

Atsuhiko Yoshida, *Goodnight Tokyo*

Quirky Japanese literature seems to be all the rage these days. Every British bookshop seems well-stocked with Tokyo-based stories about cats or cafés, or cats in cafés, or time-travellers in bookshop cafés run by cats. So, when I began to read Atsuhiko Yoshida's *Goodnight Tokyo*, I was expecting a good deal of whimsy and maybe some magical realism, and definitely cats. To my surprise, and it has to be said relief, this was not what was delivered.

The structure of *Goodnight Tokyo* is unusual. It is a novel, but could also be read as a series of short stories, in which the lives of the characters intersect. The unifying theme is what might be termed the night-time economy of Tokyo. Each story, or chapter, begins at one in the morning, and is peopled by the men and women whose lives play out in the small hours: a taxi driver, a call-centre worker, a detective, an all-night café owner (yes, all right, there *is* a café) and the narrative artfully tangles their lives together, developing chance encounters into something more meaningful.

Matsui, the taxi driver, is the catalyst for the inter-connections that unroll as the stories – each self-contained, but not really concluded – introduce us to a growing cast of Tokyo night-owls, whom fate has thrown together. The city is, of course, a vast metropolis, but the thoughtful and philosophical Matsui reflects that “People in this city passed each other by in far more places and on far more occasions than they realized. For instance, they might come to within a block of a relative or close acquaintance during some random outing. They just didn't know it.” And it's that unknowing sense of intimacy that recurs repeatedly as the stories unfold and the lives of the characters become ever more intertwined.

A taxi driver who works night shifts is an easy enough concept for an English reader of this excellent, idiomatic translation by Haydn Trowell to understand. But some of the other characters' occupations are, well, quirky. Kanako Fuyuki is the call-centre worker, but her place of work is the “Tokyo No.3 Consultation Room.” This seems to be a sort of clearing house for any sort of problem, practical or personal. So Kanako may in one call be offering advice to the love-lorn, and in the next advising on the best all-night grocery store. Another character, Moriizumi, is a funeral director by day, but collects redundant landline phones at night. Ibaragi runs a junk shop which is only open between nine at night and four in the morning.

Each character is looking for something: a person, like Kanako's lost brother, or self-awareness, like film prop girl Mitsuki, who can't decide on whether she wants to settle down with her boyfriend. And as the novel progresses, each character becomes a little more enlightened. Each story represents a step along the way to some kind of resolution to their problems.

I enjoyed this book very much. The matter-of-fact style, really quite spare and unpretentious, enables Yoshida to lay bare the yearning at the heart of these nocturnal creatures, and the reader is soon very much supportive of their journey to a more fulfilling life.

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Atsuhiko Yoshida (trans. Haydn Trowell), *Goodnight Tokyo* (Europa Editions, 2024) 978-1-78770-512-8, 174pp., paperback.