

The September issue of *The Japan Society Review* presents a selection of six reviews that range widely in geography, period and form. Together, they explore how people make sense of the worlds they inhabit through history, architecture, literature, memory and the shifting realities of contemporary urban life.

The issue opens with Nandini Das's *This Little World: A New History of Tudor and Stuart England*, a book that re-examines early modern England through the lens of global connections, revealing a society far more entangled with the wider world than traditional narratives suggest. At a different scale, Michaela Nettell's *Encounters with Kazuo Shinohara's Umbrella House* offers a thoughtful meditation on one of post-war Japan's most influential architectural works, exploring how a modest domestic building continues to inspire reflection on design, space and everyday life.

The enduring legacy of Hiroshima is addressed through two deeply moving works. *My Deepest Desire* by Hara Tamiki

brings readers into the emotional and psychological aftermath of the atomic bombing through the voice of one of Japan's most important post-war writers. Complementing this literary perspective, *Hiroshima, 8:15* by Tanimoto Kiyoshi provides a powerful first-hand account from a survivor whose testimony continues to resonate across generations.

Contemporary Japan is represented by two strikingly original works that blur the boundaries between reality and imagination. Qudan Rie's Akutagawa Prize-winning *Sympathy Tower Tokyo* examines technology, language and social change in a near-future metropolis, while Kawamura Genki's *Exit 8*, adapted from the acclaimed independent video game, transforms the familiar experience of navigating public spaces into a compelling and unsettling exploration of perception itself.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

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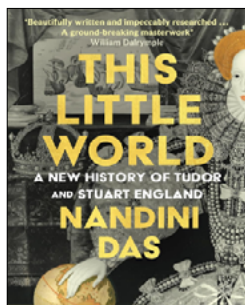
Image by Sandy Walker from *My Deepest Desire*

This Little World: A New History of Tudor and Stuart England

by Nandini Das

Bloomsbury Publishing (2026)
ISBN-13: 978-1526669650

Review by Thomas Lockley



I originally set aside three weeks of my summer to read *This Little World: A New History of Tudor and Stuart England* by Professor Nandini Das of Exeter College, Oxford. Instead, I finished it in three days. I simply could not put it down.

Having read countless books about the Tudor age and the early Stuart era, I must confess that I approached yet another “new history” of this heavily saturated period with a dose of misgiving. However, because I have always enjoyed Das’ work, I readily accepted the invitation to review it.

Perhaps my initial hesitation was why I allocated so much time to it, but I need not have worried. Das approaches her topic in a uniquely refreshing way. Each chapter centers on two main protagonists, few of them aristocrats or royalty, and each with a fascinating tale to tell. Around them, Das reveals a host of related figures whose lives and experiences brilliantly illustrate the chapter’s core themes. These themes explore, among other things, concepts of freedom, belonging, alienation, and, in essence, what it truly meant to be English at that time. Every chapter draws the reader in with historical episodes that ring with academic rigor while showcasing the craft of a master storyteller. Rarely does a history book achieve both feats as seamlessly as this one does. Reading it today as a London-born “Jappaner”, I felt these themes deeply.

Chapter 3, which focuses on language, illustrates how anyone pretending to have any kind of sophistication or scholarship at the time possessed at least a handful of foreign languages, alongside Latin. It left me wondering: how did the English lose this multilingual vigor? Did later imperial dominance, and the global linguistic authority that came with it, ultimately diminish the nation’s intellectual breadth? A country that loses its foreign language ability loses the crucial capacity to view the world from different lights, angles, and perspectives. The Elizabethans possessed this facility; yet the modern nation may have lost it, as foreign languages and related skills such as interpreting are systematically cut from university and school curriculums. We would do well to reflect on a quote highlighted by Das: English was a ‘language that will do you good in England, but past Dover is worth nothing’ (John Florio, cited in Das, 2026, p. 108).

However, it is Chapter 6, ‘A Fortune at Sea’, which will most intrigue readers of this review, as its focus shifts largely to Asia and, more particularly, Japan. Das chooses as one of her main characters the navigator, castaway, and minor Japanese lord, William Adams, likely the first English-born person to set foot on the Japanese archipelago, so far from the islands of his birth.

Through warm and vivid prose, the chapter reflects upon belonging, alienation, adaptation, and the manipulation of circumstances through violence. Das masterfully examines how Adams’ life reshaped Englishness, and broader contemporary ideas of national identity, through global, and specifically Japanese, interactions.

Ultimately, Das’ narrative demonstrates that the lives of mariners like Adams dismantle the oft-told myth of England as an inherently insular, inward-looking nation. Instead, she proves that Tudor and Stuart culture, economy, technology, and governance relied heavily on porous borders and cross-cultural encounters to breed innovation and vitality.

Readers might also reflect on how Adams’ story simultaneously disproves the equally infamous belief that Tokugawa Japan was a completely “locked” realm. In reality, Tokugawa Ieyasu was just as open to foreign peoples, counsel, technology, and ideas as Elizabeth I and James I were. Ironically, neither England nor Japan extended this liberality to the Catholic Church or Jesuit missionaries; both nations persecuted Catholic citizens and priests relentlessly.

A book review is supposed to include something that you would like to see done better in a second edition (I hope there will be one), and in this case that is the maps at the beginning of the book. They show the protagonists’ travels in England, Europe, and the world, but for some reason the routes are presented as straight lines on the maps, not as the winding voyages or progresses that they were in real life. For example, Adams’ travels go in a straight line from Morocco (where he traded in early life before being washed up in what is now Oita Prefecture) to Japan, crossing through North Africa, the Middle East, Persia, the Himalayas and China. In real life, Adams voyaged to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean before traversing the Strait of Magellan and then sailing across the Pacific Ocean. It would be nice to be able to reflect on his real route.

Leaving the last paragraph aside, *This Little World* deserves a wide readership and would make an ideal Christmas present for anyone captivated by global history, and ideas of nationality. I heartily recommend it. §

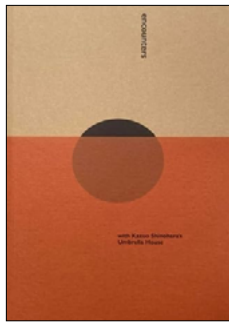
Encounters with Kazuo Shinohara's Umbrella House

by Michaela Nettel et al.

Passengers (2026)

ISBN-13: 978-1739914127

Review by Andrew Nishiyama
Taylor



Encounters with Kazuo Shinohara's Umbrella House documents a research project by London-based artist filmmaker Michaela Nettel, bringing together contemporary responses specially commissioned from 20 international contributors on the mid-century titular building. Understanding why this particular building provides a platform for the rich artistic output that the book collates requires some context.

Umbrella House, designed by the Japanese architect Shinohara Kazuo (1925-2006), was built in Nerima, Tokyo in 1961 for a telecommunications company worker, his wife and their young daughter. Measuring just 55 square meters, the design of the house, with its simple square plan topped with a large pyramidal roof, was inspired by a visit Shinohara made to Jodo-ji, a temple in Ono, Hyogo prefecture, dating from the 12th century, and typified the first phase of his career which abstracted traditional Japanese architecture into modern dwellings.

Faced with demolition in Tokyo, the house was acquired by Swiss furniture company Vitra and relocated to their campus in Weil am Rhine, Germany, between 2020 and 2022, in coordination with the Tokyo Institute of Technology. It is against this unique backdrop that *Encounters* explores Umbrella House's past and present through creative writing, photography, drawings, collage and transcriptions from interviews and roundtable discussion.

Shinohara was an enigmatic figure in post-war Japanese architecture, whose body of work consisted primarily single-family dwellings (he did design a few public buildings later in his career), and is best known for declaring in 1962 that 'a house is a work of art' in contrast to modernism's functionalist principles still prevalent at the time.

Early sections of the book contain collages by Nettel and Amsterdam-based artist Ana Ruepp exploring the outward physicality of the house, while those by Argentine artist Estefania Araujo Bianchi are a playful study of an imagined journey for the building from Japan to Germany.

As *Encounters* progresses, it captivates with deeper immersion in the inner world of the house, in both its former and current locations. The house was rebuilt on the Vitra campus to the original working drawings, "restoring"

any modifications made during its time as a functioning home in Tokyo. Many of the book's sections in some way touch on the erasure of the marks of decades of family life in Umbrella House, bringing it to a sanitised, museum-like state, as was likely the architect's hope all along. As filmmaker Emily Richardson noted in a thought-provoking passage 'the beautifully choreographed fictional images Shinohara created on completion of the project', belying any sense of everyday inhabitation to come, begs the question if the move to Weil am Rhein finally makes 'Umbrella House an artwork now', brought closer to those original photographs.

Wonderfully diverse contributions continue with digital collages by architect Lera Samovich, poetry by US-based artist and translator Nakayasu Sawako, notes and drawings of a performance by Emily Speed, and photography of Umbrella House reimagined as an upturned fruit basket and mushrooms by Passengers curators Kevin Gault and Julie F Hill.

The most insightful and moving portion of the book comes from the one contributor who lived in Umbrella House: the client's daughter, Kawai Emi, who also goes by the pen name Hanawa Kyoko. Told through a series of message exchanges with London-based writer Yuki Sumner, it is a far-reaching dialogue touching on the house reinforcing (but not aiding) gender roles of the time, parallels between tension in the building's structure and that within Kawai's family, and finally overcoming painful childhood memories associated with Umbrella House through therapy. The text, presented in both the original Japanese and with English translation, feels honest, raw and refreshing in a broader landscape of architectural discussion where so many voices are underrepresented.

On a similar theme of architecture and memory, the commission of a short story by Akutagawa Prize-winning author Shibusaki Tomoka will delight readers who enjoyed her novel, *Spring Garden*, also translated by Polly Barton (featured in Issue 68 of *The Japan Society Review*). Like *Spring Garden*, the piece, entitled *Inside the House*, has a strong sense of dislocation pervading the prose, directly reflecting the transient aspects of Umbrella House in fictional narrative.

Encounters rounds out with analysis of *ma* (temporal or spatial distance between two elements) in architecture and calligraphy by researcher Mónica Verdejo Ruiz, collages from vintage ikebana photo prints by California artist Leigh Wells, and an exploration of the importance of art in Shinohara's work by Christian Dehli and Andrea Grolimund, the Zurich-based architects who supervised the reconstruction of Umbrella House at the Vitra Campus.

The book closing with a plan and section of Umbrella House is a contrasting reminder that none of this has been a conventional architectural monograph: the first UK publication dedicated to Shinohara Kazuo is a highly enjoyable reading of his work, importantly led by female voices, which will resonate with anyone keen to explore architecture through emotion and memory, rather than

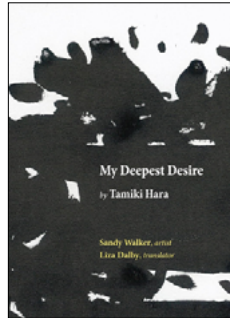
technical drawings and details. In an era when post-occupancy evaluations still fail to gain traction in the architectural profession, *Encounters* is a powerful portrait of how residential design affects its residents and, more viscerally and less explored, how residents affect residential design - regardless of the time or space a project finds itself in. §

My Deepest Desire

by Hara Tamiki
translated by Liza Dalby
illustrated by Sandy Walker

New Village Press (2026)
ISBN-13: 978-1613322956

Review by Thomas Caffrey



This new release of Hara Tamiki's *My Deepest Desire*, originally published posthumously in 1951, is a curious thing. Translated by Liza Dalby, whose credentials include the historical fiction *The Life of Murasaki* (2000), New Village Press' edition is ostensibly a collectible in the vein of recent Murakami releases like *Super-Frog Saves Tokyo*: a single (very) short story is accompanied by sufficient images to justify a hardback publication. However, here the similarities end. This book is stark and elegiac. There is no fun or magical realism to be found in Hara's final artistic statement, which is a gentle portrait of mental and emotional descent.

Hara was a Hiroshima-based writer. His life, defined by losses both personal (his wife died of illness in 1944) and collective (the following year, Hara was present at the bombing of Hiroshima), was brief, cut short by his suicide in 1951. His fiction has since been anthologised in nuclear literature collections like *The Crazy Iris* (1985), edited by Japanese Nobel laureate Kenzaburo Oe.

My Deepest Desire is Hara's final work before his suicide. In the author biography appended to this edition, Hara is positioned as a poet and this work as a short story. However, *My Deepest Desire* resembles more of a series of remembrances than a story at all; the piece has a gently hallucinatory and languid quality, with little in the way of sustained external action. If there is movement to be found here, it is internal. Across the pages of this book, Hara considers stillness, the natural world, and the impermanence of earthly life.

The edition is smartly translated, adopting a deliberately simple and direct style that is well-suited to

the emotional sparseness visible here. There are moments at which the words recall the work of later, more well-known icons of Japanese literature: the speaker attempts to 'silently call' (p. 21) out at one point, a twist on the same idea found in – or a potential inspiration for – Kenzaburo Oe's *The Silent Cry* (1967). This is a novel that likewise engages the traumatic postwar moment in a Japan still attempting to rebuild in the wake of existential upheaval.

Hara's prose poetry finds suitable accompaniment in Sandy Walker's ink drawings. These dance upon the fine line between unbridled chaos and reservation, violence and subtlety: large, emotive splashes of black ink are suggestive of forms and shapes, often nearly coalescing to fixed images. A startling rendition of an explosive force (p. 16) is especially striking; Walker's foreground is utterly dominated by an overwhelming oblivion that threatens to devour the scant fixed details he provides. The art is reminiscent of Japanese calligraphy in its expansive and suggestive brush work and ensures that this short work of fiction is one worth returning to again and again.

The book is not-for-profit; all proceeds will go to the Western States Legal Foundation, a public interest organisation for the abolition of nuclear weaponry. With nuclear weaponry, it is easy to focus on widescale destruction, referring at large to the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki or the stately anxieties of Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* (2023).

But the release of this book, alongside the now publicly available memoir *Hiroshima, 8:15* from Hiroshima-based priest Tanimoto Kiyoshi, refocusses the lens of nuclear discussion. Yes, cities are demolished and flattened, but so too are individual lives. The destruction is not bound to one moment in time, it is continuous and inescapable. In the introduction to *Hiroshima: Three Witnesses* (1990), Richard H. Minear writes that Hara killed himself in part due to President Truman's 1950 declaration that nuclear weaponry would likely continue to be employed. Let Hara's work stand as testament that atomic weaponry ought never reappear on the battlefield. §

Hiroshima, 8:15

by Tanimoto Kiyoshi

Ebury Press (2026)

ISBN-13: 978-1529992731

Review by Isabel Mermagen



In 1947, whilst the details were still fresh in his mind, Methodist minister Tanimoto Kiyoshi carefully wrote down, in English, all that he had seen on that fateful August day in 1945 when the United States dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The book starts with an introduction by his daughter, Kondo Tanimoto Koko, herself a survivor of the bomb (*hibakusha*) and a renowned peace activist in her own right: 'Nearly eighty years have passed since it was written, but it remains as powerful and as urgent today as it was then' (p. x). This manuscript was lost until its discovery four years ago in Yale's rare book and manuscript library by the grandson of John Hersey, the author of the famous *New Yorker* article entitled 'Hiroshima', in which Hersey had interviewed six survivors of the blast, among them Tanimoto. As the numbers of the *hibakusha* and their testimonies dwindle, this book serves as a visceral reminder of the horrifying impact of the use of nuclear weapons.

Perhaps because it is written in English, rather than Japanese, Tanimoto's eyewitness account of the immediate aftermath of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima is written in a simple and matter-of-fact style that merely strengthens the impact of its description of unimaginable devastation and suffering. Thirty-six year-old Tanimoto Kiyoshi was helping a neighbour move some possessions in the outskirts of the city on the 6th August 1945 when at 8:15 am an atomic bomb was detonated in the sky above Hiroshima. From his location over two miles from the epicentre, Tanimoto describes seeing a sharp flash of light and felt 'a strong blast of wind' (p. 6). Despite being uninjured himself, Tanimoto soon comes across more and more people with terrible injuries and more houses on fire or with extensive damage. Tanimoto expresses his bewilderment at how an air raid could have wreaked so much devastation: 'Until then, Hiroshima had been bombed twice by enemy aircraft but only on a small scale. When bombs had been dropped, there had been much loud noise from the aircraft. However, only ten people were killed at that time. But many people had been injured in this bombing and yet there had been no great waves of bombers' (p. 8). Questioning his own senses, Tanimoto seeks a vantage point to look out over the city to see the extent of the devastation: 'I was terribly afraid. It was then that black drops of rain, as big as blackberries, began to fall' (p. 8). Fearing for his family and for his church, Tanimoto heads back into the city, passing on his way an

endless procession of injured people heading to the hillsides from where he has just come. He describes the strangeness of seeing so many without clothes and the burns on parts of their bodies that had not been protected by caps or clothing: 'All faces were pale and without expression. No one was crying or yelling. People were following one after another in silence. It seemed like a procession of ghosts' (p. 10). Tanimoto miraculously is reunited with his wife and child but the reunion, incredibly, does not bring him any joy. Rather, he feels indignant that a church member calling on his parsonage should be killed, whilst he and his family are spared. Thus follows Tanimoto's quest to find and help as many of his church members amidst the carnage of the wrecked city.

Whilst the relentless horrors that Tanimoto encounters in the immediate aftermath of the bombing are shocking, they are described in a dispassionate manner, reflecting the basic need to rescue or help as many survivors as possible. Tragically, many of those who are initially rescued subsequently died of their wounds or even later succumbed to radiation sickness. Even the author suffers from 'The Atomic Disease' but survives. Tanimoto's quest evolves as his account continues, and his focus later turns to finding information on his church members and holding his first religious service to the eventual seeking of funds and materials for the reconstruction of his church. Amidst all the suffering, he notes that no-one expresses resentment towards the Americans who had dropped the bomb. His description of Emperor Hirohito's radio address to the nation in which he announced Japan's surrender on the 15th August, meanwhile, deals a body blow to the population. Tanimoto writes: 'The Emperor's broadcast had crushed our fighting spirit much more than the atomic bomb' (p. 66).

Tanimoto's Christian faith never waivers and he even comes to see Hiroshima's suffering as divine retribution for Japan's role in numerous military aggressions during the war, including atrocities committed in Nanking and Manila: 'We were not only unable to stop this aggressive war – had we not also approved of it? The terrible disaster inflicted upon our fellow countrymen on August 6 was a heavy blow that we well deserved' (p. 144).

As we accompany Tanimoto on his journey from the ruins and see the horrors through his eyes, we also witness how this deeply Christian man evolves into one of the key advocates for the anti-nuclear movement in Japan and see his determination that the world should never forget what happened on that fateful day. Tanimoto died in 1986 at the age of seventy-seven. *Hiroshima 8:15* is a worthy legacy and reminds us that whilst fewer *hibakusha* remain to share their experience, the taboo of using nuclear weapons must not fade with them. §

Sympathy Tower Tokyo

by Qudan Rie
translated by Jesse Kirkwood

Viking, Penguin (2025)
ISBN-13: 978-1405972062

Review by Rio Julian



Sara Machina was an exceptional architect who took on the conception of a grand tower in futuristic Tokyo, 'Sympathy Tower Tokyo'. Not only was it going to bear as much physical significance to Tokyo as the Eiffel Tower to Paris, but its groundbreaking function was also to be considered: it would provide ideal living conditions to the 'Homo Miserabilis'. Homo Miserabilis was a term coined in this AI-censored era to refer to people who had committed a crime, proposed by a happiness scholar to value those who had no option but to go down that path. As a victim of rape, Sara was in two minds about the idea of letting this tower be built. She was given the responsibility for making it happen, yet she herself was never on board with it – more specifically, she had never been on board with the changing of language by humans' ever-changing emotive responses towards words and their meanings. Sympathy Tower Tokyo would be the culmination of that very phenomenon and Sara Machina found herself drawing its path towards existence, moral qualms notwithstanding.

Before examining the text, there is admittedly some unfortunate extratextual housekeeping to deal with. This book drew quite a bit of controversy, with the author Qudan Rie's [admission](#) to using AI in the writing of the text. Questions were justifiably raised about the ethicality of Qudan's creative process, as the AI [workflow](#) would have constituted the taking of people's posted work as datasets that the AI model would draw from. In the interest of treating the book fairly and avoiding preconceived notions, I avoided researching the controversy despite being aware of it during my reading period. Post-reading, I personally found that two things were valid: that Qudan's AI-incorporative approach was unbecoming, and that the public reception was slightly off-target. Qudan's use of AI-generated text within the book is in the form of chatbot answers à la ChatGPT, which she could very easily have written herself and yet decided against. Moreover, Qudan wasn't at all reserved in sharing her relationship with AI as a creative, as she [mentioned](#) making 'full use' of the LLM bot to conceive the story and claiming that it amounted to 5% of the text. For reasons mentioned, my personal worldview deems this approach ignorant at best and enabling at worst. Although, with that considered, the AI text included in the book effectively carries little weight within the narrative. The narrative itself frames an AI-dependent society negatively,

which wouldn't be expected if this book were the pro-AI narrative like the headlines might have led the public to believe. Thus, I see it as being understandable for the public not to engage with this book as to steer clear from enabling AI into creative spaces, but I maintain that this book offers more than a gimmicky narrative with a written-by-AI novelty.

With that addressed, I'd like to establish the focus of my reading of the text. This book undoubtedly has value in an international context, seeing as it received an English translation from one of the biggest publishing houses. Presumably though, with the book's probing of the changes in the Japanese language and how the masses are portrayed in the eye of a changing society, this book may well offer a comprehensive commentary on the Japanese society. This, I'd like to assert as a person who has no lived experiences of the Japanese society, is not within my scope in this review. I will instead be concerned about the setting, themes and narrators.

Although the narrative is set in a futuristic Tokyo, Qudan focuses on stretching the reality of an AI-dependent world rather than painting a high-tech imagery of the city. In this setting, seemingly every person has a language-monitoring unit installed in the brain, interjecting each person's speech in order to bend it the way the AI deems societally acceptable. The use of an AI chatbot (referred to in this world as 'AI-built') is also constant – not that this is a futuristic phenomenon anymore. People born into this status quo are hence seemingly less experimental with their imagination and more attuned to the vocabulary censorship, veering them towards physicalism and a world where language has been bastardised in the name of sympathy. Though I'd have liked to see more of the lived experiences of those actively opposing the tower and how this AI dependency affects them, Qudan manages to sell the plausibility of this reality satisfactorily given how compact and character-focused the narrative is.

Thematically, I see the narrative's questioning on ethics as discussion-inducing and not solution-proposing. Qudan sheds light on society's ever-changing relationship with words and meanings, supercharged in the setting of AI censorship and global interconnectedness. People are more alarmed than ever to possibly offend others by the use of language in order to conserve their livelihoods, slowly erasing any hope 'that words are ever going to help us truly understand each other' (p. 123). With this performative sympathy strongarmed by AI censoring, Qudan questions the ethics of compliance through Sara, a victim that feels helpless against but is marginally capable of raging against the status quo. I find this very engaging and relatable, painfully illuminating by framing it within a narrative, but

also unfortunately slightly ironic given Qudan's stance on AI in creative spaces.

A shoulder brush of sorts to Sara Machina's noncommittal ethos comes in the form Max Klein, an American 'third-rate journalist who lacks the difficult but necessary skill of writing the truth without hurting people's feelings' (p. 84). Qudan provides a narrator with a disconnect from the reality of the futuristic Tokyo, comedically attached with a stereotypical East Asia fetishist identity of a white American male: superficial Japanese fascination, sex tourist, repulsive odour. Max Klein's straightforward disposition directly collides with the so-called Japanese avoidance of individuality – how the Japanese never confuse 'how they actually feel with what they're required to say' (p. 97). With that said though, Max does not actually challenge Sara's ethos behind the conceiving of the tower – rather, he challenges Sara's regret in taking part. I personally found this to be a missed opportunity for an interesting conversation as neither Sara nor Max bought into the tower's concept for their own reasons, yet Max only got to meet what was left of Sara after the tower had been built. Max's outsider perspective and brash personality could've played a bigger role than simply echoing Sara's exact words in an article, I feel.

The centrepiece of the narrative is carried by the main and most interesting narrator, Sara Machina. Qudan centres on a direct victim of language's inadequacy and society's compliance, as Sara was a victim of rape whose words weren't

capable of bringing about justice to her rapist. Her position clashed with the happiness scholar's Sympathy Tower idea, where criminals like her rapist would be provided with ideal lives. She found herself 'repelled by the incursion of the Sympathy Tower' (p. 3), and yet her passion for structures and workmanship that she boiled down to 'her desire for control' (p. 53) made it a given that the tower was inevitable. Sara continuously wrestled with her ethos and desired any justification for its existence, eventually landing on Takt's naming suggestion of 'Tokyo-to Dojo-to'. To her, the name essentially cleansed herself of any association with what 'Sympathy Tower Tokyo' represented, though it ultimately didn't stop the masses from reacting to the tower however they pleased. Through Sara's moral qualms as the architect, Qudan thoroughly verbalises the feeling of helplessness from the idea that being understood is only possible insofar as meaning remains stagnant. Qudan perceptively shows that language will always be inadequate to foster mutual understanding, but it's also the very and only thing on which society bases its functionality and defines its parameters of acceptability and punishment.

A short book that, for reasons good and bad, feels to me longer than it is. It's bulky on ethical questions regarding language in relation to compliance and punishment, yet its narrators aren't captivating enough for me not to drop this book a few times despite its length. Coupled with tangential speeches and Qudan's AI use, I suggest engaging this book primarily for its intriguing subject matter. §

Exit 8

by Kawamura Genki
translated by Sameeha Anwar

Ithaka Press (2025)
ISBN-13: 978-1806173907

Review by Conor Hodges



After getting off the last train home from Kyoto, I would walk through the quiet corridors and caverns of my local station and feel watched. Perhaps it was because I felt like an interloper in the desolate, pristine silence punctuated only by my footsteps. I'd find myself being hypervigilant, waiting for someone – or something – to turn the corner and remove me from my isolation. Nothing would come, and then, as if transported, I'd ascend the steps and feel completely normal, as if nothing had happened at all.

Thus, *The Exit 8*, a tight, mechanically sparse horror video game about traversing an empty corridor in a Japanese subway, released in 2023, it felt tailor made to me and my fears. In it, you are a faceless, voiceless protagonist

who must spot "anomalies", fissures in reality that tweak the environment in ways both large and small. One anomaly might be a poster that continually grows in size, and another could be a doorknob out of place. Others are more deliberately malicious and amp up the creepiness: a staff door is ajar with a grinning face peeking through the crack at you, or, at their most cruel, a humanoid figure textured to match exactly the wall tiles bolts out at you full-speed, just as you thought you were safe.

When I heard that the game would be adapted into a film and a novel, I was sceptical. Much like with the concept of most "liminal spaces", most ubiquitously the "backrooms", the allure comes from the quotidian being deformed in a slightly unsettling way, either through magnifying the space to impossible scales, or by hinting at Escher-like architecture that loops in on itself like an ouroboros. With *The Exit 8* game and its invisible playable character, you could feel as though you really were navigating this warped simulacrum of a Japanese subway station. The consequences for failing to spot an anomaly, sending you tumbling back to the start of your run, force you to be vigilant lest you lose all your

progress, and because they are happening to “you”, the jumpscare feels a little more real. In this regard, reading the novel *Exit 8* fell flat when compared to my time playing the game.

The novel’s main character, the Lost Man, is an everyman. He rides the train and scrolls his phone with a vague sense of dread, is avoidant of stressful social situations, and commutes back and forth from home and work feeling vaguely unfulfilled. He watches a salaryman castigate a mother for not controlling her crying baby, and does nothing, refusing to step out of his headphone cocoon. The salaryman then chastises his onlookers, saying that he’s ‘just saying what everyone else is thinking!’ (p. 2) Then, off the train, his ex-girlfriend calls to tell him she’s pregnant, and that he’s going to be a father. Just as he prevaricates on what to say – a trait she has never liked about him – his signal dies, and he finds himself in an empty subway corridor.

After traversing the same corridor a few times, watching a man with a briefcase stride through on repeat as if on rails, the Lost Man begins to realise he’s in a loop. He notices a set of rules pinned to the wall, saying that he must spot anomalies and only progress forward if the corridor is clear from any oddities. If he does this correctly eight times, he will reach the titular exit 8 and, presumably, his freedom.

Some anomalies from the game, such as blood oozing from air vents, signs with moving eyes, and the walking man’s usually emotionless face being pasted with a malevolent grin appear in the first section of the novel as Kawamura attempts to create dread. However, the anomalies themselves aren’t interesting enough to read about on their own; their mundanity works fantastically in a spot-the-difference game, but not so much in a slim novella that moves at breakneck speed.

Like the setting itself, the writing is repetitious, and is not infused with the claustrophobic dread or rising panic that such a bizarre space needs. In Susanna Clarke’s *Piranesi* (2020), a house with colossal statues and crashing tides is described by a man trying to map out his surroundings, and Clarke’s writing is so evocative of the place that I still think about how such a structure could be possible years after reading the novel. Kawamura does not do his corridor the same justice, perhaps hoping that most people who read the book would already be familiar with the game and its environment. Even I found it hard to visualise what was happening where, for which the map at the start of the book was incredibly helpful – never a good sign.

The characters too, are archetypal and uninteresting. The Lost Man follows the arc of a timid man gaining confidence as he comes to understand what the subway is asking of him, but he is clearly a blank slate, a faceless protagonist infused with a moral purpose to find his way out of the endless loop. The perfectly timed phone call informing him of his life-changing news forces him to reckon with fatherhood almost immediately, taking up the mantle of responsibility so quickly and certainly that I found hard to believe, especially because he and his partner had just broken up (in large part because of his indecision!). The other two characters, the Walking Man and the Boy, are not distinctive enough to warrant their own chapters, and the boy in particular is saccharine and cloying in his relationship with the main character, his existence in the story seemingly existing only to facilitate the apotheosis of our protagonist.

Kawamura does have some interesting ideas about apathy and expresses them well. I found his description of a social-media feed, thrown in at the start, particularly charming, where the protagonist sees an advert for a shooting game and can ‘no longer tell whether these images were real or just part of a game’. (p. 3) Likewise, the Lost Man remembers how his horror upon seeing his hometown destroyed by a tsunami faded into indifference ‘like it was something happening in a different world entirely’. (p. 37)

Much like the movie *Backrooms* (Kane Parsons, 2026) did with its setting, Kawamura frames the tunnel of *Exit 8* as a personal purgatory, using people’s fears against them. In one scene, the Lost Man sees his ex-girlfriend and hears the distant cry of a baby, whereas the Boy sees his mother beckoning him to her side. Likewise, the Walking Man in a headstrong moment rushes up a false set of stairs believing himself to be free, but is clearly consumed by the space and recycled as a mindless automaton destined to walk the corridor forever.

Traversing the mobius strip is also an act of pedagogy. It tells the characters what they fear and forces them to forge on regardless in an attempt to break the cycle. It tells them that they spend every day as if they were the same. They are trapped in a loop. The subway and whatever malevolent force controls it tortures its victim with enforced repetition and, if they prevail, gives them a chance to turn back the wheel of time. Thus, upon reaching an exit, the Lost Man is transported back to the start of the novel, with an angry man screaming at a mother and her baby. Will he act differently this time? [S](#)

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