

PRAISE FOR *A MAN*

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—Sheng Keyi, author of *Northern Girls* and *Death Fugue*

A | M A N

A

MAN

KEIICHIRO
HIRANO

TRANSLATED BY ELI K.P. WILLIAM



AMAZON **CROSSING**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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Previously published as *Aru Otoko* in the magazine *Bungakukai* and then in book form by Bungeishunju in Japan in 2018. Translated from the Japanese by Eli K. P. William. First published in English by Amazon Crossing in 2020.

Published by Amazon Crossing, Seattle

www.apub.com

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ISBN-13: 9781542006880 (hardcover)

ISBN-10: 1542006880 (hardcover)

ISBN-13: 9781542006873 (paperback)

ISBN-10: 1542006872 (paperback)

Cover design by David Drummond

Printed in the United States of America

First edition

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PROLOGUE

The protagonist of this story is someone that I have been fondly calling “Kido-san.” You may be wondering where the fondness comes in, as using a family name with the addition of “san” isn’t always the warmest way to address someone, but I think you will soon understand why I hesitate to call him anything else.

I first met Kido-san on my way back from a talk at a bookstore. My head was buzzing after having spoken continuously for two and a half hours and, wanting to settle down somewhat before returning home, I had stopped in at a certain drinking establishment that I happened to stumble upon. Kido-san was drinking alone at the bar.

At first I listened vaguely as he chatted with the bartender. But at some juncture, I couldn’t help but laugh and found myself joining the conversation.

The initial introduction he gave me—his name, his background—I would soon learn was all lies. But as I had no reason to doubt him then, I believed every word.

Wearing square black-rimmed glasses, the man wasn’t what you would call strikingly handsome, but his face had a certain air of sophistication that went well with a dim bar. I thought to myself that if I had looks like his, I might remain attractive well into middle age, even if I were to develop a few more wrinkles and gray hairs. But when I told him so, he merely cocked his head to the side with an expression of disbelief and said, “No, not at all . . .”

I told him I was a novelist. He hadn't heard of me and seemed embarrassed by that fact, which made me ashamed in turn, an all-too-common occurrence. But he had a profound interest in my profession, and after interrogating me about various details, something like admiration suddenly filled his face, and he said, "I'm sorry." I frowned, unsure why he was apologizing, when he told me that his real name was Akira Kido, thereby admitting that the name he had just told me was a false one. He then asked that I keep this secret from the bartender and went on to explain that he was a lawyer, born in the same year that I was, 1975.

Having once been a, shall we say, less-than-studious law school student, I often feel self-conscious when faced with a bona fide legal expert. But after his confession, I felt no such drop in stature, as the personal history he had until then claimed as his own had been unfortunate enough to arouse my sympathy.

His behavior struck me as tasteless, and I asked him what he was doing telling such lies. This left him searching for words with a pensive frown.

"I keep myself together by living other people's pain," he said eventually with an indescribably lonesome smile. "It's like the expression 'the man who goes mummy hunting ends up a mummy himself . . .'" Do you understand what it's like to be honest through lies? I mean, of course, just for brief stints at places like this. Somehow I can't seem to let go of myself entirely.

"What I truly want is to think directly about myself, but that just makes me sick. It's the one thing I can't help. I've done everything I can. And I believe that soon enough my need to act like this will pass—I never would have guessed things would turn out like this . . ."

I was put off by his intentionally mysterious way of speaking but found the content of what he had told me fascinating. Moreover, I could not deny my budding affection for the man.

“But to you,” Kido-san continued, “I will tell the truth from now on.”

Aside from this initial exchange revolving around his lie, Kido-san was an unaffected, affable, collected person. He had a sensitive and receptive mind, and in his every word one could sense a character of great depth and complexity.

I felt comfortable talking with him. Whatever I wanted to get across he understood well, and his meaning in turn was as clear as day to me. We also found commonality in our love for music. I appreciated how rare it was to come across someone like this, and I sensed that there had to be extenuating circumstances that explained his need to lie.

The next time I visited that bar on the same night of the week, Kido-san was drinking alone again as I'd expected, and I sat down beside him at his invitation, in a seat somewhat removed from the bartender's post. A number of times afterward, we shared each other's company in those same seats and grew intimate enough that we would talk late into the night.

His drink of choice was vodka. Despite his lean build, he could definitely hold his liquor and would claim to be pleasantly tipsy even though he never seemed to change, his tone of voice remaining always composed.

The two of us became something like friends. Making a new drinking buddy with whom you form a deep connection is surprisingly rare in middle age. But our relationship was limited to the counter of that establishment, and neither of us sought the other's contact information. He probably felt uncomfortable asking. For my part, the truth is that I was still wary of him. In fact, I have not seen him in quite some time and doubt that I ever will again. His no longer visiting that bar—no longer feeling the need to do so—I interpret as a positive sign.



Novelists, whether consciously or unconsciously, are always on the lookout for people that can serve as models for their novels. That is, we eagerly await the serendipity of someone like Meursault or Holly Golightly appearing out of the blue one day.

For a person to be appropriate to serve as such a model, he or she needs to be highly out of the ordinary while possessing something that might be seen as a kind of template for humanity or for the age and must be purified via fiction until they reach the dimension of the symbol.

When I hear the stories of people who have lived dramatic and tumultuous lives, I think to myself that they might work as novels. Some of these individuals even encourage me by way of subtle circumlocution, as if to say, “You can use me if you want, you know.” Yet whenever I give serious consideration to writing such ostentatious yarns, I find myself balking, though I suppose my novels might sell better if only I could go through with it.

Where I usually find my models is among the people I already know. Since I try to associate as little as possible with those who don't interest me, everyone that I maintain a long relationship with has a certain something. And sometimes I am astonished to discover all of a sudden that one of them is the protagonist of my next novel for whom I was searching all along. Individuals such as these, about whom my understanding slowly deepens over time, are ideal for full-length novels, since the protagonist is together with the reader for the long haul.



Starting the second time I met him, Kido-san gradually began to explain the reason he had used a fake name, and it turned out to be a very intricate story indeed. I found myself utterly captivated, often keeping my arms crossed as I considered what he told me carefully, and soon grasped why he had wanted to divulge it to me. While he may never

have actually said, “You can use me if you want,” the proposition was surely on his mind. But my decision to actually do so didn’t come about until after I happened to meet a lawyer elsewhere that knew him well.

“He’s a great man,” this lawyer said without hesitation, “and incredibly kind to people of all stripes. Like taxi drivers. If they don’t know the route, he tells them with such warmth and care it’s amazing.”

I laughed, but had to agree that it was an admirable quality in this day and age—and in a rich man to boot!

The other stories this lawyer related were surprising, involving as they did a number of moving incidents about which Kido-san himself had never spoken, and I finally came to understand in full living color this unmistakably isolated and lonely middle-aged man. It might sound trite, but he was, after all, a real character.

In writing this novel, I spoke again with the lawyer and other concerned parties, investigated for myself various details that Kido-san had left vague in the interest of confidentiality, embellished it all with my imagination, and made it into fiction. I doubt Kido-san would have ever disclosed so much of what he had learned on the job to anyone, but I followed through with what the novel required.



With all the unique characters that make an appearance, some of you might wonder why on earth I didn’t pick one of the bit players to be the protagonist. While Kido-san will in fact become obsessed with the life of a man, it is in Kido-san, viewed from behind as he chases this man, that I sensed something that needed to be seen.

There’s a painting by René Magritte entitled *Not to Be Reproduced* in which a man with his back turned is looking into a mirror at the back of another version of himself inside the mirror, who is likewise looking into the depths of the reflection. This story is similar in some ways. And

perhaps the reader will spot the central theme of this work in the back of me, the artist, obsessing over Kido-san absorbed in his own obsession.

What's more, you may take issue with this prologue and doubt that the man I met at the bar was really "Kido-san" to begin with. That is perfectly understandable, but personally I believe he is who he says he is.

It would seem natural to begin the story with him, but before that I would like to write about a woman named Rié. For you see, the bewilderingly strange and tragic ordeals that she underwent are where everything in this tale finds its origin.

CHAPTER ONE

It was in mid-September 2011 that news spread among the people of a certain Town S that the husband of Rié from the stationery shop had passed away.

While everyone in Japan associates 2011 with the Great East Japan Earthquake, there are some in Town S, tucked away in the center of Miyazaki Prefecture, for whom this death of no national significance holds a more prominent place in their recollections. It was not uncommon for those residing in the small, rustic community of around thirty thousand, Rié's mother among them, to never have met anyone from the devastated Tohoku region.

Looking at a map, one finds a thoroughfare of some antiquity called Mera Road cutting through the middle of town along its course over the Kyushu Mountains to its eventual terminus in Kumamoto. Visiting in person, one discovers a settlement of simple appearance, about a forty-minute drive from Miyazaki City to the southeast.

Town S is undoubtedly a place of many unique qualities. For ancient history buffs, its name reportedly conjures the enormous burial mounds within its precincts, while fans of professional baseball recognize it as the site of one team's spring camp and dam aficionados for its boasting the largest in Kyushu. Like a good local, Rié never had much interest in any of this. Though she would, nonetheless, develop a sentimental attachment to a certain cherry tree in the park with the burial mounds.

Upon the release of a documentary in 2007 about a secluded mountain village that was abandoned en masse in the 1980s after severe depopulation left it difficult to sustain, a certain kind of tourist began to descend on Town S. Previously unknown in these parts, they would waltz about with a condescending air, possessive of a perverse fascination with ghost towns.

While the center of Town S flourished after it was redeveloped during the economic bubble of the Showa era, the combination of a low birth rate and aging population left many businesses on the main shopping stretch along Mera Road permanently shuttered, earning it the rueful nickname “Showa Burial Mound.” One of the few shops that remained was Rié’s family business, Seibundo Stationery.



Rié’s late husband, Daisuké Taniguchi, moved to town just before the documentary began to generate buzz. Wanting to start a career in forestry at the age of thirty-five without any experience in the industry, he found employment at Ito Lumber, and after working there for four years with enough diligence to earn the admiration of the company president, he was crushed by a cryptomeria tree that he himself had felled and there met his end. His age at time of death was thirty-nine.

Daisuké was a reticent man. As he hardly spoke to any of his coworkers and had no friends of note, the only townspeople that learned the details of his past were Rié and her family. One might even call him an enigma, though it wasn’t unusual for migrants to depopulating areas to have issues about which they could not speak. What set Daisuké apart was that, within a single year of his arrival, he had married one of the locals: Rié from the stationery shop.

Rié was the only daughter of the proprietors of a stationery shop that had been in the family since her grandfather’s generation and was known by everyone in town. While somewhat eccentric, she was thought

to be sensible and trustworthy. So, although her decision aroused universal surprise, everyone assumed that a woman like Rié would only have decided to tie the knot after thoroughly sussing Daisuké out and concluding that he presented no harm. This was enough to bring all prying into his past to an indeterminate hiatus.

Ito, president of Ito Lumber, was pleased by the development, as it raised the likelihood that Daisuké, who had far exceeded his expectations, might stay permanently. At the same time, officials in charge of migration between urban and rural areas at the town office treated the union as an ideal case study.



In part due to his being Rié's husband, no one ever had bad things to say about Daisuké Taniguchi. On the contrary, even hinting at ill-intentioned gossip would provoke disapproval, and most of the townspeople were quick to defend him. One might even go so far as to call him cherished.

Better described as introverted than standoffish, Daisuké wasn't the type to go out of his way to socialize, but if someone struck up a conversation with him, he would engage them with surprising cheerfulness. He had a distinctive, laid-back air about him, and Ito would often cross his arms and say, "Now that man is going places."

While Daisuké was never angry, sulky, or otherwise in bad temper, he wasn't afraid to speak up, albeit gently, about inefficiency and danger in his work. Occupational accidents are an all-too-frequent occurrence on logging sites, and talk has an unfortunate tendency to be gruff and dire. Somehow, the mere presence of this newbie reduced conflict.

They say it takes approximately three years for a forester to come into their own, beginning with chainsaw felling and moving on to the operation of processors and grapples. Daisuké was a reliable hand within a year and a half. A prudent judge of circumstances, steadfast, and both

physically and psychologically healthy, he poured himself quietly into his work, whether under the scorching sun of midsummer or the sleet of a chilly winter day, and completed his tasks so utterly without complaint that experienced site supervisors would often advise him to pipe up if he was uncomfortable.

It can be hard to predict the capabilities of a new hire until they are actually put to the test, but Ito bragged on a number of occasions to others in the industry about what a find Daisuké turned out to be and tended to attribute his exemplary performance to his university degree. In the whole history of Ito Lumber, going back three generations, there had never been another employee like him.



After Daisuké's death, neighbors who had known Rié for many years expressed their sympathy by saying of her, "That girl is badly marked . . ." To be "badly marked" means to be unfortunate. Apparently, this is something of an anachronism, but the phrase remains in use in the Kyushuian vernacular. It is often intoned by elders with intense commiseration derived from reflection on their long life experience. None of which is to imply that the people of Kyushu have exceptionally bad luck or that they are especially fatalistic.

Misfortune can visit itself upon anyone. But when it comes to serious misfortune, we have a tendency to presume that, if it happens at all, it can only happen once in a lifetime. The fortunate imagine this to be so out of a certain kind of naivety. Those who have actually experienced misfortune pray for it to be so as a desperate wish. And yet, the sort of major misfortune for which once is plenty, sadly, has something in common with the stray dog that persistently chases the same person around, twice and then thrice. It is in the midst of such recurrent misfortune that people visit shrines for purification ceremonies or have their names changed.

Including Daisuké, Rié lost three of the people she most loved one after the next.

Rié was raised in Town S and lived in her family home until leaving after high school graduation to attend university in Kanagawa Prefecture. There she found a steady job and, at the age of twenty-five, married her first husband, an assistant at an architecture firm. Their first son was named Yuto, and their second, Ryo.

At the age of two, Ryo was diagnosed with a brain tumor and died six months later. This was the first deep sorrow Rié had ever experienced.

Rié and her husband fought over Ryo's treatment, and she was never able to put the hurt she suffered in the process behind her. At her husband's insistence that they forge onward as a family, she could only shake her head. Their divorce mediation lurched from argument to argument, and it took eleven months for them to reach an agreement. Thanks to the efforts of a capable lawyer, Rié managed to secure custody of their remaining child, which had been a sticking point for her husband in the negotiations. Then a vitriolic postcard arrived from her in-laws, with whom she had always been on good terms, denouncing her as "inhuman."

Just as the dust was settling, her own father suddenly died, prompting Rié to return with Yuto to her family home in Town S.

Her predicament aroused great pity as the townspeople had all been fond of Rié since she was a child, remembering her as a well-behaved little darling. A lovely, subdued, petite girl with the sort of eyes that seem to harbor idiosyncratic thoughts, her friends would often tease her about the faraway look that appeared on her face whenever her mind wandered.

While she wasn't exactly an overachiever, Rié had good grades, and when her friends learned that she would begin commuting to a university prep school in Miyazaki City an hour away by bus instead of to their local high school, they took it as a matter of course. Despite the fact that she wasn't the most talkative student, there were two or

three boys every school year, in both junior high and high school, who watched her in the hallways or classroom, nursing a secret crush.

Her parents were immensely proud of their only daughter, who had graduated from university in the big city of Yokohama, married a man on track to be an architect, and even been blessed with children. One would have been hard pressed to find anyone who looked upon that joyful face of hers with anything like bitterness or contempt.

In other words, Rié's life fell far short of how everyone imagined it would turn out. No one—not the grown-ups, not her old classmates—had doubted for a second that she was happy, so when the townspeople heard that she had lost a young child, gotten a divorce, and returned home, their reaction did not stop at mere sympathy; they were profoundly disturbed by the injustice of it all. That the world in which they lived was the sort of place where such things could happen was an unsettling idea. When on top of all this she lost her second partner after only three years and nine months of marriage, it's hardly surprising that they would say nothing to demean the memory of Daisuké, if for no other reason than that he was Rié's husband.



When Rié met Daisuké, she had taken over management of the stationery shop from her mother. Delivering office supplies to her old middle school, the town office, local corporations, and other customers; seeing to the checkout counter; and fulfilling the various tasks required, Rié watched each day pass in a blur. While she found some consolation in familiar faces, it was less stressful to deal with new clients. Of these they had no shortage, thanks to their serving as a distributor for a mail-order company since the days her father was in charge.

As soon as Rié was alone, she thought of the son she had lost and often cried. She could never forget the time, perhaps one month before he died, when she'd left his ward to talk with the doctor and returned

to find him staring quietly at the ceiling. *What could he be thinking and feeling?* she wondered as she studied him in profile. The capacity for thought he had been endowed with was supposed to have served him in leading his life for many decades more. Instead it was functioning merely to recognize his impending doom. But there was just no way he could possibly understand the terrible process occurring in his body, not even at the bitter end . . . Whenever Rié recalled Ryo at that moment, she lost even the power to stand, sitting down wherever she happened to be and covering her face.

Inevitably, her thoughts would turn to Yuto, the growing son that had been left to her, and she would remind herself to continue on as cheerfully as she could. Lacking the maturity to be troubled by his brother's death, Yuto had grown into an unexpectedly energetic boy since Rié's return, and this was her one solace.

She also remembered her father. Not once in his life had he ever raised his voice to her or stopped loving her with everything he had.

Rié had no faith in any particular religion. Her family were so-called "funeral Buddhists," belonging to the Jodo sect only insofar as they employed its funerary services. Nevertheless, she often imagined her father as a kindly old man watching over Ryo in heaven, and this never failed to bring her a touch of relief.

"Father only went to heaven a little bit early to keep Ryo company," drawled her mother, who truly believed such things. "He followed after that boy so as he won't worry till you're ready to go yourself. That's Father, alright."



Living in her hometown for the first time since high school fourteen years earlier was the source of some comfort for Rié. But sometimes, when idling at her desk in the shop, she was beset by a feeling of emptiness so powerful, she worried for her own well-being. Her moorings

to the world came loose, time slipping by insensibly around her. Then suddenly, like long-sunken garbage bobbing up inexplicably from the bottom of a pond, the thought would come to her that maybe death wasn't that scary after all. I mean, if such a small child as Ryo could go through it, then why not her? And wasn't her father waiting patiently with him on the other side . . . ? Whenever she caught herself thinking this way, the core of her body would fill with the luminous chill of dread.

For the first while after her return, Rié looked with envy at the social media pages of her friends from her university days. But after taking a break for a week, she was surprised to find that her interest in the interplay of text and photos was gone.

Visitors to the shop were scant. It was their mail-order clients that supported Rié's life with her son and mother. The future of the family business was not looking bright.

She had seen the main street lined with shuttered stores on her annual visits for New Year's and the Obon Festival. But it wasn't until she resettled permanently that the town began to make her feel lonesome, as though she had been abandoned alone in a big, empty, dilapidated house.

On the second floor of a building across the street from the shop was the piano studio where she had studied for eight years. It was now deserted, the building utterly neglected. The town lacked even the young people to spray-paint it with graffiti.

Once a week, Rié had crossed the street for her lesson and then returned to the shop, where she did homework while waiting for her father to finish work. The ride back to their nearby home, with her sitting shotgun while her father drove, just the two of them, she now looked back on with fierce longing . . .

Could I start fresh in Yokohama or another area around Tokyo? Or how about somewhere closer like Hakata? Maybe I could go look for a new job there? Such thoughts crossed her mind from time to time. She could

never be bothered to even reach out and touch them, leaving them instead to simply fade away.



It was in the February of the year after Rié's return that Daisuké first visited Seibundo Stationery.

That winter, Rié and Yuto had both come down with colds twice. Although Town S was supposed to be much warmer than Yokohama, Rié had gotten used to living in a modern condo, and her drafty family home was simply too much for her, especially the frigid bathing room. It had been up to her mother, the only one in the family who remained well, to take care of them on both occasions.

Rié had just recovered from one of these colds when Daisuké stepped into the shop alone. It was evening, around the time that children come to buy pens and notebooks on their way home from school. Darkness had fallen already, and Rié was just then considering letting her mother take over so she could go home to make dinner.

Especially given the dearth of customers, it was hard not to notice an unfamiliar man around Rié's age. Also conspicuous were the sketchbook and watercolor set he brought to the counter along with a planner. Skinny, he was just tall enough that Rié with her small stature had to look up at him slightly and, dressed plainly in a navy-blue windbreaker and jeans, he gave the vague impression of not being from around there.

As she was peeling off the planner's price tag for him, Rié imagined this man starting a new life in the town and wondered what would compel him to do so. Any of the townspeople surely would have been just as curious. When he left the store, she said thank you for the second time and, with her eyes on his back as he walked away, inexplicably sensed a life teeming with stories that needed to be told.



Before a month had elapsed, Daisuké visited the store again. It had been raining torrentially since morning, and an old acquaintance of Rié's mother's, Okumura-san, had just stopped by, carrying some bamboo shoots to while away the time.

"Go ahead," said Rié, as Daisuké was making his way timidly toward the counter to buy a sketchbook and a small amount of paint as before.

"Oh, I'm very sorry, young man," said Okumura-san. "Looks like I'm in your way."

When she stepped aside, Daisuké gave a slight bow and put his items on the counter.

"That is some storm," said Okumura-san, trying to make conversation.

"Yes." Daisuké gave a faint smile. His white car was parked in front of the store.

"Do you need a receipt?" Rié asked.

"Um . . . I'm fine," Daisuké replied, lowering his head. Then, with palpable self-consciousness, he straightened up abruptly and looked Rié straight in the eye for a moment.

Rié opened her eyes wide, as though she had just been addressed. But Daisuké merely averted his gaze without a word, gave another slight bow, and left the shop, driving off into the downpour.



From then on, this nameless customer visited the shop about once a month, usually in the evening. Invariably he purchased painting supplies and sketchbooks, only the large A3 size at first, then the little A5 ones as well. They were the sorts of items that hardly anyone but high school art club students wanted, so whenever Rié stocked up on inventory, he began to pop into her head.

One of his visits was on another day of pouring rain about six months later, when Yuto's summer break was coming to an end. Thick turbulent clouds blanketed the town, and Rié was repeatedly startled by ground-rumbling booms that followed close behind lightning.

He opened the door of the shop around three o'clock. The sound of cicadas—buzzing from the lush sidewalk trees in spite of the weather—filled the room, along with sultry air, before both were cut off as the door closed.

Okumura-san was sitting in a chair eating a steamed bun, absorbed in conversation with Rié's mother. She had stopped in not long before to blather away while taking shelter from the rain.

"I take it art is your hobby?" Okumura-san asked Daisuké in the local dialect as he approached the checkout counter with his usual sketchbook and paint.

Startled, Daisuké paused before replying yes with a faint smile.

"A customer of mine says he saw you painting outdoors. On the lawn by the Hitotsuse River? Bet you've built up some collection by now, huh?"

Daisuké gave only a slight nod, still smiling.

"Next time you could show them to us. What do you say? You want to see his paintings too, don't you, Rié?"

Rié could tell that Okumura-san wasn't making this request purely for curiosity's sake. She was trying to ferret out information about this unknown repeat customer. It reminded Rié why she'd spent her adolescence desperate to escape this country town, as tranquil and close to her heart as it was supposed to be.

"Okumura-san, you're putting him on the spot," said Rié. "Sorry about that. Forget what she said and please come again."

"Oh . . . It's fine. I mean, they're not really worth showing to anyone . . ." Saying this, the man nodded and made his usual abrupt exit.

Okumura-san looked to Rié and her mother, giving them each a sly smile in turn.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In addition to the various sources I consulted and quoted, this book would not have been possible without the cooperation of many people with my interviews and investigations. I would like to take this opportunity to give them my sincere thanks.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo © Mikiya Takimoto

Keiichiro Hirano is an award-winning and bestselling novelist whose debut novel, *The Eclipse*, won the prestigious Akutagawa Prize in 1998, when he was a twenty-three-year-old university student. A cultural envoy to Paris appointed by Japan's Ministry of Cultural Affairs, he has given lectures throughout Europe. Widely read in France, China, Korea, Taiwan, Italy, and Egypt, Hirano is also the author of *At the End of the Matinee*, a runaway bestseller in Japan, among many other books. His short fiction has appeared in *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Japanese Literature*. *A Man*, winner of Japan's Yomiuri Prize for Literature, is the first of Hirano's novels to be translated into English. For more information, visit en.k-hirano.com and follow Hirano on Twitter at [@hiranok_en](https://twitter.com/hiranok_en).

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR



Photo © 2019 Alexander O. Smith

Eli K. P. William is the author of the Jubilee Cycle, three novels set in a dystopian future Tokyo: *Cash Crash Jubilee*, *The Naked World*, and *A Diamond Dream*. Originally from Toronto, Canada, he has lived in Japan for over a decade and has spent most of that time working as a Japanese translator. *A Man* is his first full novel translation to be published. For more information, visit www.elikpwilliam.com.