

Three Lives

Yank Shi

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A man who's capable of reincarnation recalls his past lives, looking for connections between them, in the musing novel Three Lives.

In Yank Shi's novel *Three Lives*, a reincarnated man with past-life memories reflects on his connections to previous times.

Shu Rui's memories include experiences from three past lives. In one, he led a peaceful existence as a beloved cat. His first human life was one of relative luxury, as a upper-class woman living in early 1900s China; it ended in a Japanese air raid in 1942. He recalls the underworld and being pulled back to Earth. His second human life began in 1943; he lived as a peasant farmer. Now, Shu Rui learns that these lives are intertwined in intricate ways.

These intricacies complicate the storytelling, though. Shu Rui's recollections jump around in time; minimal space is devoted to their most emotional events. Shu Rui also sometimes lingers on extraneous details to the book's detriment. Further, each of his life stories is bookended by recollections and observations regarding how others' lives went on without that version of Shu Rui until his next reincarnation. Only in the epilogues of each life story does the book become focused and detailed: Shu Rui covers how each life impacted their loved ones (and enemies), making note of the ripples left by each incarnation.

In the end, Shu Rui himself is the least developed character in the book. His focus is so concentrated on his previous identities and on loved ones from past lives that who he is now is obscured. Indeed, Shu Rui is a distant narrator who recalls the harrowing events of his past lives at a remove, as though he's reciting from a textbook. This also dilutes the power of the book's conclusion, which involves Shu Rui interacting with people who remember his previous lives as well.

Throughout the book, plain prose mixes with stilted language; often, the work seems mistranslated. Feelings are eschewed in favor of historical and contextual details, despite the book's coverage of childhood traumas, joyful marriages, and the civilian side of war. While notions of love and hope are proclaimed, and while they're pointed to in the course of retelling each life story, they're not often felt in the story itself.

In the fantastical novel *Three Lives*, a man makes a record of his previous lives, deaths, and experiences of the afterlife.

JOHN M. MURRAY (December 14, 2023)

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