FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Thriller

Remote Control
Kotaro Isaka
Stephen Snyder, translator
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Taking office at the age of fifty, Sadayoshi Kaneda becomes the youngest prime minister in Japanese history. The old guard isn't exactly thrilled about this turn of events, but to the people he is wildly popular. In a plot undoubtedly inspired by the Kennedy assassination, this charismatic politician is cut down by an enemy when he returns home to Sendai for a victory parade. In this instance it's not a bullet, but rather a bomb, that ends his life, one planted in a remote-control helicopter that detonates against his limousine.

In the chaos that follows, a suspect quickly emerges due in part to ubiquitous security pods—like our traffic cameras on steroids—that photograph citizens and monitor their e-mail and cell phone traffic. Masaharu Aoyagi, an unemployed delivery truck driver is accused of the crime…and convicted by the press in the court of public opinion. But how could an unremarkable individual such as this pull off such a thing? And what would motivate him?

What follows is an epic manhunt experienced from the point of view of the suspect himself as well as that of regular folks watching as events unfold on television. Aoyagi quickly discovers that seemingly unrelated events—brief notoriety he gained a few years back by saving an actress from a robber; his former company publicizing his route and contact information; a threatening phone call; an accusation of groping by a woman on a train that cost him his job; an unexpected reunion with an old school buddy; and an improperly aimed security camera—all serve to place him at the scene of the crime and make him appear guilty.

The book is separated into sections: the beginning; the audience; twenty years later; the incident; and three months later. Owing to this arrangement, readers know Aoyagi's name as he is described as the perpetrator in news reports of the assassination, but his point of view isn't introduced until page 60. By then they might think that they know what will happen, that Aoyagi is a simple patsy whose story will end badly and soon…but plot twists and turns keep

the narrative riveting, and surprising, right until the end. Dialogue supersedes action in this character-driven work, yet the pacing will keep readers interested throughout.

Remote Control is a complicated story, but a quick read. An interesting theme highlighting differences in Japanese versus American attitudes is the level of acceptance of the trade-off between personal liberty and the illusion of safety brought about by a surveillance society. The characters' complaints about security pods have more to do with lack of results than with their intrusive nature. Behavior of the law enforcement officers is different too; most never use a firearm, let alone carry one on a regular basis, so when Aoyagi is shot at by his pursuers it's a bigger deal than some American readers might intuitively realize. And, of course, a hint into how pervasive the conspiracy is.

Author Kotaro Isaka was born in 1971 in Matsudo, Chiba Prefecture, and graduated from Tohoku University School of Law. Formerly a systems engineer, he debuted as a writer with Audubon's Prayer in 2003. His novels and short-story collections have won the Eiji Yoshikawa Prize for New Writers, Shugoro Yamamoto Prize, Suntory Grand Prize of Mystery, and the Japan Booksellers' Prize, among other honors. Remote Control, originally released as Golden Slumber, has been made into a movie, as have other titles such as Fish Story, Gravity's Clown, and Rush Life.

Translating from Japanese to English under any circumstances isn't easy, but maintaining the author's style, wit, and subtle humor when performing that translation is a herculean effort. Stephen Snyder pulled it off flawlessly. He is also the acclaimed translator of Natsuo Kirino's Out, Ryu Murakami's Coin Locker Babies, and Yoko Ogawa's The Diving Pool, The Housekeeper and the Professor, and Hotel Iris. He teaches Japanese literature at Middlebury College in Vermont.

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