

Spirit of the Fox

Matthew O'Connell

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Spirit of the Fox is a gripping, culturally immersed mystery.

Matthew O'Connell's intriguing and compelling mystery, *Spirit of the Fox*, draws on the culture and history of Japan.

Meiko, whose parents, David and Chieko, are divorced, doesn't feel like she fits in—either in San Diego, where she grew up with her father, or in Japan, where she's teaching English and learning about her mother's homeland.

After years of painful separation, Meiko and her mother start to rebuild their relationship. But then, Meiko takes a trip to Kyoto and disappears. When Meiko's picture is found with a businessman who jumped out of a window, her parents work to figure out who is behind her disappearance, and why she is being connected to suicides.

In the course of their investigation, they learn about the historical significance of foxes in Japanese culture. Chieko's mother, Aiko, becomes convinced that Meiko's involvement with various businessmen isn't a coincidence, but is instead connected to Japanese folklore about fox possession. Elsewhere, Meiko struggles to remember who she is before her alter ego, Hana, takes over entirely.

Cultural details about *kitsune*, or foxes, ground the sometimes far-fetched mystery. Atmospheric descriptions of Japan's spiritual landscape help to set the scene. Breaking with form, the novel gives readers much more information than any one character possesses through expository scenes that implicate the culprit early on. The technique is both frustrating and delightful, drawing connections that the characters themselves cannot yet make.

David and Chieko are substantially developed, especially as they are forced to rekindle their long-closed connection to each other. They realistically acknowledge what drove them apart. Meiko, the police, and many secondary characters are flat and predictable; they don't show much ability to think outside the box. Aiko, Meiko's grandmother, is spunky, skeptical, and one of the most active sleuths in the story.

Early in the book, as Meiko explores Japan, the tone is pleasant, even as the pace is meandering. When Meiko disappears, the appearance of Hana as a character is jarring and unclear; the revelation of the mystery speeds up the story. Once Hana is established as a character, her schemes are gut-wrenching and impressive. The resolution of the mystery is deliberately unclear, but satisfying and appropriate.

The writing is precise, perpetuating a persistent curiosity about why Meiko has disappeared, with reasons remaining unclear throughout much of the text. Descriptions are terse, moving quickly between action and dialogue, with some mouthwatering descriptions of food and drink coming between. The dialogue slips into clichés, especially between Hana and the men she seduces.

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LAURA LEAVITT (August 7, 2018)

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