

litfest

International Fiction Book Club

Yoko Ogawa – *The Memory Police*

Monday 21 September

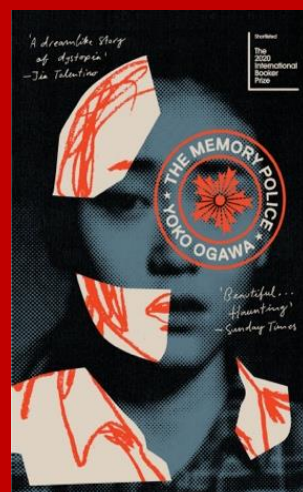
The sixth meeting of the Litfest International Fiction Book Club was held by Zoom on Monday 21 September 6.30pm.

We discussed *The Memory Police* by Yoko Ogawa, translated from the Japanese by Stephen Snyder, and published in hardback by Harvill-Secker and in paperback and as an eBook by Vintage.

About the Book

First published in Japan 26 years ago, *The Memory Police* is one of Yoko Ogawa's 40 books. Yet, while it has been read in Europe since the 1990s, it was only translated into English in 2019. This year it was short-listed for the Booker International.

The novel is set on an unnamed island from which not only things but also the memory of them unaccountably disappear. Soon enough, the island's people forget that a bird, a rose or a hat, ever existed, and 'normality' is reasserted. Here memory is a subversive faculty. So when a writer discovers that her editor retains his memories and is in danger of being taken away by the Memory Police, she sets out to save him ...



We chose *The Memory Police* because it is clearly one of the stand-out international novels to appear in English in the last couple of years, and because the Booker International judges thought so highly of it that they short-listed it for this year's prize. We were delighted that Lucie Campos, a member of this year's Booker International Prize jury, could join our discussion from Lyon to explain some of the background, talk about the book and tell us what's involved in judging a top literary prize.

If you haven't read *The Memory Police* yet, we hope you will. An edited transcript of our discussion with Lucie Campos follows.

Bill Swainson Welcome, Lucie, and thank you for joining us from Lyon this evening.

Lucie Campos I'm very happy to be with you. But have I missed all the great readings that you've been discussing? What are the things that Fiammetta said we didn't notice?

Fiammetta Rocca (*administrator of the Man Booker International Prize*) Lucie, you can't believe what these people have noticed. They're amazing readers.

Bill I think some of those readings will emerge as we talk, but can we start, Lucie, by asking you to tell us about your reaction to the book?

Lucie I really, really enjoyed this book. And I must say, as you may know, we read the books for the Booker International several times: first for the longlist, then for the shortlist and finally to decide the winner. Now, that's as it should be, but that book in particular was one of the most interesting books to reread a third time, not only because of everything that had happened in between, because of course, we started our reading pre-crisis and went on reading throughout the crisis. And then our final reading was much later on, and much water had gone under the bridge by then. But it was a fascinating read, and I love this book.

Bill Lucie, before we go on to the other questions, can you tell us a couple of things that you really liked about it?

Lucie Well, to start with, it was slightly different from the other books in that it was written much earlier. It has an incredible feeling of timelessness, which is very strong, and all the stronger when you realise that it was actually written in 1993, pre-internet in many ways, I mean, prior to a lot of things that are now much more real and much more important to the frames of our lives now. And in spite of that gap between the time when the narrative was actually written and today, it felt incredibly strong, timeless and prescient. For example, its way of treating our connection with memory, but also with language and with the words we use, which it works around in many interesting ways. And because of the interweaving of the story that is being written by the narrator with the story that is happening around her, there's something very interesting going on around the words and the language that are gradually being lost and then regained in other ways that I found very good. It goes beyond a straight dystopia and becomes something much more interesting.

'It goes beyond a straight dystopia and becomes something much more interesting'

Margaret Can you tell us why it has taken so long to be translated? – because it seemed so unanimously popular, I couldn't believe that it hasn't come into English before now.

Lucie Well, these are amongst the surprises of this sort of list. The judges get to read the books that are published in a given year. And it so happens that this book has been picked up belatedly, but this is not uncommon. Translation from a different language into English is not always immediate, and it takes a lot of intelligent reading, intelligent translating and intelligent publishing for a book to actually make it through into the English language. And I must say, though I live in France now, I'm as connected to the English publishing world as I am

to the French. And for a French readership, Yoko Ogawa is a well-known name, and her books have been published in French translation since 1998. So she was picked up by French publishers, five years after the book was published. Now it's taken longer – because of the English language ecosystem – to bring this book through, but that in itself is interesting, because the book that we read in France 20 years ago or so was strong then, but is just as strong now in 2020. So sometimes that gap can also help to give a book a second life.

Chris Hello, Lucie. I wonder how you feel about my view that the book is strongly reflective of the Buddhist heritage in Japanese culture, and the Buddhist tradition of objects only having existence through the mind?

‘I did not read it as an example of a specific culture’

Lucie Now, that's very interesting. And, and I'd say maybe this is one of the things we did not come across in our own readings. I must confess, I know very little about the Buddhist tradition, so my framework for reading this book was very much about relating it to other narrative forms that I *am* familiar with. So, as I was saying, I read it first as a dystopia, and then realised there was much more going on there. Now, I did not read it as a typical example of a specific culture, though, I am aware that some things might be resonating there that I would know less about. So I don't have the answer to that question. But it's a really interesting way of looking at the relation to those objects. I must say, I found that story universal. I found that it transcended any cultural anchorage or any cultural reference. And that what was going on there was so strong, so revealing that one could abstract it from the context. Let's say that the title in English actually helps that considerably because *The Memory Police* is a great title. In French, it's got a much more poetic title. It's *La cristallisation secrète* (The Secret Crystallisation). So it sounds much more exotic, whereas *The Memory Police* really sets it up and connects it to ideas that we are very familiar with, and that we can relate to instantly.

Chris *The Memory Police* has a dystopian context, but there are points in the description of how things disappear, and how people forget them that are very, very clearly of Buddhist origin.

Lucie I can imagine how strongly it must resonate with a knowledge of Buddhist culture if one has it, but with less knowledge of Buddhist culture I found that that whole memory theme resonated with so many stories and is something that is also deeply in conversation with a tradition of stories of memory, narratives around memory, that goes beyond Japan. And that definitely shows how much Yoko Ogawa has read of books from other cultures and other countries and how much she is in dialogue and in conversation with that, which I found interesting as well. Because she has her own approach. She has her own strength. And that structure is very special, very different from the sorts of things we read coming from the English language or from French or from all those other languages. But she definitely knows what she's doing and she knows that some of those strings she's pulling will resonate with a

larger theme of memory, including going beyond just Buddhist connections with objects. It resonates for a contemporary reader who might read this book, side by side with other books coming from Spanish or from English. It manages to become a book about resistance to oppression, a book about totalitarianism, and it resonates with so many things.

Sam My question is really about how you see the key themes of this text working together, because first and foremost, for me, it's a writerly text. There's the metafictional aspect of the writer and the framed narrative within the text. There's the theme of narrative art, and how that relates to the theme of memory. And then there's the idea of endurance – resistance against oppression – and the idea also of art conferring immortality, which I think is a theme. I haven't really phrased that as a question, but perhaps if you could speak on those subjects...

Lucie Thank you. And it says so much about the different layers in the book. It's one of those books where you have a change in typeface to indicate changes between the two different levels, between the book she's writing and the narrative we're reading. But that, in a way, is just the sort of the structure in which the whole story is set. And to me that structure is not unusual. I mean, it's not the first nor the last book we will read with a main narrator who's actually writing a book, and a book about resistance to oppression, a book about totalitarianism where we discover parts of that book within the text of the story we're reading. That's familiar enough, but not only memory, but actually disappearance is extremely original. And bordering on poetic at times, I found, and I must say, on rereading it, those were the bits that really came out of the page; you suddenly realise how striking small sentences can be that are just remarks or passing annotations in the midst of the narrative. And those elements were very good and very lasting to the quite experienced readers that we were. And I should say, talking about the power of those individual sentences and small annotations, how important the translation is for those sentences to have that power. The translator Stephen Snyder has done an amazing job in making those sentences just right, neither too glamorous, nor too drab, but just the right tone. And that strikes you and comes back when you move on to the next few paragraphs. And I think the job that translator has done is really, really amazing. And, of course, the translations were part of what we were so impressed by and constantly talking about in our discussions of this or that book, and which book is actually going to make it into the shortlist.

'You suddenly realise how striking small sentences can be'

Bill We now have three questions about the judging process. Don't worry, we won't be asking who liked what, or plying you with questions about the inevitable 'horse trading'.

Penny Hello. I'd like to know how you start from a hundred odd books, and whittle them down? Do you all read every novel? Or do you split the reading up?

Lucie It's a great question and I will answer it every time because it's such an amazing process. All five of us read every single book. And that's the way it works. I don't think Fiammetta would have allowed anything else.

Fiammetta That's the thing about the Booker prize. It's the only prize in the world where every judge reads every book.

Lucie And it is a pride and a pleasure. It was amazing. Now you need time and the Booker Prize gave us that time. And it's also the only prize in the world that's able to give that time and to allow us to take three months to do the reading properly. But reading 124 books, changes your way of reading. However experienced you are in working in the publishing

'The only prize in the world where every judge reads every book'

world or working in translation, we all read books all the time for our jobs, and are constantly talking about them and reporting on them and doing all sorts of things to do with those books, but actually reading a list straight through from number 1 to number 124, and reading it at the same time as 4 other people who all have different

experiences of reading, and come from different segments of the literary world, and indeed come from different parts of the world, is an incredibly interesting process. To such an extent that, by the end, we had had so many discussions about individual books that we were able, at some points in our discussions, to anticipate what the other was going to say – we had that sort of common reading going on. It was a shared experience, but it was also a representation of all the different ways in which a book can be read by different people – if you're sitting in LA or if you're sitting in London or if you're in India, you might read these books differently. And we were all doing this together all the time, for every single one of the 124 books, and then getting to do a lot of horse trading, but that's part of the game.

Stephen Hi, there. First of all I want to say thank you for bringing this book to the shortlist, which kind of is how it came to our group, and because obviously, we all have limited time in which to read and if it hadn't made the shortlist who knows whether or not we would have read it? And so thank you for doing that. But it's a question, then, about that process: you start with 124 books, and then you get them down to the long list, you get that down to a shortlist. And then obviously, you're talking about great texts, great translations, and then you've got to distil this shortlist down to just one. Given the different reading experiences of five different individuals, can you tell us something about that distillation process?

Lucie It's so hard. Again it's a question I'll answer every time because it's so interesting. We discussed every single book, and we read the books in the same order. So we were all following the same reading path from number 1 to 124. We discussed every single book at length, giving each of the 5 members of the panel time to air their views express their

uncertainties, enthusiasm where there was enthusiasm, different positions, different opinions. So to start with every book gets that treatment. And during those preliminary discussions, some of us changed our minds. After all, one can come to those meetings, loving one book and not really having got one's eyes into another book, and leave the meeting having changed one's opinion on one's first enthusiasm thinking, 'Oh, well, actually, maybe I went a bit too easy on that one' and then wanting to go back to read the book that had not caught our attention the first time until another juror said, 'Well, actually I saw this and that and that.' So that process to start with was long and very interesting because it gave every book its chance. And every single book will have had, at some point somebody standing up for it, because most of these books were very, very good books.



Photo © Bertrand Gaudillère

So even just moving down from 124 to 13 was incredibly difficult, because there's a lot of good publishing going on out there. And, and many of us will have gone away from that process with, of course, pride in having selected the 13 that were selected for the long list, but also the memory of a certain number of other books that didn't make it to the long list; our only sadness was that we could only keep 13.

So then then moving from the 13, down to 6 was difficult again, in a different way, because suddenly, you're having to reduce things from a long list that was very representative of a very wide variety – there were very long, huge 900-page books, there were books from Japan, books from France, there were books from all over and a whole lot of different formats in there. And different types of narrative, different ambitions and what the writers are doing in those books, different types of translation also, between Steven Snyder, who is very much a specialist of translation from Japanese and Japanese literature, or one or two other books, for example, the Emmanuelle Pagano, which was translated by two translators working together

and completely in the translation process, reconstructed the book from a previous collection, which had been published in French, so that that type of translation work was very different from other translation going on. So we had a huge variety of objects that we were looking at. And then suddenly, we had to reduce it down to only 6.

‘Then you have to criticise some to keep others’

So every process of reduction and thinning out was incredibly difficult because you become very attached to these books – I would defend every single one of the books on the list – and then you have to criticise some to keep others. So then then that second reading, of course, is very hard on the books because you find yourself criticising books that you've previously

supported with enthusiasm. The shortlist is the result of that. And then the worst meeting of all, is the meeting when you move down from the shortlist to the book which is going to get the prize.

Jo Hello. I was intrigued to know, but I think you might have answered it really, how you put your subjective feelings aside when you're looking at all these different books and whether, if you take a violent dislike to something, does that just get beaten out of you in all these meetings with the others?

Lucie That it's very good question. Because I'd say, if you look even at the books and the long list, there's a great variety of themes, and not all the themes are easy to deal with. There's a lot of very tricky material in those stories that can be hard to deal with. Either because it's extremely violent, or because one might have opinions about the political implications of the stories that are being told, or because one might have views of the sort of the limitations because fiction is a very strong tool, but it's not always strong enough in what it sets out to do. There are many ways in which one might be not entirely comfortable with a book, but still

'The Booker Prize is a reader's prize' defend it because of the strength of what is going on, because of the ambition or because of the way the final construct actually works. So I'd say, we all came to those meetings with a mixture of personal feelings and a desire to give the book, a proper analysis and a real chance. Each of us would set out our arguments, discuss why this particular form of violence, for example, can be hard to read, but still striking and, and incredibly strong in the way it works. Or, on the other hand, why certain narratives could seem unacceptable to some of us and acceptable to others, and that can happen as well as it would in a book group. So there's a mixture of the personal and the emotions one puts into one's reading with a very professional analytical drive we hung on to from beginning to end, because that's the way we all read books.

Well, the way I see it is that the Booker Prize is a reader's prize. And each of the five of us was representing a certain type of reading. So what we were discussing was how my reading relates or compares with this other person's reading, and which we think is the most representative of the sorts of reading we want to give a chance to in this year.

It's very much how we come to reading and our emotions are part of it. That's a very long answer, but it was a good question because those meetings were very passionate.

Bill Wonderful. Well, thank you so much, Lucie. And thank you Fiammetta for joining us.

Fiammetta Thank you everybody, it's been an amazing evening – so illuminating and such careful reading.

Lucie I have the impression I'm in Lancaster now, or rather somewhere between Japan and Lancaster. I wish I was in both. Goodbye.

Lucie Campos Mitchell is director of the prestigious Villa Gillet in Lyon. She was a judge of the 2020 Booker International Prize for Fiction and for five years (2015–19) was director of literature of the French Institute in London where she founded the annual Night of Ideas and the Beyond Words festival.

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 19 October at 6.30pm** is *Berta Isla* by the acclaimed Spanish novelist Javier Marías, translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa, and published in paperback and eBook by Penguin.

We will be joined by Margaret Jull Costa for this session.

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

