

In the Woods of Memory

Shun Medoruma

Takuma Sminkey, Translator

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An alternating narrative creates a subtle yet intense and multilayered portrait of Okinawans.

Shun Medoruma's *In the Woods of Memory* is a powerful novel of compact complexity, set in the Japanese prefecture of Okinawa. Beginning in World War II, during the 1945 American invasion of the area, the story centers around the rape of a local girl by four US marines, along with the psychological aftershocks following that horrific crime.

Okinawa's plight is an underlying theme in Medoruma's fiction, with a native consciousness lending depth of detail and compassion to his characters and to the region itself. Following the 1879 annexation by Japan, Okinawans were pressured to stop using their indigenous language and assimilate. With the later establishment of American military bases, Okinawa found itself occupied during wartime and for decades afterward, continuing through to the present day.

Amid the novel's near-tropical backdrop, flanked by waters full of shellfish and coral and shaded by banyan trees, the American marines and war arrive. Their presence is feared at first, but because the soldiers offer medical care, food, cigarettes, and alcohol, resistance begins to weaken. Locals who once screamed anti-American epithets are now quick to "grovel" in order to coexist with the invaders and keep the free supplies coming. *In the Woods of Memory* touches upon a less valiant yet more realistic aspect of war, specifically the ambiguous ethics of civilians just trying to survive.

The gang rape of beautiful and kindhearted Sayoko, however, causes a young Okinawan named Seiji to take action. Though the other men of the village seem angry about the event, Seiji sees how their expressions are "emasculated by fear." Seeking revenge against the marines who violated Sayoko, Seiji follows them into the sea as they take a quick swim to cool off. He then stabs one soldier with a harpoon. Seiji is arrested for his attack, but no marines face charges for violating Sayoko. Seiji and Sayoko both survive the traumatic chain of events, but the novel casts them as almost mythically tragic, their ruined lives linked together forever by the cruelty of fate.

Through its alternating narrative that shifts perspectives over a span of sixty years, *In the Woods of Memory* creates a subtle yet intense and multilayered portrait of Okinawa during World War II and into the twenty-first century.

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