



SHUSAKU ENDO
THE SEA AND POISON

TRANSLATED BY MICHAEL GALLAGHER



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Sh?saku End? , Michael Gallagher (Translator)

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At the outset of this powerful story we find a Doctor Suguro in a backwater of modern-day Tokyo practicing expert medicine in a dingy office. He is haunted by his past experience and it is that past which the novel unfolds.

The Sea and Poison Details

Date : Published April 17th 1992 by New Directions (first published 1958)

ISBN : 9780811211987

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Format : Paperback 167 pages

Genre : Asian Literature, Japanese Literature, Fiction, Cultural, Japan, Literature, War

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From Reader Review The Sea and Poison for online ebook

Danielle says

Difficult but rewarding read!

Shusaku Endo's *The Sea and Poison* is a difficult book to write about for a number of reasons. I won't be giving anything away by telling you the story concerns the vivisection of two American POWs during WWII. Despite such a harrowing subject matter the telling of the story, although unpleasant at times, was not quite as graphic as I was anticipating. What makes it difficult is that this seemingly simple text, a short novel of only about 160 pages, is weighed down by subtle meaning and a philosophical and ethical quandary at the heart of the novel. The quandary seems fairly cut and dry to me, but looking back on history--even not so distant history, I can only say the capacity for human cruelty seems large.

We meet Doctor Suguro some time after the war, his promising career ruined, abandoned by his wife, and living in a small town an hour outside of Tokyo. He is still practicing medicine but his surgery has a down and out feel to it, seemingly closed and empty. One wonders why he chose such an out of the way location for his practice. A man recently arrived to the area must visit the doctor for treatment for a lung condition, but Suguro won't treat him without first seeing his chest x-ray and following normal protocol. Suguro exudes about him the same feeling of being uncared for--dirt under his nails, an office that is dusty and filled with an odor of general uncleanness. But it's obvious that Suguro has great skill even if not a sympathetic bedside manner.

"...it seemed that this man with the grey, bloated face had, somewhere or other, gained a considerable amount of medical skill. If he were so capable a doctor, there should have been no need for him to settle in a barren spot like this, so lacking in every attractive feature. Yet he had come. Why, I wondered."

In Fukuoka, as a young intern in a TB hospital during the war, Suguro had been presented with an opportunity for the advancement of his career if he would take part in an experiment, which was presented to him as a way to further science. Suguro was only one of several doctors and nurses that would take part in the vivisection of American POWs who were already slated to be executed. So it becomes a question of conscience and personal responsibility. They are going to die in any case, why not take the opportunity to make discoveries that will help sick patients in the future? What is the harm? That is what the others tell Suguro.

The bulk of the novel is made up of the stories of three central participants who are to take part in the vivisection. Just what in their histories enable them to do such a thing with so little thought and feeling? What is their flaw? And what are the repercussions? Endo doesn't really make judgements, if so they are subtle. Rather he presents to the reader this situation and the circumstances under which the doctors and nurses are working and the choices they make.

The residents of the town of Fukuoka are the victims of almost daily bombardments. Those in the hospital, where there is now something of a military presence, exist in dire conditions. No sooner does one TB patient die than another is brought in to take his bed. The survival rate is low, and despite the efforts of a few who are dedicated, particularly of Suguro, it seems little can be done. Many of the doctors seem more interested in jockeying for position, worried about their futures, than in the real care of the sick.

It's against this bleak background that the military offers the POWs to the hospital staff for a number of

different experiments. The fact that the experiments are to be done more or less on the sly and with the knowledge of only a few is telling. Each character has their own inner conflicts--Suguro has seen the patients he has tried to help die ignominiously, Toda has found that he can get away with almost anything without getting caught (why feel guilty if no one else minds), and nurse Ueda has been mistreated and everything she wanted and wished for taken away from her. Although each doctor and nurse is given the choice of participating or not there is still the subtle pressure from those around them that they must do so. One can, of course say no, but what will the others think.

Endo asks far more questions than he gives answers as you can see. Endo raises many issues--the question of conscience and guilt, of culpability (does being present but not participating still taint one?), of responsibility and of what is ethical and moral in science--well, at least these are things that crossed my mind as I was reading. This is a thoughtful book that requires careful attention. I admit I half read it with an eye closed for fear of what I might find before me, so my somewhat rambling post is not doing the book justice. It is an uncomfortable read but a worthy one for the questions he asks and makes his reader consider.

Endo won the prestigious Akutagawa Prize when it was published in 1958. It took many years before it was finally translated into English by Michael Gallagher.

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Rachel says

This was my first encounter with Endo, and I came away a fan. Historically rooted, the story line itself would have been enough to hold my attention. But his ability to show the dichotomy of the tenets of Catholicism and traditional Japanese culture was masterful, subtle, and intriguing. A must-read for any fan of Japanese literature.

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Veselin Nikolov says

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Jessica says

Deals with several characters who were, in one capacity or another, party to the vivisection of an American prisoner of war. The book discusses what brought them to that place and how they rationalized or dealt with their involvement in the deed. Although the vivisection is central to the story, very little of the book actually deals with that event; it's not a "grisly" novel in that sense. It's more a story about morality and how people come to and then cope with the decisions they make.

Parrish Lantern says

The Sea & poison
by Shusako Endo

The book starts as a prologue, with the visit to a “shabbily constructed house, more like a shed than a Dr’s surgery” by an unnamed man seeking a Doctor for a routine injection. He meets Dr Suguro, whose faultless technique, but cold distant attitude, piques his curiosity. A while later, whilst at a family wedding, he meets another doctor who is a fellow guest, they get chatting & he finds out that the other doctor knew Suguro & through his tale we learn about Dr Suguro’s past.

During the 2nd world war, Suguro worked as an intern at Fukuoka medical school & whilst there became involved with medical experiments on some American prisoners of war, these included live vivisection & injecting air into their veins to find out how quick they’ll die. Although, when it came down to it, Suguro couldn’t do it, he couldn’t stop it either, he froze.

“I didn’t do anything at all; Suguro made an effort to shut out the voice. I didn’t do anything at all; But this plea seemed to reverberate within him, churning itself into a whirlpool devoid of meaning”

It’s this inability to act against his superiors that overrides everything. This leads to a lack of resolution that paralyzes his ability to act according to his ideal of what a doctor is. Creating the humiliation that will dictate his future.

There is another character in the book called Toda, who appears to have none of the qualms of Suguro. He is guided purely by his ambition, to him the patients are merely another instrument to assist him on his chosen path. Toda discusses his lack of concern & chides Suguro for his compassion, even when it comes to killing the prisoners Toda is only concerned with how he would be perceived by his peers.

“After doing this will my heart trouble me with recriminations? will I shudder fearfully at having become a murderer? killing a living human being. Having this most fearful of deeds, will i suffer my whole life thru?

“I looked up, both Dr Shibata & Dr Asia had smiles on their lips, these men were after all no different from me. Even when the day of judgement comes, they’ll fear only the punishment of the world, of society”

So what is a moral dilemma for Suguro, even if it's one that through his submission he cannot act upon, causes Toda a momentary concern of how society would view his actions.

It's this apparent contradiction, on the one hand almost total subservience & on the other an ambition that has no brake, that seems to stunt the growth of any moral or ethical perspective from both Suguro & Toda. In the end, although both reacted differently to the situation they were in, the result was the same.

Postscript

This book was written in the late 1950's & was set in the 2nd world war. Yet having recently finished Haruki Murakami's – Underground (Tokyo gas attack & the Japanese psyche) pub' 1997, i was constantly amazed by how similar they were when referring to the society they were set in (all though they are separated by about 50 years). There was this constant sense of isolation & alienation of the individual & an obedience to authority, regardless of whether it was detrimental to the person involved.

What also struck me about both books, was that no one had any sense of personal responsibility. With The Sea & Poison, the reasoning was there was nothing I could do, it was the medical authority, the military or the war etc. With a few name changes (the Aum, work ethos) this could have been Murakami's Underground. In fact, whilst researching how a massacre of Japanese troops led to slaughter by their superiors during an invasion of Mongolia (1939), Murakami writes

“I was struck by the fact that the closed, responsibility – evading ways of Japanese society were really not any different from the Imperial Japanese army operated at that time”

Pascale says

A spine-chilling novel about the vivisection of an American POW in a Japanese hospital during WWII. One great strength of this book is his construction. Endo starts by showing us one of the main protagonists, Doctor Suguro, through the eyes of a nameless tubercular patient who is surprised to find such a capable but obviously depressed practitioner in the backwater where he has just moved. Struck by the doctor's regional accent, the narrator then makes use of a trip to Fukuoka to research Suguro's past. The story then cuts to what happened at the Fukuoka hospital during the war. Due to the abrupt death of the Dean of the Medical School, fierce competition flared up between 2 factions for his succession. Suguro was part of the team of Doctor Hashimoto (aka the Old Man), an aging surgeon married to a German woman named Hilda. On the other side was the team of Doctor Kando. In order not to let the coveted post go to Kando, Hashimoto decides to hurry through an operation on a member of the dead dean's family. However, the routine operation goes awry and the young woman dies in the operation theatre. Although the team covers for Hashimoto and puts about the story that the patient died later of unforeseeable complications, his reputation is virtually ruined. Partly as a consequence of this debacle, Hashimoto decides to undertake 3 operations of scientific value on POW. The justification for this blatant violation of the rights of prisoners is that these procedures will file important information on how to treat tubercular patients in war time. Of course this is only a game of oneupmanship between Hashimoto and Kando. We then get 2 first-person statements by members of Hashimoto's squad, Nurse Ueda and intern Toda. Ueda is an embittered woman who not only lost her first fetus, but also her matrix. Repudiated by her worthless husband, she is easily persuaded by cynical Doctor

Yazeed AlMogren says

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Raimu says

In my view, reading *The sea and poison* is the most delightful experience since it shows the Japanese spirit during the WW?.

First of all, this story is based on a non-fiction story. In 1945, there was a case of American military's vivisection in Kyushu University which was occurred instead of execution. This book refers to those frightful cases. Although this story is fiction, it will shows us reality, so we can consider about those living times in WW?, Japan. It is very interesting the way how they look the American military.

Secondly, The sea and poison reproduces Japanese characters faithfully. The main character, Katsuro, has a typical personality of Japanese. He is shy, can't excuse from his boss's command and always is swayed by the opinions of others. I think foreigners can understand those Japanese peculiar thoughts more easily from this book.

The most obvious reason for recommending this book is the author, Shusaku Endo's writing style. This story is written like a character's reminisces and describes each character's feelings with many details; fear, sense of guilt, impatience and despair. We, the readers will sympathize with their thoughts very easily. Also, this story will keep you on the edge of your seat.

Although this book needs much time to read and some people might think too much trouble to read it, I think it is worth reading because this story will make us reconsider “ The crime against humanity ”. It will be a valuable experience for you. You have my word.

Therefore, I highly recommend you to read Shusaku Endo's The sea and poison.

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Diego Munoz says

Like all Endo novels it is a very easy read. This book deals with the morality of killing captured POWs for the sake of advancing medical techniques and knowledge. Very little time is dedicated to the surgeries, this

book deals mostly with telling the story of the main characters as they deal with this large moral issue.

A lot of Japanese literature focuses on outsiders, and disenfranchised. Endo seems to be from a different league of writers. Although he is Japanese, his books don't read like typical Japanese novels. I hope that makes some sense to people who read a lot of Japanese authors..

Darryl says

This stunning, disturbing and deeply moving novel about the actions of Japanese doctors in a hospital during World War II opens in postwar Japan, in a small town that has been battered and demoralized after the country's defeat. A ordinary man infected with pulmonary tuberculosis who has recently moved to town seeks out the local physician for care, and he meets Dr Suguro, a withdrawn and defeated man who provides him with the treatment he needs, but nothing more. The narrator later meets another physician who trained at the same hospital in Fukuoka as Suguro did, and learns that Suguro was imprisoned for taking part in an experimental operation on a lightly injured American airman.

The first person narration then shifts to third person accounts of Suguro, a medical intern at the time of the airman's vivisection, along with those of Toda, another intern who is more urbane and comes from a wealthy family, but lacks the moral scruples of his colleague, and a nurse who formerly worked at the hospital but has returned in disgrace after her husband has left her for another woman. The three, along with the power hungry and uncaring supervising physicians, care for patients afflicted with TB who are treated worse than animals, particularly those who are welfare cases and cannot afford to pay for their care. The doctors view these patients' lives as hopeless and unworthy, whose only value is to serve to advance medical science, even if it means they must die premature and pain filled deaths.

After an unfortunate accident, Suguro and Toda are "invited" to participate in the operation on the downed airman. Toda readily agrees, knowing that his participation will advance his career. Suguro initially agrees, but experiences deep moral conflict once he learns of the nature and brutality of the operation. The nurse does not attend the surgery, but becomes aware of the nature of the operation and the effort by the doctors and head nurse to cover up both the operation on the soldier and the earlier accident.

The Sea and Poison, the winner of the 1958 Akutagawa Prize which was later made into an award winning movie, is a powerful tale of man's inhumanity to man, and the role that societal and peer pressure play in causing decent human beings to commit immoral acts toward those in their care or under their power. Based on a real story, it served as one of the first novels that openly criticized acts committed by Japan in wartime against its citizens, enemies and prisoners of war, and brought to light some of the atrocities that the world would learn about in later years.

Eric says

The structure of many of Endo's novels may seem "unfinished", but I think that misses the spirit of his work. It is not about finishing in the western sense; it has more to do with the angst of internal struggle, and in that department, it has few equals. Sparse and precise, which most writers can't hope to manage.
