

Ghost of a Smile: Stories

Deborah Boliver Boehm

Kodansha America (February 2001)

\$25.00 (288pp)

978-4-77002531-9

From this non-Japanese writer comes a collection of traditional Japanese ghost stories as colorful, enigmatic, and foreboding as the book jacket's cover art, which features a "Hell Courtesan." Set in Tokyo, Boehm's eight longish short stories explore the city's supernatural mythology; deceased ancestors and exiled phantoms float into the narrative first-hand or are contained within a frame of superstitious storytelling among characters. Possession of the body by spirits is another recurring theme.

Each tale begins unsuspectingly, but the reader is soon introduced to "a sinister shadow world populated with a pantheon of malevolent demons, ghouls, and shape-shifting monsters." In this shadow world, a dog bite turns an innocent sumo wrestler into a werewolf on a killing spree, and beings with eggshell faces haunt the streets. The only disappointing story concerns the opening of a restaurant for vampires that must be snuffed out by a neighboring café owner; it seems too common in this otherwise exotic collection.

"Hungry Ghosts in Love" is by far Boehm's best. In it, Josephine, a travel writer, takes an assignment to cover a haunted hot spring in the Valley of Hell, where on October 10th every year, the ghost of a chambermaid is said to appear. As she hikes into the dark night, Josephine stops at a temple where she feels love at first sight for Gaki-san, a handsome priest. They spend an erotic evening swimming in the hot spring and painting symbols on each other's naked bodies. Having promised to return to the temple in exactly one year, Josephine resumes her life, and although she is warned by a friend that Gaki-san may be a demon, she reunites with him on October 10th of the following year and experiences a horrifying but enlightening night.

"The Snake Spell" is another engaging tale, in which a shy librarian named Bronwyn is the unlikely "winner" of the Festival of the Snake Goddess spell that heightens her sexuality and helps her find love.

Most of these eerie stories combine the sacred and the fanciful in a straightforward, Western-style voice that reflects Boehm's love for Japanese culture. She succeeds in her attempt to depict an almost palpable past that unites the modern Japan's land, its people, and its stories.

REBECCA REGO (May / June 2001)

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.