

“stickiness,” to years of careful marketing and millions (sometimes billions) of dollars in advertising. Name evaluation, aside from metrics like market valuation, is highly subjective; what is “awesome” to one person may be “annoying” to the next, to use Watkins’ terminology. But as long as they recognize the book’s shortcomings, the average business owner who needs a name for a company or product will find *Hello, My Name Is Awesome* a valuable resource for creating meaningful, appropriate, and available names.

Sutton Strategy

LAUREL SUTTON



Spring Garden. By TOMOKA SHIBASAKI. Translated from Japanese by Polly Barton. London, UK: Pushkin Press. 2014. Pbk. 2017. Pp. 154. ISBN 978-1-78227-270-0.

Spring Garden is the title of a novel by Tomoka Shibasaki. It is also the title of a book inside Shibasaki’s book. Duality emerges many times in this slim book. Names take on dual roles in this tale of people living with other people’s names, in other people’s homes. Characters point out whenever two people share a birth year. And, fittingly, we encounter many gifts being given; gifts can be regifted.

In fact, I at first believed that the major theme of this book was regifting. Over the course of the novel, many gifts are given to thank people for favors and, in turn, for giving a thank-you gift. Our protagonist, Taro, never actually keeps a gift, passing everything along to his neighbors and co-workers, always with a reason for not welcoming the item into his own life. The book is set in Tokyo, and gift-giving is part of the Japanese culture, but Shibasaki has created in Taro a protagonist who seems (and prefers) to exist in a limbo state, one of transition. Nothing settles with him.

The act of giving and re-giving gifts moves us into the realm of trading identities, with the names of the presenter and recipient changing hands. Taro is intensely interested in identity: who shares a name with whom, which people in his life were born in the same year or in the same hometown. (We learn, for example, that two characters share a birth year with Neil Young. It seems important.)

People’s homes also seem to have names and identities that are traded over the course of the novel. Taro lives in a housing development, an L-shaped apartment building called View Palace Saeki III, with an unusual naming scheme. The family name makes sense: a Mrs. Saeki owns these “flats.” Taro (like the reader), however, never finds out if there are a View Palace Saeki I and II. Entering while naming is in progress, we are robbed of starting at the beginning.

Besides being the third of something, these flats hold another onomastic mystery:

Instead of having room numbers, the flats were identified by animals of the Chinese zodiac. So, starting with Taro’s flat in the short section, the flats on the ground floor had the names Pig, Dog, Rooster, Monkey, and on the first floor, Sheep, Horse, Snake, Dragon. It was common these days for people not to put their names on the nameplates on their doors, or on their letterboxes either, so the flat names were all there was to go on. (11)

A neighbor puzzles about the zodiac scheme of the flats. “They start with Dragon, right? That’s the fifth one in the zodiac. That means the first four are missing. I think

there must have been a View Palace Saeki I and II” to account for the use of those missing signs (62). Yet only four zodiac signs are unaccounted for (Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit), not enough to make up two additional housing complexes.

Given Taro’s aversion to permanence, he does not try to learn his neighbors’ names. Instead, a woman residing in the Snake flat is called Mrs. Snake. Another neighbor is Dragon Woman. Taro does not interact with the world around him. He claims his favorite pastime is napping. Yet he is not a recluse. He has a full-time job and was once married. But his failure to find out the mysteries of the names around him says something about Taro’s character. Mrs. Snake is always just that; Dragon Woman herself must offer up her real name to Taro; she must name herself to claim her identity.

Name changes seem to disorient Taro. A male colleague from work gets married and takes his wife’s surname (explaining to Taro that his wife is an only child). Not only that, he now uses this new name at work, which is apparently even more unusual. At one point, this colleague laments that the choice he made ultimately means that he must be buried in his wife’s family’s grave. The change of name has thus changed his home for the rest of eternity. It all makes Taro very uncomfortable.

View Palace Saeki III is slated for demolition (more flux). As tenants move out, they are not replaced, so the flats become more and more desolate. Mrs. Saeki’s house is next door to the flats she owns, but even she no longer lives there. Whether a residence is occupied or not matters to Taro; it is a distinction he often considers (again, a focus on limbo). Is it really Mrs. Saeki’s house if she is now in a nursing home? Over time, the flats house only three tenants: Taro, Mrs. Snake, and Dragon Woman, who has in fact, we learn, been born under a different zodiac sign, not the dragon but the rooster. She tells Taro (and us) that her name is Nishi, and that is what she becomes for the rest of the book. However, she refuses to reveal to him her pen name for a long time. (She is an illustrator.) When Nishi informs Taro of Mrs. Snake’s actual name, he never uses it, and the reader remains in the dark.

Nishi has been obsessed since her teens with a book of photos called *Spring Garden*. The images are of a private house that actually exists right next to these flats. The photos were taken by (and of) the occupants of twenty years ago, a husband and wife named Taro Gyushima and Kaiko Umamura. Kaiko is an actress, and we later find out that she is identified in the book by her stage name, not her real name of Asuka Sawada. And of course the husband shares a name with our protagonist. Two Taros. Nishi researches the couple and finds news of Kaiko over the twenty intervening years, as she tries to make the book and the real house come together for herself, “but the more [Nishi] read, the further Asuka Sawada grew apart from Kaiko Umamura” (58). Realities converge when Nishi visits the house in the book and befriends the current occupants: “It seemed as though the decades that had passed there before and the afternoon now slipping by were coming together as one” (97).

The house, too, has evolved in twenty years. The nameplate now reads “Morio.” Taro’s sense of the distinction between a simply unoccupied house and a vacant one is confirmed by the appearance and disappearance of a home’s nameplate, when folks bother to use one at all. A word about nameplates. They are absent from View Palace Saeki III, but they are valuable to Taro; they are how he confirms his hunch about whether a flat has been vacated (nameplate gone) or re-rented (new name). When younger, he would notice television celebrities’ names on nameplates in his neighborhood and marvel at the duality: are these famous neighbors the TV characters they play or themselves in those houses? It was difficult for him to reconcile the two, their dual identities, dual names.

Burying and unearthing are other themes that arise from the flux all around Taro, the trading of the visible and the invisible. An unexploded bomb is discovered in the area. Taro muses that the discovered bomb is around the same age as his father. One photo in

the book *Spring Garden* in particular preoccupies Taro, the occupant Taro of twenty years ago posing with a shovel in the house's garden. It is ambiguous: we don't know if this Taro is burying or unearthing something. Protagonist Taro's thoughts about burial coalesce at the end of the story. He climbs the wall into the garden, finds the same spot as in the twenty-year-old photo, digs a hole, and places in it the remaining ashes of his father, along with a wasp's nest (more housing) that he had discovered intact but empty in his flat. Taro has been in limbo, napping, until he climbs that wall and both finalizes his father's resting place and clears up the ambiguity of the photo in the book of the other Taro mid-dig: now it is the action of burying (as opposed to unearthing).

But then Taro returns to limbo. He enters the house and falls asleep in the upstairs bedroom. In the morning, he is awoken by a police investigation downstairs. He hears that a woman's body has been discovered in the garden. Something perhaps was unburied, unearthed after all. "Okay, and cut!" he then hears (152). A film shoot is taking place. An actress, whose name he remembers (but doesn't share with us), motions for him to scam. The duality of fiction and reality appears once more.

Toward the end of the book, a potential solution to the four missing zodiac signs of View Palace Saeki III seems close. Mrs. Saeki's son, Tora, visits the flats to give Taro his eviction date. Tora means tiger, one of the four missing zodiac signs. 'This is going out on a bit of a limb,' Taro says, 'but do your brother and sister's names happen to use the characters for "cow" or "rabbit"?' (131). Alas, Tora is an only child. The naming scheme will have to remain a mystery.

Taro is so much in limbo that in the last twenty pages of the book, he relinquishes the role of protagonist. The narration switches from third to first person, offering us now the point of view of Taro's sister (whose name we do not learn). The sister had also encountered the *Spring Garden* photography book when younger. (*Spring Garden* must have been a best seller!) A friend had a crush on the Taro in the photographs and an intense dislike for the wife, attacking even her name: '[H]er name was weird. When I suggested that Kaiko Umamura was a stage name, probably the name of her character in the theatre troupe, my friend said she couldn't possibly get along with someone who would choose a name like that. In her mind, Kaiko Umamura could do nothing right' (136-137).

Taro's Tokyo is also in flux, in duality. It is constantly building itself up and tearing itself down. The limbo that Taro dwells on is all around him. Time is almost up for his flat. The *Spring Garden* house is in flux but also exists in many current forms (book and reality). Nishi has multiple names over the course of this story. The title *Spring Garden* plays a dual role. The house in the picture book *Spring Garden* exists in two realities, twenty years apart. No wonder Taro finds his grounding by burying a piece of his own history. During Shibasaki's book, while underground (or at least masked) objects surface, Taro reverses the process.

Marymount Manhattan College

SUSAN BEHRENS

<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8983-0753>

