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Coffee and Reconciliation

Emily Linnéa Lüter · Thursday, June 25th, 2020

Toshikazu Kawaguchi explores the consequences of making up with your past by telling the story of a unique café and the intriguing characters that frequent it. He shows that love can come in many forms.

By Emily Linnéa Lüter

What if you could revisit the past without changing the present? Would you go back in time and whom would you meet? These are the questions negotiated in the bestselling novel *Before the Coffee Gets Cold*. Originally written as a play, the story was published as a novel in Japan in 2015 and translated into English last year. It deals with the ever-important human concerns of love, regret and lost opportunities. Set in a back-alley café in Tokyo, which has a very special coffee on its menu, the novel tells us about the past regrets and future hopes of four unique customers.

Lost Opportunities

The café, situated in a basement tinged in a sepia hue, is not only known for its spicy mocha coffee but for the urban legend surrounding it: its customers can travel back to the past to meet a person they have lost. They will meet in the café for one last time. However, there are strict rules which must be obeyed: they cannot change the past, no matter what they do, they may neither leave their seat nor the café, and - most importantly - they have to return to the present before the coffee gets cold. The novel is made up of four interconnected parts, each centering around a different kind of relationship. They show that, regardless of the form love assumes, truth and communication are vital.

Kei, one of the four protagonists, has been working as a waitress at the café for many years and has witnessed customers travel to the past and come back with varying emotions. Her recent acquaintance Fumiko asks for a chance to tell her lover how much he means to her before he flies across the ocean. He ends up leaving Tokyo - that cannot be changed - but during the course of their meeting, she learns about the importance of opening up. Kohtake, a regular visitor, decides to see her still-lucid husband, who now suffers from Alzheimer's and does not remember her anymore. Her lesson is to come to terms with her role as a nurse and wife. Kei's friend Hirai challenges her estrangement from her family by travelling back to meet her dead sister Kumi. And lastly, Kei herself drinks the café's special coffee to lay her eyes on

her unborn daughter, once and never again. This last story is the most heart-wrenching of the four and powerfully completes the quartet of love and reconciliation.

Reconciliation

Before the Coffee Gets Cold is based on Kawaguchi's Suginami Drama Festival award-winning play and is best enjoyed with its origin in mind: its structure, based on the four acts of the original, as well as the paratactic syntax might strike the reader as unusual at first. The café appears like a stage on which the characters enact their scripted story. The prose is simple, yet compelling and the dialogues drive the narrative forward. Despite the novel's relative brevity and stylistic minimalism, it still manages to create real-life characters with individual background stories. In no more than 200 pages, the reader quickly grows attached to the dramatis personae, which renders their emotional journey all the more touching. The café itself, just as prominent a character as the others, creates a magical atmosphere of timelessness and

Book



Toshikazu Kawaguchi
Before the Coffee Gets Cold
 Translated by Geoffrey Trousselot
 Picador: London 2019
 224 pages, 9,90 €

escape from the world outside: »The café had no windows and the lighting was always dim. Unless one looked at a watch, there was no way of knowing whether it was day or night. The three solid-looking clocks on the wall all showed completely different times.«

The novel's premise that your past actions cannot change the present is both a blessing and a curse. The customers do not have to fear interfering with consequences they cannot control. On the other hand, they cannot prevent their loved one's passing either. For all four characters who revisit the past, their encounters are painfully bittersweet. But whilst they are unable to save their lovers, husbands, sisters or daughters, they can still make a difference - a difference in attitude. Our relationships are not only determined by the events that carry them, but the feelings we attach to them. This message may sound simple, but the story shows how hard it is to implement in real life. Kawaguchi's story is a subtle warning to readers to never let opportunities pass, unless such a café actually exists.

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