An I-Novel

Minae Mizumura
Juliet Winters Carpenter, Translator
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First published in 1995, Minae Mizumura's *An I-Novel* was Japan's "first bilingual novel;" this translation maintains its original tone and cross-cultural resonance.

In the mid-1980s, the narrator, Minae, sips whiskey while reflecting upon her family's exodus from Japan twenty years earlier. Now a graduate student, Minae rents a rundown apartment near a major American university. Though compelled to write about her life experiences, Minae's childhood emigration left her with a sense of confused displacement. Minae is also unsure of which language to write in; she feels exiled from Japan, but she's not quite American either.

Minae has frequent phone conversations with her older sister, Nanae, who lives in Manhattan. Nanae's colorful fashion statements make her seem confident, but she is also sensitive and vulnerable. The sisters talk about daily happenings, or recall memories of Japan and growing up in suburban New York.

Minae's spirited mother is a woman of "extravagant tastes and abundant energy," while her father accepts his corporate transfer to New York with enthusiasm. The increased sugar and fat content in American food takes a toll on his health. And while Minae and Nanae share a close bond, Minae soon feels the need to return to Japan to rediscover her personal identity.

Innovative yet influenced by traditional Japanese literary style, *An I-Novel* focuses on subtle details within an intimate structure. There are evocative descriptions, as of the snow's "soundless dance" and how Nanae dates "a merry-go-round of men." More intense events, however, like the crime and veiled racism Minae encounters in the US, are included with detached yet troubled candor.

An I-Novel is an intriguing, nuanced portrait of a family in flux, and of a young woman finding her creative center between two worlds.

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