



★ Beautiful Shining People

Michael Grothaus

Orenda Books (Oct 10, 2023)

Softcover \$16.99 (276pp)

978-1-914585-64-7

In Michael Grothaus's shimmering speculative novel *Beautiful Shining People*, an American teenager encounters a Japanese woman whose fragile identity fuels her anguish—and a perilous search for answers about her origins.

John is a self-conscious computer prodigy who was recruited to work in Tokyo. Through a chance encounter at a café owned by a former Sumo champion, Goeido, he meets Neotnia, a waitress who intrigues him with her demeanor, beauty, and isolation. They become acquainted against the backdrop of Tokyo's tech-driven districts, in which robot servers, drones, and deepfakes are commonplace, and global superpowers engage in an ongoing cold war.

Neotnia and John's secrets propel the mysterious atmosphere: Neotnia is sometimes seized by an unseen force, and John, despite his coding skills, hides part of himself. Still, their friendship advances thanks to sake-fed humor. But then consequential cyberattacks prompt further rumination, and unintended disclosures thrust John into a risky task: rescuing Neotnia from a painful condition about which neither of them is certain.

This beguiling, futuristic tale considers the boundaries between cybernetics and human impulses, as well as questions what constitutes a relationship, both in its yearnings and meaning. There are Japanese deities and nightmarish sacrifices too. But John's connection to Goeido and Neotnia deepens because they all share their vulnerabilities. Each is separate from society for reasons that range from self-imagined insecurity to persecution; their empathy for one another is touching.

The book's suspenseful twists tie the aftermath of the bombing of Hiroshima to themes concerning the roles of scientists in either tearing or healing humanity. But it's also a story about personal agency in which people's relationships endure unthinkable circumstances.

People's differences are seldom as stark as they seem in *Beautiful Shining People*, an arresting novel in which a couple's love flourishes despite treacherous acts.

KAREN RIGBY (September / October 2023)

Disclosure: This article is not an endorsement, but a review. The publisher of this book provided free copies of the book to have their book reviewed by a professional reviewer. No fee was paid by the publisher for this review. Foreword Reviews only recommends books that we love. Foreword Magazine, Inc. is disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255.