ForeWord Reviews

The Gourmet Club
Jun?ichiro Tanizaki
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Obsession. Sado-masochism. Decadence. The Japan of Tanizaki's world is a montage of opium dens and secrets. This sextet of short stories ranges from children at play and torture, to Buddhist acolytes contemplating the forbidden world of "women." Throughout, the author displays a masterful hand as a short story writer and an artist of the grotesque. Tanizaki is one of Japan's most celebrated twentieth-century writers. Known in the United States for such novels as The Makioka Sisters and Some Prefer Nettles, his shorter works have rarely been translated into English.

The title piece, "The Gourmet Club," is a disturbing look at the inner workings of a group of gourmands whose jaded senses fuel their passions for indulgent and exotic foods. Wearied by the same old Japanese and Chinese fare, they search for new and unique tastes. The Count, the leader of the club, witnesses a gastronomical orgy in an opium den and, inspired, proceeds to serve his fellow club members such dishes as Deep-fried Woman, Korean style. Though the meal is not "really" human, the line between the real and unreal, diner and dined upon is blurred in a peculiarly unsettling ending.

Several of the other stories in the collection— "The Children," "Mr. Bluemond?" —are similarly structured: Tanizaki strings the reader along with oddities and quirky bits, finally concluding in a shattering and disturbing revelation. Though Tanizaki's strength lies in detail to opulence and the depravity that hides beneath human motivation, he is also versatile. "The Two Acolytes" is a departure for the author in that it privileges a life of religion and contemplation over the pleasures of the floating world.

One of the joys in this collection is its evenness: there are no weak stories thrown in for padding. The writing is earthy, detailed, and bold. The stories in this book are a pleasure to read, if not particularly pleasurable in content.

Johanna Massé