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Review:

Mary Yukari Waters. *The Laws of Evening*. Scribner, 2003.

Mary Yukari Waters is an American Japanese-Irish author who, in her collection of stories *The Laws of Evening*, writes about Japanese culture, usually women's experiences adapting to their lives in this culture. Many of the stories reflect the changes in culture that occurred during and after World War II. An overarching theme is that of the invasion of American culture in Japanese society as a result of the American occupation and America's formulation of Japanese government and political structure at the conclusion of World War II and the difficulties the older generation experiences in accepting the changes while the younger generation fluidly adapts to the changes. Waters beautifully examines the perseverance and pride with which her older characters contend with the cultural clash, especially emblematic in the stories of "Since My House Burned Down" and "Aftermath."

The Meiji Restoration from 1868–1894 brought the influence of Western society into Japan during which the Japanese modeled their societal structure on Western structure, dismantling the feudal system and centralizing the government and westernizing the economy and educational system. Japan also built a strong, unified army. After the turn of the century, Japan desired to become a national power ultimately leading to its involvement in World War II. To mobilize the country behind the war effort, the leaders pursued a movement that embraced traditional values and created a discourse that eschewed anything Western to foster a greater sense of national pride. When Japan lost the war, the country and economy was devastated and the intense pride and sense of autonomy was crushed. America occupied Japan for several years, rebuilding the country and drafting a new Constitution, causing the reevaluation of Japanese values and culture.

Waters highlights the role women play in these changing times. These women find themselves having to adjust to new values and customs, as well as to the devastating effects of the war. For instance, Waters builds sympathy for her older, nameless narrator in "Since My House Burned Down" by sharing the difficulty this woman has living with her daughter-in-law Yuri, who embodies Western ideals and represents change. Yuri cooks American food, which the traditional older woman despises. And, as if occasionally eating American food is not bad enough, the older woman is displaced from her beloved and customary role in the kitchen by Yuri. The idea is reinforced that the woman cannot escape the changes that have taken place in her society as change has even invaded her house. It is also important to note that Yuri is the dominant power in the household, not her husband Toshihide. In traditional Japanese culture, the husband is the supreme head of the household, his authority impregnable, and this shift from male to female power illuminates another change in culture with which the older woman must contend.

Waters' success in building sympathy for the older character lies in the woman's perseverance through what she describes as "Yuri's era" (21). The woman claims that her "whole life has been a process of losing security. Or identity" (22) as her life is completely changed with the loss of her husband in the war and the rapidly changing traditions that had been her foundation. The woman takes comfort in a poem by Masahide in which is written: "Since my house burned down / I now own a better view / of the rising moon" (21). She realizes that she has been "pared down... to Masahide's poem" (24), but this loss that she has endured allows her to recognize the goodness and hope that is still left in life. Waters is eloquent and profound in her writing of adapting to life's

changes and she closes the story of this remarkable character with: "And I sense with a slow-mounting joy how wide this river is, and how very deep, with its waters rolling out toward an even vaster sea; and the quiet surge of my happiness fills my chest to bursting" (24).

Waters is also very successful in sympathetically portraying the role of a traditional Japanese woman adapting to her child's acceptance of Western culture that consequently diminishes the value of old Japanese culture. In "Aftermath," Makiko is a mother who feels that "with the war and surrender, the changes have come too fast" (39). Makiko is not ready to accept the transition of the American troops "from enemy to ally" (40). She despairingly notes her son Toshi's disinterest in performing the traditional prayer ritual that honors his father's memory. Ancestral worship is an important part of traditional Japanese culture, where remembering the past is emphasized because it is believed that life is cyclical and those ancestors have a hand in directing one's life. Toshi's lack of interest in this important part of Japanese culture is attributed to the Western education he is receiving which places little importance on history and mandates that individuals direct their lives. Makiko attempts to combat these alienating Western ideals by invoking ancestral wisdom: "A man who forgets his past... stays at the level of an animal" (45).

Makiko's admonition is not meant to hurt Toshi; rather she has a "need to provide a legacy for a small, fatherless boy" (47). Makiko intuits the threat the Western ideals pose to the development of Toshi who is more easily swayed by the ideas because he does not have the influence and stature a father would have imposed. She observes Toshi playing the Western game of dodge ball and "notes the ease with which the fallen one seems to switch roles in this game, heaving the ball at his former teammates without the slightest trace of allegiance" (43). Already the Western idea of individualism is dominating the children's play, breaking the bonds of unity that was the foundation of Japanese tradition, and serving to alienate them later in their lives. Makiko realizes that she isn't equipped to completely protect Toshi from these changes though "she has tried hard to remain true to the past" (47). Waters achieves the reader's empathy with the portrayal of the anguished Makiko, who must accept these cultural changes while trying to provide a quality life and history for her son. Makiko has the ability to endure these changes for the benefit of her son while ingraining important Japanese values in him, evidenced by the sentiment in this passage in which mother and son attend a traditional festival: "Perhaps Toshi will remember this night. Perhaps it will rise up again, once he is grown, via some smell, some glint of light, bringing indefinable texture and emotion to a future summer evening. As will his memory of being carried by his father before an open window, or a time when he prayed before his father's picture" (54). Waters is savvy in recounting that Makiko's desire for her son to have the best possible life transcends the encroaching cultural change. The passage is emblematic of many of Waters' stories because Makiko realizes that it is more important to rise above the changes and look toward the future despite the new circumstances, hoping that some aspect of Japanese culture and heritage will live on and be remembered.

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