left me with a deeper sense of emo-

tional impact.

While I enjoy Yoshimoto's writing immensely, I had a little more trouble with the translation in this book than in Haruki Murakami's exquisitely translated "After Dark," which I discussed last week. I frequently found myself stumbling over phrases in "Kitchen" that didn't seem to be formed quite as correctly as they should.

I also read the book for the first time several years ago, and I don't remember it seeming quite as awkward then as it did during a quick re-read. I don't know if I read two separately translated editions, but my instinct is to think that some of the jerkiness of the text I re-read is due to the translation rather than Yoshimoto's actual style.

There's enough beautiful imagery that struggles through the translation that I'm very willing to believe that "Kitchen" is a superbly crafted piece of literature in the original Japanese. Ultimately, the shy charm of Yoshimoto's stories and characters easily overcomes the language barrier.

Hopefully, a few of you still have enough interest in Japanese culture left over after two weeks' worth of literature in translation to swing by the Cherry Blossom Festival on Sunday. Hope to see you there!