



Hopeful Monsters

Hiromi Goto

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“Hopeful monsters” are genetically abnormal organisms that, nonetheless, adapt and survive in their environments. In these devastating stories, the hopeful monsters in question are those who will not be tethered by familial duty nor bound by the ghosts of their past.

Home becomes fraught, reality a nightmare as Hiromi Goto weaves her characters through tales of domestic crises and cultural dissonance. They are the walking wounded—a mother who is terrified by a newborn daughter who bears a tail; a “stinky girl” who studies the human condition in a shopping mall; a family on holiday with a visiting grandfather who cannot abide their “foreign” nature. But wills are a force unto themselves, and Goto’s characters are imbued with the light of myth and magic-realism. With humor and keen insight, Goto makes the familiar seem strange, and deciphers those moments when the idyllic skews into the absurd and the sublime.

From “Stinky Girl”:

The unbearable voices of mythic manatees, the cry of the phoenix, the whispers of kappa lovers beside a gurgling stream. The voice of the moon that is ever turned away from our gaze, the song of suns colliding. The sounds which permeate from my skin on such a level of intensity that mortal senses recoil, deflect beauty into ugliness as a way of coping. And my joy. Such incredible joy. The hairs on my arms stand electric, the static energy and the heat amplifies my smell/sound with such exponential dizzying intensity, that the plastic which surrounds me bursts apart, falls away from my being like an artificial cocoon.

I hover, twenty feet in the air.

Hiromi Goto is the author of the novels *Chorus of Mushrooms* (winner of a Commonwealth Writers Prize and co-winner of the Canada-Japan Book Award) and *The Kappa Child* (winner of the James Tiptree, Jr. Award). She lives in Burnaby, British Columbia.

Hopeful Monsters Details

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From Reader Review Hopeful Monsters for online ebook

Pamster says

The title story made me almost throw up. I was like, oh my god, I cannot read this while I eat. THEN I was like, I DON'T HAVE TO FINISH IT AT ALL. I let it gooooo. Some of the other stories were really good, but still a lot of gross body stuff making me uneasy throughout. Bods! Yuck!

Charles says

Stuff I Read - Hopeful Monsters by Hiromi Goto Review

I picked this up in preparation for Wiscon '14 where the author will be one of the guests of honor. It's something of a strange thing, this collection, very dark, very concerned with the themes of death and birth and family and culture. If it was just that I'd be tempted to say that it is typical, but this collection was anything but typical. The stories, ranging from rather mundane tales of picking relatives up at the airport to those featuring cat demons and kappa, are interesting and weird (in a good way). While existing only in the "real" world, the stories take elements of the fantastic, from children born with tails to obese women floating.

Probably the biggest obstacle for me getting into the stories, though, was my own lack of experience with either Canadian culture or Japanese culture, both of which are rather central to the story. I might not be wholly ignorant of them, because I have read a number of other Japanese collections and novels, but I did feel that there were some things that I was missing out on, that I didn't quite have the right frame of reference to understand. Or perhaps I just didn't know exactly what to think of some of the stories because they were very strange, surreal, where it was difficult to distinguish reality from dream. That said, I feel like I understand both cultures a little better now, which is always a good thing when looking at how successful a collection is.

My favorite stories probably were the ones that tended more into the speculative areas. Perhaps that's just my own bias, but Stinky Girl was my favorite, in part because it set up the character so vividly, and gave her a moment of true redemption and transformation, and in part because it was a voice that is so seldom heard in fiction. Similarly, the story with the kappa and the story with the cat demons and the story with the tails were also among my favorites, at least in part because they used those elements of Japanese folklore to make a statement about how the Japanese heritage is something difficult to bear at times in a Western country which has much more progressive ideas in certain areas (namely women's roles).

So this was a quite enjoyable collection, certainly dark, but funny at times, emotionally wrenching at others. Most of the stories worked well for me, and I think the structure of the collection was well thought out, moving nicely from moment to moment, from theme to theme. Nothing felt out of place, even the most fantastic elements, and it made me think, challenged me to figure some things out, to question how I read. It was a good collection, and a great bunch of stories, and I'm giving it an 8.25/10.

Kyle says

Amazingly abnormal (and sometimes scary) short stories that examine a lot of complex themes.

Jingshi says

Incredibly apt and descriptive prose. Sometimes I found her stories a little too metaphysical or monologue-ish, but more often her choices of words arrested and amazed me. It is worth obtaining this collection for the title story alone. The description of how her protagonist received bad news will stick with me for a long time.

Ben Nash says

Most of the stories in this collection stick in the mind. Goto creates strong characters, places, and situations. The horror she finds in some common parts of life becomes that much more visceral for it.

"Tales from the Breast" was the closest to a twist-ending story here, but it was a great one. Funny and a bit terrifying at the same time. Sometimes a person's body can become alien to them, and the portrayal of just how difficult breast-feeding might be worked to heighten that sense.

"Drift" wasn't as much a story as it was a snapshot. It brought Kawabata to mind. The trudge through the snow and the subsequent rest in the hot-spring made me long for winter.

"From Across a River" and "Camp Americana" were the creepiest stories here. "River" had a woman going mad from the loss of a child, trying to deal with life through the murk of that aftermath, and "Americana" had a judgmental old man having his fears realized. With both, Goto connects to real life in such a way to enhance the effect of the surreal.

"Stinky Girl" had the most distinctive voice in the whole collection, and, to me the most unreliable narrator. After discussion with another reader who took everything as straight-forward, I found that the story was effective both ways.

The shortest stories in the collection worked the least for me. I just couldn't quite understand them.

Joel says

I was very impressed with this book of stories.

Many of them have twists of fantasy, especially at their ending; but they are rooted in domestic life and family dynamics. Two of the best stories, "Hopeful Monsters" and "Tales From the Breast", deal specifically with the trials of pregnancy and new motherhood. Many of the stories depict cross-cultural marriages between a Japanese and a Westerner; in "Camp Americana", an old, traditional Japanese man struggles to come to terms with his son's Westernized wife and children.

Goto's writing is subtle; she does a very effective job of putting the reader inside her character's heads, making us understand their anxieties and dreads. There's a constant tension underlying most of these stories;

and yet, despite the fact that sometimes the characters' anxieties come true, there is also hope. In "Drift", we watch an angry young woman on holiday with her meek mother; by the end of the story she has come to realize how poorly she's treated her mother, and moved to make amends. "Hopeful Monsters" and "Stinky Girl" present us with the possibility that greatness can come from the very things which set us painfully apart from others.

I wouldn't say that every story here is powerful, but most of them are; and the ones that didn't interest me were generally short ("Night", "All Possible Moments"). Highly recommended.

Bree says

So I'll be honest - while the writer and the reader in me agree that this collection is beautifully, even masterfully written, many of its subtleties are completely lost on me. It's not a collection to sit down and read in a sitting or two - though it was assigned as a reading assignment for a graduate class to be completed in a week. This one takes digesting and contemplation and several re-reads. While I generally appreciate that kind of complexity - I think this collection is missing balance.

I would recommend this to friends who like to tackle very complex fiction and like a challenge but I'd suggest reading one story at a time and waiting for that story to process before moving on.

Marcus says

Tales of domestic life, almost all from a Japanese woman's perspective. Not written for my demographic.

Stinky Girl stands head and shoulders above the rest.

Other stories I would give the thumbs up to:

Tales from the Breast

Drift (was ok)

Home Stay

From Across a River

Jude McLaughlin says

Start with Shirley Jackson's cynicism and sense of horror, mix in the mythic and folkloric qualities of Nalo Hopkinson's work, and add a dash of poetry, and you have Goto's short stories. We got this volume after listening to Goto read from "Tales From the Breast" at WisCon, and the end of the story was not a disappointment. The rest of the stories are just as good, and just as gripping.

Kazza says

Hit or miss. Some really great stories and some that I didn't quite follow. Overall enjoyable.

Melinda says

An excellent collection of short stories dealing with themes of family, birth, motherhood and mother-daughter relationships. Using magical realism, Goto, explores life experiences of immigrants and communities that are "othered" America, in particular, Canada.

What I really connected with from this collection of short stories was the realness of the characters' experiences. The mother who is breastfeeding and the physical and emotional pain she experiences as well as the ways that her feelings and experiences are invalidated because she should sacrifice self for the need of her child. The daughter who takes her mother hiking and comes to realize that her mother is her frustrating mother but accepting of the daughter's sexuality in the only way she knows to be. So much intense expression of people in only a few stories. Definitely a book to keep and re-read when you want to appreciate the human relationships.

Leseparatist says

The stories are such a mixed bag - I really enjoyed some of them (including the title one) and others left me completely unimpressed.
