

Coin Locker Babies

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A surreal coming-of-age tale that establishes Ryu Murakami as one of the most inventive young writers in the world today.

Abandoned at birth in adjacent train station lockers, two troubled boys spend their youth in an orphanage and with foster parents on a semi-deserted island before finally setting off for the city to find and destroy the women who first rejected them. Both are drawn to an area of freaks and hustlers called Toxitown. One becomes a bisexual rock singer, star of this exotic demimonde, while the other, a pole vaulter, seeks his revenge in the company of his girlfriend, Anemone, a model who has converted her condominium into a tropical swamp for her pet crocodile.

Together and apart, their journey from a hot metal box to a stunning, savage climax is a brutal funhouse ride through the eerie landscape of late-twentieth-century Japan.

RYU MURAKAMI was born in 1952. The only son of schoolteacher parents, he grew up in the port city of Sasebo in southwestern Japan. After graduating from a local high school, where he played the drums in a band called Coelacanth, he went to an art college in Tokyo. It was while studying there that he entered his first novel, *Almost Transparent Blue*, in a competition for new writers. Published in 1976, the book won a major literary award and sold over a million copies. Since then, he has worked for a publishing house, presented a weekly music and interview radio program, and hosted a TV talk show. His literary output includes two collections of stories *Run, Takahashi* (1985) and *Topaz* (1988), and the novel *Coin Locker Babies* (1980), which made its debut in English early in 1995. His roman a clef *69* appeared in English in 1993. He has also directed four movies based on his writing, causing a sensation at an Italian film festival when *Tokyo Decadence* was shown there in 1992. His latest film is set in the U.S. and Cuba.

STEVEN SNYDER, the translator, is Professor of Japanese Studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Among his first-rate translations from Japanese are Kunio Tsuji's *The Signore: Shogun of the Warring States*, which won the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission Prize; Ryu Murakami's *Coin Locker Babies*; Kenzaburo Oe's *A Healing Family*; and the forthcoming *Out* by Natsuo Kirino.

The Market was a four-lane highway that ran through a tunnel in the area. The guards had apparently been bought off so that the tunnel could serve as a ready link between customers on the outside and the services provided inside. The system seemed to work, since the stalls that lined the road were doing a brisk business--with one difference: the commerce was almost completely silent. Not a voice could be heard as buyers and sellers, whatever the commodity, conducted their transactions in whispers, their lips pressed against each other's ears. The street stalls were fairly rudimentary, just a table and some chairs set up along the side of the road where the customers sat down and waited for the prostitute in attendance--in some cases a woman, in others a man--to quietly bring them a drink. The list of drinks was simple: watered-down beer or a kind of sweet wine in dark bottles. The freelance whores lining the street advertised with creative postures but rarely went out of their way to approach a passing customer. The men, it seemed, had been there from the beginning, but the number of women had increased suddenly when the underground highway had opened. Now they lined the tunnel, leaning against the walls.

smoking with one hand and hiking up their skirts with the other. One woman had got hers up further than the rest, and the silver ring embedded in the fleshy lips between her legs glittered in the ancient yellow fluorescent light. A black woman languidly sucked grapes from a bunch, skinning them deftly with her mouth and letting them roll on her tongue like green marbles. Her dress, split down the back to the top of her ass, barely covered the sour, velvet skin beneath. A young girl was dancing in the street in toeshoes tied with white ribbons. On her thigh was a tattoo of a hydrofoil, and around her neck she wore a snakeskin collar complete with leash. A pair of twins had been painted on her buttocks, one per cheek, and they seemed to be clutching the real, lighted candle protruding between them.

In addition to the women, the tunnel walls were lined with makeshift drugstores which dealt almost exclusively in tranquilizers, the non-addictive drug of choice for both the working girls and their customers. A tranquilizer called Neutro, in fact, could almost have been said to be the pillar on which the social system of The Market was built. It was Neutro that one had to thank for the placid whispers, the smooth conduct of commerce minus the usual irritations and problems. Under a Neutro-induced haze, activity along the subterranean road was reduced to mutters, sighs, and muffled coughs, the sound effects of a concert hall between the movements of a symphony. The Market was a circus with the soundtrack left off, a silent parade, a muted ballet with only a light ringing in the ears gently lulling the spectator into the general torpor. Not silence exactly, but an odd, noiseless noise, like rustling silk, or soft footsteps on wet concrete--like a tongue sucking at a gap between two teeth, or skin on skin, or clear sake being poured into a glass. The Market was a masked ball with only the sound of the feathers fluttering on a thousand strange costumes. Those who saw it for the first time invariably said they thought they had died and gone on to some other life.

Other Books

The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature. This extraordinary one-volume guide to the modern literatures of China, Japan, and Korea is the definitive reference work on the subject in the English language. With more than one hundred articles that show how a host of authors and literary movements have contributed to the general literary development of their respective countries, this companion is an essential starting point for the study of East Asian literatures. Comprehensive thematic essays introduce each geographical section with historical overviews and surveys of persistent themes in the literature examined, including nationalism, gender, family relations, and sexuality. Following the thematic essays are the individual entries: over forty for China, over fifty for Japan, and almost thirty for Korea, featuring everything from detailed analyses of the works of Tanizaki Jun'ichiro and Murakami Haruki, to far-ranging explorations of avant-garde fiction in China and postwar novels in Korea. Arrayed chronologically, each entry is self-contained, though extensive cross-referencing affords readers the opportunity to gain a more synoptic view of the work, author, or movement. The unrivaled opportunities for comparative analysis alone make this unique companion an indispensable reference for anyone interested in the burgeoning field of Asian literature. Although the literatures of China, Japan, and Korea are each allotted separate sections, the editors constantly kept an eye open to those writers, works, and movements that transcend national boundaries. This includes, for example, Chinese authors who lived and wrote in Japan; Japanese

authors who wrote in classical Chinese; and Korean authors who write in Japanese, whether under the colonial occupation or because they are resident in Japan. The waves of modernization can be seen as reaching each of these countries in a staggered fashion, with eddies and back-flows between them then complicating the picture further. This volume provides a vivid sense of this dynamic interplay.

田中 洋次 . *Accomplices of Silence: The Modern Japanese Novel* . Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974. Murakami Haruki. *A Wild Sheep Chase* . Trans. Alfred Birnbaum. New York: Plume , 1989. ---. *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. Trans. Jay Rubin."