

International Fiction Book Club

Toshikazu Kawaguchi – *Before the Coffee Gets Cold*

15 June 2020

The third meeting of the Litfest International Fiction Book Club was held by Zoom on Monday 15 June at 6.30pm.

We discussed *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* by Toshikazu Kawaguchi, translated from the Japanese by Geoffrey Trousselot, and published in paperback and as an eBook by Picador.

About the Book

Before the Coffee Gets Cold is a tale of four people, each hoping that a mysterious café will allow them to travel back in time to put right something arising from a missed opportunity, but what they discover is not what any of them or the reader expects.



We chose this book because which of us has not wanted to rerun a scene from our lives in which it is possible to say what was left unsaid, do what was left undone, or just as likely vice versa.

It is a fascinating novel with an unusual origin, so we were very glad that Ansa Khan Khattak, commissioning editor at Picador, could join us to explain some of the background, to talk about what's involved in commissioning books originally written in another language and to talk about editing translations.

If you haven't read it yet, we hope you will enjoy it. An edited transcript of our discussion with Ansa follows.

Bill Swainson Welcome, Ansa. We're very happy you could join us today. We've been talking about the book you commissioned, *Before the Coffee Gets Cold*, and have a whole roster of questions for you. Are you ready?

Ansa Khan Khattak It feels a bit like joining a murder mystery, like I've just walked in on and I have to decide who did it!

Bill Well, no murders here, I'm glad to say. Penny would you like to go first?

Penny Hi, Ansa. Two questions, really – how did you find this book? And why *this* book?

Ansa It actually came to us via a slightly unusual route. One of our international sales managers who is based in Hong Kong had heard of the success it had had in Japan, and also in Taiwan. She mentioned it to the international sales team here and then our international sales director emailed me. To be honest I was pretty sold on the title alone. We had the whole English text in translation, which is quite rare when you're commissioning books in translation, so, not speaking Japanese myself, I could read it straight away. It's a lot more commercial than the books that I normally publish, but I just loved the idea and found the text charming, and I suppose I could see immediately how I could publish it and who would like it, which made me excited about it as a project.

Alex I enjoyed the book very much. I was interested in the different cultural backgrounds between Japan and the West, and wondered whether, as a commissioning editor, you thought there were things in it that a Japanese reader would perceive that an English person might miss?

Ansa Yes. A spoiler! I've just finished editing the second book in the series. So I have that incredibly clearly in my mind and I can instantly think of things that I think would mean more to a Japanese reader, or that would read slightly differently. For instance, in the second book, there is a man who has moved to Kyoto to study pottery, which of course we'd understand, but the idea of moving to Kyoto to study traditional pottery – and there's a lot of language about him taking up a place as an apprentice to a master potter, that has a cultural meaning that has a different resonance in Japan than it would for a UK reader. One of the things I thought was really interesting about the first book was the slightly different way they talk about work. There's a language of formality around the relationship between two colleagues, one junior and one senior, that felt like a small insight into how hierarchy might work in a Japanese company, versus a UK company. I wouldn't claim to be an expert in it just from having edited this novel. I felt like I was seeing the tiny tip of an iceberg of how subtly different things can be.

'To be honest I was pretty sold on the title.'

Bill Ansa when you say series, is this the second book by the same author?

Ansa Yes. It's set in the same café and has some of the same characters. He has clearly hit upon this structure that works, of four chapters, four tales, four different people travelling in time.

Bill Jo, you were talking earlier about certain stock phrases that appear in the book, like the cashier in the café saying 'receiving ten thousand yen' when a customer pays.

Jo Yes, I had misgivings about it in places because the translation did sound a little odd, and there were lots of funny phrases that just wouldn't happen in English, and I was intrigued as to whether this was a deliberate move or what really?

Ansa I suppose on a general level my tolerance for slightly unusual wording or phrases in a translation, if I think it's representative of the original, is higher, so something that might not be completely idiomatic in English I might leave because I'm aware that the reader knows that they're reading something foreign even though we're trying to suspend disbelief as you're hearing from these characters in English but really they're speaking Japanese. This was quite unusual in that we received the translation which had already been organised by the Japanese publisher. So there was quite a lengthy editing process, which was brilliant because it meant we could work on the English text, with the translator and Japanese publisher.

'You're hearing from these characters in English but really they're speaking Japanese.'

Editing translations is wonderful because you're only changing things on a line level rather than a structural level. I feel like you can carry on going and carry on going and carry on going, but at some point you have to stop, for one thing you have a production schedule to stick to. But it's entirely possible that things slipped through and if I read it again now there might be things I'd take a pen to.

Liz Following on from that, I wondered whether there were particular challenges in translating from Japanese. From my limited knowledge of it, the way people speak to each other can be quite reverential, whether someone's called by their first name or their surname, and so on, and I wondered whether there were problems in trying to convey that?

Ansa Yes, that's a really interesting question. In the first draft of the translation I saw there was quite a lot of repetition of people's names in dialogue. I don't know whether that's a sign of formality. There were, and this is possibly a different point, signs that it was originally a play. Some things read not quite as seamlessly as you might imagine they would in a novel, but perhaps it was different on stage. .

There was another book that we translated from Japanese called *If Cats Disappeared from the World* by an author called Genki Kawamura, and that was very interesting because Eric Selland, who translated it, is a poet, and he was very aware of trying to render the Japanese, trying to slightly unpack it in a way, because I think that novel in particular was written in a very poetic style which would sound quite odd in an English-language novel. I don't know if that's to do with the Japanese language but translation is definitely about bringing over the style of the original as well as the meaning.

Stephen Hi, Ansa. You explained how this book came to you in English because the Japanese publisher had already arranged the translation, but what are usually the challenges of commissioning books from languages that you're unfamiliar with? .

Ansa I find that really interesting because I read French and Spanish. A lot of the books in translation that I publish are from those languages. So I have the luxury, I guess, of reading almost everything I've commissioned in translation in the original. At Picador we do though commission books from languages we don't speak.

It tends to be that you have a couple of readers whose taste you really respect. It's such a gamble, right? No one's taste is ever going to be exactly the same as yours and you might react differently to a novel depending at what point in the week you happen to read it, so to take somebody else's opinion as a reason to commission a book or not is so interesting. And also, of course, if you buy something on the basis of a report, and perhaps a sample, you then commission a translation and it might be a year (sometimes longer) before it lands back in your in-box and you read it. And that process of revelation when you read the English text is so exciting.

The closest experience I've had personally to that was with Genki Kamuwara's novel, *If Cats Disappeared from the World*.

It was originally published in Japanese, but it had been published in French, so I read the French translation and thought that it was great. But then, of course, you want to translate from the original because you never know what's been lost in translation ... and the French translation was really, really different to the original Japanese text (*laughs*) which was fine but it *was* really interesting. Then a US publisher came on board who had also read the French translation and wanted to edit the English translation to bring it closer to the French. And you enter into this strange scenario where you're editing a book that's already been published, and I think it really it depends on the relationship with the author and the original publisher as to how much mileage there is in that.

'You want to translate from the original because you never know what has been lost in translation.'

Bill Just following up on that, Ansa, did you work with the American publisher on *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* and had they already edited and then you tweaked it for a British readership?

Ansa No, the US publisher actually only came on board after we'd already published it. They'd seen the success that we'd had and I believe that's what made them take it on.

Sam Hi, Ansa. You mentioned the origins of the novel as a play and I just wanted to ask a bit more about that. I was wondering first if you'd seen the play and could tell us about it, and then I guess my question's still valid if you didn't see it. I was wondering about the tone of the play and how it was played, or how you'd imagine it might be played, and how you marry those almost high and low scenes. Some parts of the novel are incredibly poignant, and then you also have those almost farcical scenes, such as 'the curse' [*A character tries to move the café's 'ghost' by force from her chair at the 'time travel' table and is paralysed by a 'curse'. BS*], especially the second time round when you know nothing's going to happen, it's not a particularly serious curse. I'd imagine it would be played for laughs in the theatre, at least the second time around when you know nothing serious is going to happen?

Ansa I haven't seen the play sadly, but I think the farcical aspects you're talking about are definitely deliberate. There is an interview with the author in the *Japan Times* (<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2019/09/28/books/before-the-coffee-gets-cold-as-an-agent-of-time-travel-this-coffee-%E2%80%A8has-limitations/>) where he talks about having to flesh out the characters a bit more, having to give them a back story in a way that he didn't need to with the play, where you don't have much space to give people a history. I think you can still see evidence of the kind of play it was because there's so much emphasis on entrances and exits.



Toshikazu Kawaguchi. © Picador

I was thinking today about the ghostly elements in the play and novel, and when they talk about the delay between hearing the doorbell, and then the delay before someone walks in. I think you can tell that would have been good on stage.

It's interesting because a lot in the novel is quite sentimental, but in the interview I mentioned Kawaguchi talks about how he created this rule that nothing you might do in the past would change the present, because he wanted to have some harsh reality, some kind of break on it, so it seems like he's trying to find a balance between those two things – farce and sentiment.

Margaret We've looked quite a bit at the mechanics of the play, and that explains some of the structural things in the novel. But I was also interested to hear if there was a further stage in bringing it out as a translation, whether there were any further adjustments in broad terms that had to be made or whether it did just come down to translating the language?

Ansa That's interesting because what we ended up doing was cutting some of the additional explanatory detail that had been put in there, I suspect, either to reproduce something that might have been part of the play or was an added detail that the author put in because he was perhaps worried that readers wouldn't follow. In the original text of the novel, there was a prologue where the rules of time travel are explained and in consultation with the agent we decided not to include that. I wondered whether that was something that the author had put in, in the process of adapting it from a play to a novel that we then stripped out, maybe because Picador is a literary imprint and we would expect the reader to be comfortable working a certain amount of it out as they went along. It would be interesting to see what a more commercial imprint would have done.

Margaret I thought the rules and everything all came across fine as an exposition within the text. I didn't feel I needed a placard or anything. What was the nationality of the translator, Geoffrey Trousselot? English-speaking, I know, but am I right in thinking he was Australian?

Ansa Yes, that's right. His background is in technical translation. I normally work really closely with translators, but in this case, because the translation was commissioned by the Japanese publisher everything was done at a bit of a remove, so I've been in touch with Geoffrey through the medium of comments in on a Word doc. I haven't spoken to him or emailed him directly which is very, very odd because I'm used to picking up the phone and talking to translators and choosing them because I know they like the book. It's unusual to have so little contact with the translator.

Erika Hi, Ansa. I was wondering about the book's reception in Japan, and how you find books that might be interesting for an English-speaking audience, especially in a language that you do not speak yourself?

'Picador is a literary imprint and we would expect the reader to be comfortable working a certain amount of it out as they went along.'

Ansa I suppose there are two options. Either you hear about it because it had been a bestseller in its native country or has reached a certain level of success. Or, equally, I've commissioned translations in books that haven't been published in their original countries and that's purely on the basis of having read the text or receiving readers' reports on the book. In some respects that becomes a bit of a gamble because our sales and marketing team would say it provides a launchpad for them to be able to say this book has been published in France or Germany and has been a real bestseller there, and say to booksellers, this is why you should pay attention.

But equally there are some books where if you can't read the language, you commission a report and you've read the pitch, and think it sounds brilliant. Or you read the book and you fall in love with it so you're on board with it at an early stage and that can be really wonderful because you then become this fleet of foreign publishers who are all publishing it in sequence and watching how it does in each country, and this can be very exciting.

Bill Chris, I'm sorry, I should have brought you in earlier; you had an interesting question about the foreignness of foreign fiction.

Chris Yes, I think part of the benefit of reading books like this that are written in and come from a completely different language and culture is to get a feel for that culture. I'm glad those differences weren't completely ironed out – the respectfulness and the tradition of the guest house, which is very Japanese – and various other elements like bowing, for example. I've recently read a trilogy set in medieval Russia and heavily dependent on the folklore of Russia and that author provided a glossary at the back that explained a lot of the words that were included in Russian and the traditions that were mentioned in the text which actually added an awful lot to the understanding and appreciation of the story.

Ansa Yes, so I suppose the question is whether adding a glossary to a book set in medieval Russia which has an almost non-fiction value to it would enhance the reading experience, whether that would be helpful.

Chris Yes, and the same would apply to the Japanese cultural elements in this story that we as westerners, if we didn't understand it we might think it's something really strange or gloss over it.

Ansa I suppose for me the question is, are these things an impediment to your understanding of what's happening and do they reduce your enjoyment of the book? For example, we're publishing a book called *The Art of Losing* by Alice Zeniter, which is amazing. It's about a family from Algeria who move to France in the 1962 and the generations that come after them. There's quite a lot of language connected to the Algerian War of Independence and a lot of acronyms that you might not be familiar with. So I had a conversation with the translator, Frank Wynne, about whether to include a glossary. In the end we decided not to because even though you might not know who these different paramilitary groups were, the main character doesn't really know either – it's sort of starting from a point of ignorance – we didn't feel that that was prohibitive. The experience of reading the book in English wouldn't be too radically different to the experience of reading the book in French. [*Alice Zeniter's novel, The Art of Losing, translated from the French by Frank Wynne, will be published by Picador in 2021. Ed.*]

'So I had a conversation with the translator, Frank Wynne, about whether to include a glossary.'

It's tricky, we've had that in English-language books as well, especially books that have a lot of dialogue in different languages. Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways* is about three immigrants from India to the UK and there's a lot of slang. We got at least one letter from a reader who said there's all this language in it and you didn't include a glossary and I don't know what it means. So you have to kind of weigh it up, and I'm sure there's an argument for including one and another for not.

Sawad Oh my goodness, I absolutely loved that book and actually the way that it's written in English inspired me in my own translations in how to deal with language because it's just out there! You either get on the train or you're left at the station!

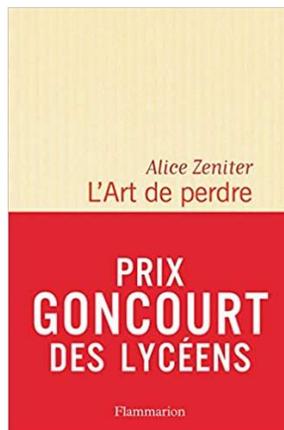
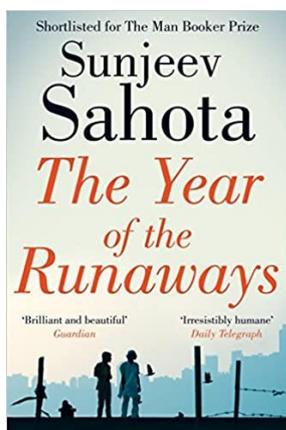
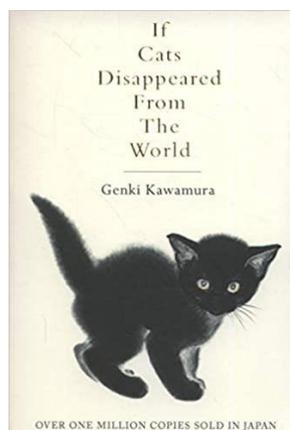
Ansa It's really interesting because when you're reading *The Year of the Runaways* you know that you're reading about characters who aren't speaking English, and you know because the text is peppered with words from a different language. But at the same time you sort of have to believe that they're speaking English because otherwise the whole thing unravels, so how English do you make it? You wouldn't want them using Cockney rhyming slang, to take an extreme example, because no one would be expecting them to use that, though that's something that someone who spoke English fluently might use casually.

'You sort of have to believe that they're speaking English because otherwise the whole thing unravels, so how English do you make it?'

Bill Well, on that note about translation and the willing suspension of disbelief, it only remains for me to say thank you for coming to talk to us and to ask what is the new book by Toshikazu Kawaguchi called?

Ansa Thank you for having me. It's called *Before the Coffee Gets Cold: Tales from the Café* and it will be published by Picador on the 17th of September this year.

Other books referred to in the discussion:



*Ansa Khan Kattak is a commissioning editor at Picador, whose list of authors and books includes Genki Kawamura's *If Cats Disappeared from the World*, Eric Vuillard's *The Order of the Day* and the late Lucia Berlin's *A Manual for Cleaning Women*, *Evening in Paradise* and *Welcome Home*.*

Bill Swainson is a freelance editor and literary consultant, a trustee of Litfest and, with Sam O'Donoghue of DeLC at Lancaster University, convenor of the Litfest International Fiction Book Club.

Next Meeting

The next book to be discussed at the Litfest International Fiction Book Club on **Monday 20 July at 6.30pm** is the Booker International short-listed novel, *The Enlightenment of the Greengage Tree* by Shokoofah Azar, translated from the Farsi by Anonymous, published in paperback and eBook by Europa Editions. Set in Iran in the decade following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, this richly imagined novel is narrated by the ghost of a 13-year-old whose family is compelled to flee their home in Tehran for a new life in a small village.

If you would like to register to join the Litfest International Fiction Book club, please email Bill Swainson at litfestbill@gmail.com.

