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Since Christopher Ransom has been living in Kyoto, the ancient capital of Japan, he has devoted himself to the study of karate. But soon he finds himself threatened by everything he thought he had left behind - a sequence of bizarre events whose consequences he cannot escape.

Ransom Details

Date : Published 2001 by Bloomsbury (first published 1985)

ISBN : 9780747553663

Author : Jay McInerney

Format : Paperback 279 pages

Genre : Fiction, Cultural, Japan, Novels, Contemporary, Thriller

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From Reader Review Ransom for online ebook

Ercilia Delancer says

I picked up this book hoping that the author would offer insights into the Japanese culture that I hadn't had a chance to see yet; however, I was thoroughly bored with the pages after pages of description of his karate training while gaining little understanding as to how the flashbacks to the story in Pakistan were related to the protagonist's current troubles. The ending was simply ridiculous. Not recommended at all.

Meg Booth says

I really enjoyed this! Having recently been welcomed into the expat lifestyle I enjoyed all of McInerney's references to it. As luck so has it I was an expat in Japan just as the characters of this novel and so delighted at every mention of familiar streets, mountains and ridiculous Japanese mannerisms. If you've ever been to Japan or lived abroad or if you simply have a mild interest in either of these things I think you will enjoy this book.

Adam says

I was ready to give this a very positive review, to recommend it to my friends, until the last chapter. The book had that sense of insincere noir that's hard to hate. The easy jokes about Japanese English were there, but nothing overtly offensive. The characters were interesting, fun to be around/fun to hate. But that conclusion! So very disappointing, so anti-climactic.

But I suppose that fulfills a realistic ending to the very apathetic, aimless protagonist. In many ways I found Ransom himself to fit into the same mold of Murakami Haruki's protagonists: largely opinion-less in conversation, wandering around, staying out of conflict but finding themselves in the middle of it. All that said, I found the flashback story to be extremely interesting, and probably explains the disappointment of the conclusion. So maybe it's not the conclusion that's disappointing in the end. Maybe it's just the character. Maybe it's just Ransom's nihilism, his sadness in the face of possible joy. It just hurts to think about. And, in that, it's a very well-written character, and a very well-written narrative.

Emily says

So good until the final chapter basically ruins the entire book.

Cari says

Boring. It's a kind of a slice of life in a world where life is messed up and oddly out of touch with reality. I read Bright Lights, Big City a long time ago and loved it for that same feeling but I wonder now if it would stand up to a reread. This book ends with more questions than answers, and the way that it is written; non-

linearly, makes the reader think that things will eventually be explained. They are not.

Another thing I dislike is the protagonists unreliability. He has all these grand standards that he has worked so hard to maintain for the duration of his time in Japan and yet all of that unravels in the last two chapters but without any reflection on that fact by the protagonist. It's all well and good to show a human being human but I felt like Ransom's friend Miles had more self introspection than Ransom did in the book, despite limited screen time, and in contradiction with the contrast of their supposed characters.

In the end it took me a long time to read this book, which is regrettable, as it leaves me feeling like I wasted my time on it. I didn't learn something about human nature, or the mechanics of writing, or even anything about how to tell a story. I was just bored.

Kate says

I read this book because I had lots of spare time at work and was looking for something I could power read, and this was just perfect for that! This was a big accomplishment for me, as I had to ignore lots of negative reviews and summaries - and it was worth it! While this book was not life changing, the story itself was of good quality, it kept me well interested, with a few great twists up until the very end. It is an enjoyable, easy read, and I would recommend it to a friend! It explores the challenges of relationships, morals and feeling "at home" while living abroad, and all the challenges that come with! It has many characters, from various walks of life and with various personalities, and is an enjoyable way to spend a few good hours!

Lawrence Kelley says

This book definitely had the mid-eighties, over-confident American vibe to it. A friend attending Dartmouth College recommended it to me. Many Americans, myself included, were in awe of the rise of Japan's industrial might, and this book allowed folks who couldn't actually travel to Japan to enjoy the experience vicariously. A nice period piece, for sure.

Ray says

Wow did I of all people not know that Jay McInerney wrote a novel about expats in Japan?

When I came across a used copy of Ransom recently, I had to read it. I think it's very much worth reading, but for the literary brat pack author's second novel it doesn't hold up well compared to his unique debut with Bright Lights, Big City.

The eponymous character Ransom is interesting, a rich kid running away by studying martial arts in 1970s Japan, is somewhat intriguing although indulgent. Lots of observations on the Japan scene from expats to locals (and lots of bad Engrish), with Vietnamese refugees looming as well.

Much of it did ring true, and McInerney seems to know his stuff when it comes to Japan. But the martial arts aspect didn't interest me, too much of how cool is for a white guy to work hard to train under a sensei. The plot with Ransom's family didn't engage me either. Overall, lots of snippets were good but as a novel I am

left uncaring. Perhaps an anthology about the weird 70s Kyoto scene would have been better.

Still, as expat literature goes it is definitely required reading for historical reasons if nothing else.

Tony says

McInerney, Jay. RANSOM. (1985) *****.

This was the author's second novel, and came out as a paperback original. It is the story of Chris Ransom, a young man who is trying to escape from his father in America and create a life for himself. He is in Japan, in Kyoto, studying karate, and interacting with a few of the other gaijin in the neighborhood. His steady job, like most other Americans in Japan without a profession, is teaching English to groups of young salarymen who expect that they will need the language on rising within their companies. Ransom has the highest hopes of reaching the pinnacle within his karate dojo, and has selected one that has a reputation for toughness. He is a very level-headed guy and supports his other English-speaking friends through their ordeals in a strange country. He has a fairly good grasp of the Japanese language, but, face it, he can't disguise the fact that he is not Japanese. He is involved – as a close friend – with a woman named Marilyn. Marilyn – an Englishized version of her Vietnamese name, Mai Lin – has no papers, and is being harassed by a member of one of the jakuzi gangs. He also has a friend named Miles Ryder, another American, who has started up two businesses in Kyoto: "Buffalo Roam," and "Hormone Derange," the first being a country-western clothing store, the second a western-style saloon. Miles is married to a Japanese girl and is close to becoming a first-time father. The adventures that occur in Ransom's life are complicated by a man named De Vito, who for some odd reason has developed a hatred for Chris and is continually calling him out to fight. Some basic driving elements are missing from the plot, but they seem not to be of importance. Spending time with Ransom and his friends is fascinating. The reader is sucked into his world and travels with him and his friends over a period of several months. The dialog is witty, and, often hilarious. The gap in the two societies is highlighted by the hilarious mistakes in both languages and in the dimly understood differences in the two cultures. This is a novel that the reader will not be able to put down. Highly recommended.

Walter says

Righteous fiction. Highly recommend.

Jane says

It was almost good and then the end was incredibly, offensively stupid. Whoever blurbed it as "brilliant" should lose their job.

Catalina says

It's not a full 5, but neither 4, so I rounded up to 5 :D

It's incredible how this book reminded me not of 1, not 2, but 3 books I read and enjoyed: with the Japanese

atmosphere, Yakuza, illegal emigrants prostituting themselves, strange strangers with a taste for violence and death, and the solitary main character reminded me of Murakami's After Dark and Ry? Murakami's In the Miso Soup. While with the situation of gaijins in Japan and the drug story, of Karl Taro Greenfeld's Standard Deviations. But that doesn't mean this book was less original, it even managed to surprise me with the final(ok i admit i cheated and read the last line when I was in the middle of it, and i felt so sad, of all the possible endings I didn't anticipated that).

Same style of the Bright Lights, Big City, but this time a book in the 3rd person, even if at times the story seemed to turned to the point of view of the character and that was a little confusing(I especially hated the dialog in the 3rd person).

So far Jay McInerney didn't let me down, so I'll try another book of his!

Glenn Russell says

I read this novel set in Kyoto, Japan featuring 26-year old American Christopher Ransom and his practice of martial arts three time when first published as part of the Vintage Contemporary series back in 1988 and I just did read it yet again. Why do I find this book so absolutely fascinating? On reflection, here are a dozen reasons:

Mishima-like Purity

Yukio Mishima's novel "Runaway Horses" takes place in 1932 and features 19-year old Isao Iinuma who seeks purity through the code of the samurai and his practice of martial arts. Eventually, in the name of purity, Isao commits seppuku (ritual suicide). McInerney's main character Ransom (he doesn't use Christopher since he hates the name) in many ways seeks a similar purity and transcendence, a purity separating himself from everyone and everything. Being a Westerner and living in a commercialized, homogenized, media-obsessed 1977 world culture makes Ransom's quest a study in stark contrasts.

The Power of Dad

More than anything else, Ransom wants to separate himself from the secret schemes and theatrical power plays devised by his father in an attempt to manipulate his life. Meanwhile, his dad, Christopher Ransom Sr. (the big reason Ransom hates the name Christopher) tells his son directly, "You need a certain kind of knowledge and power working for you." Ransom doesn't buy any of it since he sees his father as a serious artist and playwright who sold out to become a rich, big-time Hollywood producer of crap TV shows.

The Way of the Martial Artist

Ransom considered joining a Zen temple but found something even better – an impressive sensei running a karate dojo. Ransom believed he would become a different person if he kept training in karate under his sensei, that he could achieve self-mastery that would, among other benefits, reduce the complexity of his interacting with others. However, as it turned out, this sensei was one tough cookie, holding practice out on an asphalt parking lot, allowing kicks and punches to the head and insisting that a follower of the martial arts never break off an attack, no matter how weak or injured his opponent.

The Monk as Martial Artist

Ransom particularly admires Ito, the top student in the dojo, a karate student he sees as having the demeanor of a monk on Quaaludes, that is, as someone capable of always resting in his own peaceful center even when

engaging in martial combat. By Ransom's eye, Ito the monk moves like a cat floating on air and embodies greater possibilities than simply a champion excelling in a sport.

The Shadow Side of Martial Arts

Big, bulky Oklahoma born and bred Frank DeVito, ex-Marine, current Bruce Lee clone, needs combat for self-definition; as he observes: everything is real and alive when you are fighting. Not surprisingly, DeVito labels nearly everybody he sees, including Ransom, as prime enemies who must be conquered and destroyed. To his credit, Jay McInerney portrays Frank DeVito not only as the prototypical ugly American but also as a fully rounded character. Reading about Frank's lowlife is a highlight of the story.

East meets West

Ransom's friend Miles sells cowboy hat and cowboy boots and other American West paraphernalia to the Japanese, who can't get enough of imitating American culture, even things like singing American jazz and American blues with a Japanese accent. This is one of the more humorous aspects of Jay's novel. And there are a number of cultural zingers, as in when Ransom spots a photo of his Japanese taxi driver with his arm around a prize American he once game a ride in his taxi. And whose face did Ransom see in the photo? As Ransom tells us with wry humor: "There he is, Jack Nicklaus, a baby-faced god and credit to his race."

Femme Fatale, sort of

Meet Marilyn, ravishing young lady and nightclub singer fresh from Vietnam, a lady tangled up with the Japanese mafia and in need of some serious help. Marilyn turns to Ransom, a man who can't stand to see a damsel in distress, particularly when her distress could impact his friend Miles.

English for the Japanese

Ransom's part-time job is teaching English to Japanese businessmen. The book is filled with American English rendered in tawdry Japanese, as in the writing on a high-end fashion shopping bag printed to resemble an English dictionary definition: "FUNKY BABE: Let's call a funky girl "Funky Babe." Girl, open-minded, know how to swing. Love to feel everything rather than think. They must all be nice girls." Enough to drive a seeker of purity to drink, if that seeker drinks. Ransom usually does not.

Heartbreak on the Pakistan Border

4 of the book's 31 chapters are set in 1975 Pakistan where Ransom is traveling with two fellow Westerners, one of which is Annette, a remarkably alive, dreamy blonde young French lady who picked up an addiction to heroin. And the more Annette spirals down into self-destruction as a junky, the more Ransom's heart breaks. This Pakistan tragedy adds real depth of feeling to Ransom's life unfolding in Japan.

Friendship on the Pakistan Border

The other Westerner forming this Pakistan threesome is Ransom's friend, a delightful, happy-go-lucky young man by the name of Ian. Ian is a bold adventurer and travels solo into dangerous terrain to score some great dope and a part of Ransom travels with him. Again, the unfolding drama in Pakistan adds much depth.

Language and Rhythm

The language is crisp and clear; the sentences snap off like a string of Japanese firecrackers, which makes for a very pleasurable, entertaining read. This quality of Jay's writing makes sense since the author honed his craft under the tutelage of the late 20th century master of crisp and clear - Raymond Carver.

Twists Both Unexpected and Expected

Yes, the story is filled with twists, both unexpected and expected – expected in the sense that at one point Ransom acknowledges: "Some things wouldn't go away unless you face them head—on." Sound like a dose

of Eastern fatalism? You bet it does. Read all about it.

Preston says

So disappointing for a Jay McInerney book. While I enjoyed the setting of Kyoto and reading descriptions of what it perhaps was like to live in Japan in the 1970s (a subject close to my heart for personal reasons) I feel that McInerney is at his best writing about actors, screenwriters, young professionals, etc, in New York or L.A. in the 1980s. This book is very sad, but one doesn't feel sympathetic enough with the main character--I think we're supposed to--and is always wondering why he's making certain decisions. Lastly, as many other reviewers mentioned, the ending was not satisfying at all.

Daniel says

McInerney's prose is straightforward, weighing heavily in favor of telling while showing mundane details that evoke less tangible emotions and impressions. At times, it felt like the story is reaching towards something that is not easy to capture. The ending left me puzzled, and more than a week later I find myself thinking about the book for short stretches of time, juggling this bit and that bit, seeing if I can't balance it out into a more concrete whole. For its inchoate sum, I hold this book in respectable esteem.
