

The Rental Sister

A Note from the Author

Questions for Discussion



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In my neighborhood I go to a little Chinese place called Fully Bakery, down the street from the old man who sits on a stool on the sidewalk all day fixing people's shoes and sharpening their knives, and around the corner from the Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen, whose sign is in Chinese and that is run by a rather confused polyglot staff that (I'm pretty sure) is mostly Chinese and Indian, peppered with maybe some Malaysians, and I thought it'd be fun to write a novel called *Fully Bakery*, in which I imagine and chronicle the neighborhood's intrigues, centered around the three women who work the bakery's counter. Like, maybe the bakery is a front for something. Or maybe they're somehow in cahoots with Popeyes. Or maybe these sweet women who hand me my (\$1!) ham sandwiches and (\$0.65!) taro buns have some sort of dark, secret lives lurking behind their smiles.

I started with the youngest of the counter women and made her secret life be that she was moonlighting as a rental sister, trying to get a man who'd been alone in his bedroom for three years to come out and rejoin the world. Fun, right?

And guess what? Every morning for months and months all I wanted to write about was the rental sister's story, and when the man's wife threw herself into the mix, I became even more captivated, and the rest of the counter staff and even the bakery itself faded away, and *Fully Bakery* evolved into *The Rental Sister*.

At first it was the situation's alien weirdness that drew me in. I mean, even though in Japan and Korea there are thousands of real *hikikomori*—people who stay in their rooms for years—in America it's uncommon for (as happens in the book) a grown man to watch his son die and then spend three years alone in his bedroom, his wife living down the hall. As I wrote I thought, What kind of person, no matter the grief, can lock out the world like that? And what kind of wife allows it, and then allows (and hires, even) a young woman to come to his bedroom to try to lure him out? And if the young woman succeeds, if she connects with him so strongly that he does emerge, then what?

But what really surprised me, what compelled me to keep writing deeper and deeper, was that for all its weirdness, in a way it wasn't weird at all—these characters' lives and dreams and frustrations were more familiar and immediate than we might like to admit. We've all felt how lonely pain is, how it isolates us, so it's not hard to understand how two people who love each other could nevertheless grow so distant that they live separate lives under the same roof. And we've all struggled to get, be, or stay close to someone. Or far

from. I kept thinking about what happens when you try to force magnets together the wrong way.

I suspect that most of us have come up against these sorts of emotional walls; we know they exist, keeping us out, keeping us in. Are we constructing them as protection, maybe, or as preservation? No, I don't think so; I don't think we *create* them—if I'm me and you're you, then something stands between us right from the beginning. The walls are already in place. Always. The challenge is to find a soft spot, an opening, first in my own wall and then perhaps in yours. It's never easy; even good, long relationships (maybe especially the good, long ones) can grow so tangled and heavy and unbearably complicated that we ossify our soft spots, seal the openings, or long to start fresh somewhere else. And yet these are precisely the relationships we don't want to give up on, the kinds of relationships that we hope are strong enough to support their own weight and strain. Because we think it'll be worth it to get to the other side.

So in this ostensibly strange phenomenon of *hikikomori*, of people isolating themselves from the world for years on end, I found three touching characters, flawed but sincere, trying to find and re-find those soft spots and handle them gently. Just like we all are. Which, looking back, shouldn't have been surprising.

Questions for Discussion

1. This story, though set in New York, takes its inspiration from the real Japanese social phenomenon called *hikikomori*, in which young people withdraw into their rooms for sometimes years on end. Is Thomas's extreme reaction to the death of his son in any way understandable? Is it cowardly? Is it selfish?
2. All the characters in the novel are living with grief. Do you think this kind of pain is by nature a lonely enterprise or can people benefit from grieving together? How do the characters' responses to their suffering affect their relationships?
3. The author seems to be saying that human connection, imperfect as it is, is our only chance for easing life's sorrows. Do you believe that?
4. How is Thomas's room a metaphor for the human condition?

5. Do you think Megumi and Thomas have a real-life relationship or can it only exist in isolation, within four walls?
6. Megumi and Thomas's growing intimacy would seem to threaten Thomas's marriage to Silke. Why do you think Thomas's relationship with Megumi ultimately brings him back to his wife?
7. What does Megumi hope for with Thomas? What does he give her?
8. There have been many love triangles in literature. In this one, the reader doesn't always know Silke's perspective, though she has set the events in motion. What clues does the author give us to show Silke's state of mind?
9. Why doesn't Silke leave Thomas? How far would you go for love? Do you think an extramarital affair can ever be positive for a marriage?
10. The narrative shifts between first- and third-person, though it's always in the present tense. How do the perspective shifts affect your understanding of the story?
11. In both Thomas's and Megumi's brother's isolation, why were the closest people—the ones who shared the most love and history—unable to help?

12. The author uses a spare style that seems free of moralizing, but how do you feel about the morals or lack of morals of these characters?

13. How do you regard the characters' ultimate decisions? And how confident do you think the characters themselves are with the decisions they've made?