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Recommended Citation

Kempf, Andrea, "Book Review: A Lost Paradise" (2001). *Library Papers and Presentations*. 16.
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BOOK REVIEW

A LOST PARADISE

By JUN'ICHI WATANABE

Translated by Juliet Winters Carpenter. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2000. 372 pages, \$24

Andrea Kempf

Jun'ichi Watanabe's novel *A Lost Paradise* has been a publishing sensation in Japan. Reviewers in the United States, with an unsubtle nudge from the American publisher, have been comparing *A Lost Paradise* to *The Bridges of Madison County* with some justification because each novel is an unrealistic but highly romantic view of adultery, written from a man's point of view, featuring middle-aged protagonists living dead-end emotional lives. However, *A Lost Paradise* is a uniquely Japanese book, which draws upon a number of popular themes in twentieth-century Japanese culture. The big question about Watanabe's novel is, "Why has this tale of adulterous passion resonated so strongly with the public?" There is no doubt that his novel has become a cultural phenomenon, not just in Japan, where it sold almost three million copies, but also throughout Asia, where it has been translated into numerous languages. In Japan, the novel has even created a new slang expression: To do a *Shitsuakuen* (the book's Japanese title) is the new term for having an affair.

The novel tells the story of Kuki, a bored fifty-four-year-old salaryman in a book-publishing company who has recently been demoted to a back office of his firm. He meets Rinko, a thirty-eight-year-old calligraphy instructor trapped in a loveless marriage. He pursues her, and within the first chapter the couple are exploring a sensuous sexual relationship unlike anything either one experienced in marriage. Chapter by chapter, their obsession grows, and their sexual activities become more experimental, often bordering on the sadistic. As the affair takes over, the couple gradually shut out more of their previous lives, work, friends, and family until they are locked in a claustrophobic passion so personally ideal that the end can only be death. This is accomplished in the last chapter, in a gruesome double suicide immediately following coitus, which Watanabe, a doctor as well as a novelist, assures the readers is physically possible.

The Japanese culture of sex and violence has been discussed in many forums. Recently the critic Ian Buruma devoted several chapters in his volume of collected essays *The Missionary and the Libertine* (New



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York: Random House, 2000) to that topic. Buruma conjectures that suicide, sex, and the art of cruelty are outlets for people in an authoritarian society-individuals who have been denied the natural political freedoms of many other countries. When people have no ability to effect changes in society itself, they focus inward, expanding the boundaries of those areas that will shock the public, without disturbing the higher authority. Buruma bases much of his thesis on the ideas of Japanese filmmaker Nagisa Oshima, whose 1976 film *In the Realm of the Senses* (Ai No Corrida) about a famous 1920s murder case in which a woman strangled her lover and cut off his genitals so that no other woman could ever have him, is much discussed by Kuki and Rinko in *A Lost Paradise*.

It is true that both Kuki and Rinko seem powerless to control their lives. Kuki faces years of boredom in both an unchallenging job and a stifling marriage. Rinko receives no support from her family to divorce her unresponsive husband. As the two of them break one taboo after another-for example, he seduces her during her father's wake, and later they begin to find sexual pleasure in pain-their actions cut them adrift from the rest of the world. Rinko's mother disowns her. Kuki's wife serves him with divorce papers. Finally, Kuki's affair comes to the attention of his superiors, which results in an even more humiliating demotion. Is this obsessional relationship a means of expressing their individuality in a repressive society?

In the end, what matters is the reader's enjoyment of the novel. As a view of adultery, the novel is an intense and claustrophobic experience. It is also a revealing look at Japanese mores. What it is not, is great literature, but that's not the point when a book becomes a cultural phenomenon spawning movies, television programs, and fashionable trips to all the elegant hotels where the fictional couple had sex. The novel is slick and fun and another way to see Japan.

Andrea Kempf is a professor and librarian at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas, and an alumna of the East-West Center's Asian Studies Development Program. She is a regular reviewer of fiction for *Library Journal* and was named *LJ Fiction Reviewer of the Year - 2000*.

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Persimmon: Asian Literature, Arts, and Culture is published
by Contemporary Asian Culture, Inc., a not-for-profit educational organization.

46 East 92nd Street
New York, NY 10128
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