



THE RISING ASIA REVIEW OF BOOKS

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THE “POST-BUBBLE DECADE” OF NIHON AT SEA A Masterpiece From “The Stephen King Of Japan”

Koji Suzuki. *The Shining Sea*. Translated by Brian Bergstrom. Kodansha, 2022, 251 pages, US\$24.95.

Koji Suzuki’s *The Shining Sea* is a novel of pristine surfaces. It is a clean novel, with unfussy, direct language communicated with clarity and precision. This surface is as deceptive as that of the sea itself; both contain swirling undercurrents of wild and uncontrollable violence, always present, sometimes breaching with incredible ferocity.

Suzuki, who died of illness in May 2026, is among the most interesting of contemporary Japanese novelists currently available in English translation. In an author biography appended to *The Shining Sea*, he is introduced as “a self-described jock” with a first-class yachting license. Suzuki was a laddish adventurer, fond of sailing and motorcycle road trips. A sense of this wanderlust persists in *The Shining Sea*, which is an ambitious blend of romance, mystery, and adventure. This puts the novel

at odds with Suzuki's best-known work, which retains the mystery found here, but tends toward horror instead of romance or adventure.

An Absurdist Approach To Japanese Life

Like Haruki Murakami, another breakthrough Japanese author of the eighties-to-nineties, Suzuki's overall body of work exists in the long shadow of a slightly misleading masterwork. For Murakami, this was the classic novel, *Norwegian Wood*, a realist love story in 1960s Tokyo. Murakami's fiction beyond this novel is characterized by, yes, the same doomed love, but also a cheerfully absurdist approach to modern Japanese life. Brand mascots spring to life, cats talk, hidden portals to alternate realities lurk behind every signifier of normality. Suzuki's breakthrough novel was *Ring*, a 1991 supernatural thriller that centers on a malevolent entity that lurks inside cursed videotapes. Adapted for cinema in 1998 by director Hideo Nakata, Martin (2017) cites the film adaptation as a key text in the popularization of what would later become known as J-horror (p. 22). J-horror, referring to the wild popularity of Japanese ghost films in the late-nineties to early noughties, was defined by long-haired ghostly women, like Sadako in Nakata's adaptation of *Ring*, Kayako in Takashi Shimizu's *Ju-On: The Grudge* (2002), or the lady in the red dress in Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Retribution* (2006). The shadow of *Ring*, and the legacy of subsequent J-horror and their attendant spooky women, looms large across the rest of Suzuki's catalogue. In the translator's note at the end of the novel, translator Brian Bergstrom acknowledges this, writing that *The Shining Sea* is more a novel "of adventure and romance than the novels of suspense and horror that became his trademark following the success of *Ring*" (p.250).

Suzuki would go on to write four more *Ring* novels, alongside short stories set in the same universe. This—coupled with the choice of



texts translated to English—means that Suzuki is often considered a genre writer, identified in reviews as “the Stephen King of Japan” (Longman 2026). But Suzuki was more: he authored adventure fiction, alongside multiple non-fiction books on childrearing, none of which have been translated into English. Even *The Shining Sea*, a novel originally published in 1993 was only released in translation in 2022, suggesting a curatorial oversight to Suzuki’s currently available anglophone bibliography. Nonetheless, just as Murakami’s surreal texts distend the same concerns found in his realist ones, Suzuki’s work maintains family as a consistent thematic.

A Russian Doll of Scaffolded Tellings & Retellings

The Shining Sea is a particularly tangled family novel. It opens in Japan’s post-bubble economy mid-nineties. A pregnant woman has been admitted to a psychiatric ward following a failed suicide attempt. Her reasons for suicide, alongside her identity, are unknown. She receives no visitors and nobody calls looking for her. A handful of clues—her method (attempted suicide by drowning) along with an obscure song that she hums incessantly—help her doctor and a fellow patient to assemble an impression of the woman she once was, grasping at these clues in their struggle to identify and, perhaps, to understand. In parallel, the woman’s ex-lover works aboard a tuna fishing boat, battling both the sea and his fellow fishermen. The novel’s steady escalation of tension and intrigue renders it a masterful mystery; the woman was once an idol singer, her ex-lover is on the run for fear of his own life, the benevolent doctor who initially serves as our aligned viewpoint is a philandering cheat. Meanwhile, the dual narrative structure is smartly composed, reaching corresponding emotional peaks and revealing information through flashback with a confident and scrupulous meanness.

If there is a curse to be found in *The Shining Sea*, it is a metaphorical one, predicated on repetition. The novel is a Russian doll of scaffolded tellings and retellings: the same basic narratives recur endlessly, stacking and scaffolding upon one another. A wife cheats on her husband and hides the parentage of the resultant child. Two men's enmity aboard a fishing vessel results in an accidental death. Like a curse, these events play out time and again in *The Shining Sea*. As with J-horror, a ghostly woman who exists in the interstice of life and death lingers over proceedings. However, here readers encounter not a ghost but a suicidal young woman who may or may not be suffering from Huntington's disease. As retellings accumulate, Suzuki's novel acquires a meditative, reflective quality. Simple plotlines deepen upon their reappearance. Suzuki's linguistic clarity (well-translated here by Brian Bergstrom) is direct and simple, communicating depth of feeling with ease, grace, and grit.

Familial guilt and a sinister modernity hang heavy in the novel: the Japan of *The Shining Sea* is the post-bubble economy Japan of the 1990s, known as a "lost decade" (Aronson, p. 58) in Japanese culture. Originally published in 1993, *The Shining Sea* taps into that same political malaise that heralded the formation of cults like Aum Shinrikyo. The ship on which the woman's ex-lover is trapped is a transitional, relational place defined by its transactional potential; the sailors suffer daily torment for the promise of an eventual paycheck. This suffering is unseen by participants of the other narrative thread, but it is this violence that underpins and allows society in this strand to continue aesthetically undisturbed. Yet again, a deep current of violence rumbles beneath a pristine surface, threatening to roar into life at any moment. *The Shining Sea* is an excellent novel: psychologically complex, politically

astute, and viscerally entertaining above all else, it is the work of a master storyteller.

Note on the Reviewer

Thomas Caffrey (PhD) is an early career researcher currently working at the School of English, Dublin City University (DCU). He conducted his doctoral research at the same institution, funded by a scholarship from DCU, and graduated in 2025. His primary research interests include Japanese literature, postmodernism, and monster cinema. He has presented at conferences across Europe and Asia, and has published research on children's literature, videogames, and horror cinema. Thomas is currently working on a book about the anglophone fandom of Haruki Murakami.

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