

Birthday

Koji Suzuki

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If the “interpretation of dreams are the royal road to the unconscious,” as Sigmund Freud once said, *Birthday* by Koji Suzuki is a highway to the horrors of human evil. Composed by Japan’s bestselling postmodern master of chill, *Birthday* is a collection of short stories from Suzuki’s *Ring*, *Spiral*, and *Loop* told in the voices of several women victimized by the murderous ghost Sadako.

Suzuki begins *Birthday* with “Coffin the Sky,” the riveting story of the pregnant Mai Takano, the anguished sweetheart of missing professor Ryuji Takayama. Mai, while searching for the missing pages of Ryuji’s last article, discovers a strange videotape that leads to a horrifying conclusion.

In a partial explanation of Mai’s fate, Suzuki rewinds to 1965 in *Birthday*’s central story, “Lemon Heart,” about the beautiful Sadako’s escapades with a lover during her theatrical debut as the Girl in Black with an ensemble, Theater Group Soaring. At eighteen, Sadako appears to have “all the innocence of a young girl,” but skillfully seduces the theater’s director, twenty-three-year-old sound technician Hiroshi Toyama.

Suzuki then fast-forwards to November 1990, when Hiroshi, now forty-seven, a professional sound designer, a husband and father, awakens from a nightmare about Sadako’s stage debut. In it, Hiroshi flees from the sounds of an incriminating tape booming from an isolated booth above the stage. Disquieting as was that dream, Hiroshi remembers it was a recurrent one he had twenty-four years earlier following Sadako’s mysterious disappearance.

Perplexed by its eerie return, Hiroshi believes it was prompted by a recent phone call he received from a news reporter who was searching for information about Sadako.

Eventually, the scent of lemons, memories of the incriminating tape, the faint sounds of an infant’s voice on a soundtrack, and Hiroshi’s heart-stopping encounter on the street with a still youthful Sadako in a green dress, lead to “Lemon Heart’s” chilling conclusion.

Suzuki’s trilogy reaches its towering height of terror in *Birthday*’s third story, “Happy Birthday.” This time another pregnant woman, Reiko Sugiura—whose lover Kaoru Futumi has disappeared into the American desert “to eradicate the cancer virus that had brought the human race to the edge of extinction”—questions the wisdom of bringing a child into the world. What ensues is a postmodern quest through the “Loop”—a cyber-universe filled with multiple Sadakos and preternatural horror that justifiably affirms Suzuki’s title as the “Stephen King of Japan.”

While readers will likely be as entranced with mystery of *Birthday* as are his fictional protagonists, they, too, must be patient with its twisting plot to grasp Suzuki’s cautionary message about life, human good and evil, and the inevitability of aging and death.

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