



## The Three-Cornered World

*Sōseki Natsume*, Alan Turney (Translator)

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*"An artist abandons city life to wander into the mountains to meditate, but when he decides to stay at a near-deserted inn he soon finds himself drawn to the daughter of the innkeeper. This strange and beautiful woman is rumoured to have abandoned her husband and fallen in love with a priest at a nearby temple. The artist becomes entranced by her tragic aura. She reminds him of Millais's portrait of Ophelia drowning and he wants to paint her. Yet, troubled by a certain quality in her expression, he struggles to complete the portrait until he is finally able to penetrate the enigma of her life."*

Interspersed with philosophies of both East and West, Soseki's writing skillfully blends two very different cultures in this unique representation of an artist struggling with his craft and his environment.

### The Three-Cornered World Details

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## From Reader Review The Three-Cornered World for online ebook

### Hadrian says

A wandering look at the creation of poetry. Slow and meditative.

This short little book treats life with a sort of nostalgia for something that was, or might not ever have been. It relays the process of creating a poem, of finding inspiration, of rebirth and renewal and of wandering the countryside to escape the neuroticism and 'fart-smellers' of the big city.

As you might have guessed from the last remark, this does not mean that S?seki's tale is wholly humorless and austere. On the contrary. Our narrator-poet talks about how easy it is to write *haiku*, saying that it can be done on the toilet. The scene with the garrulous barber is a real treat as well, with the loud man hacking apart the narrator's face as he chatters away in the serene atmosphere of the countryside.

The plot barely exists, and instead the reflection is in thoughts and details. The existence of this world is in something that is not human. In the artist painting his subject and his longing for detachment, he only finds engagement with something more human and emotive, and not so separate from the world after all.

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### Ben Winch says

Beautiful. Joyous. Sharp, clear, precise. Soseki's best, I think, for its freedom, for its glow. True, from here on near everything he wrote had the magic, but like Kafka's his characters were hemmed in, in darkness. Here, from when the unnamed "I" appears on a mountain path until he disappears at a train station as the world calls from down the tracks, all is glittering. I couldn't read this when I was down; it demanded I engage with it, bring heart to it, enjoy it. I know not everyone (few people, even) will feel this. The 150-page mountain idyll of a painter who never paints. A "haiku novel" preoccupied with stillness. A cod-philosophic essay on alienation, the artist's role in society, Japan versus the west, the "nonemotional". Not that it's plotless (the plot, though simple, is taut, engaging) or experimental (it is, but subtly; not for Soseki vulgar flash and histrionics), but it's *quiet*, thirst-quenchingly so. For Soseki, anything less (anything louder, brasher, less disciplined) would be a failure. But where in *The Gate* or *Light and Darkness* this reserve might constrain him, here it sets him free. Where *The Gate* takes place (until its pained Zen-temple denouement) in a virtual burrow – wintry Tokyo unseen outside – *Kusamakura* is spring, mountains and sea, a wide chessboard on which his proud sharp-carved characters (which, as Eddie Watkins says, are always chess-pieces) move with full-extended ease. Where *Light and Darkness* follows its ailing protagonist through successive contortions in the name of duty, *Kusamakura*'s "I" moves unhindered, able to see all from its lucent mountain height. Without it, Soseki's fame would be assured. With it, we have a picture of his first steps into maturity, newly aware of his mastery but unenslaved by it, not yet the professional writer (Japan's first) hemmed by deadlines and reputation.

Re the new translation, at first I was suspicious:

As I climb the mountain path I ponder –

If you work by reason, you grow rough-edged; if you choose to dip your oar into sentiment's stream, it will sweep you away. Demanding your own way only serves to constrain you. However you look at it, the human world is not an easy place to live.

In the old translation (*The Three-Cornered World* by Alan Turney):

Going up a mountain track, I fell to thinking.

Approach everything rationally, and you become harsh. Pole along in the stream of emotions, and you will be swept away by the current. Give free reign to your desires, and you become uncomfortably confined. It is not a very agreeable place to live, this world of ours.

Nor did I buy the line that “English, unlike Japanese, cannot sustain occasional shifts to past-tense narration”. (See Sverre Lyngstad’s *Hamsun* translations for a deliberate muddling of the tenses, or – the first name that occurs to me – Michael Ondaatje for a native-speaking equivalent.) But by the end, and having kept Turney’s translation beside me throughout, I came to trust and at times delight in Meredith McKinney’s work.

And so from him I learn the fate of this young man, who is destined to leave for the Manchurian front in a matter of days. I’ve been mistaken to assume that in this little village in the spring, so like a dream or a poem, life is a matter only of the singing birds, the falling blossoms, and the bubbling springs. The real world has crossed the mountains and seas and is bearing down even on this isolated village, whose inhabitants have doubtless lived here in peace down the long stretch of years ever since they fled as defeated warriors from the great clan wars of the twelfth century. Perhaps a millionth part of the blood that will dye the wide Manchurian plains will gush from this young man’s arteries, or seethe forth at the point of the long sword that hangs at his waist. Yet here this young man sits, beside an artist for whom the sole value of human life lies in dreaming. If I listen carefully, I can even hear the beating of his heart, so close are we. And perhaps even now, within that beat reverberates the beating of the great tide that is sweeping across the hundreds of miles of that far battlefield. Fate has for a brief and unexpected moment brought us together in this room, but beyond that it speaks no more.

In another register:

Nor do I exert myself in climbing the temple steps; indeed, if I found that the climb caused me any real effort, I would immediately give up. Pasing after I take the first step, I register a certain pleasure and so take a second. With the second step, the urge to compose a poem comes upon me. I stare in silent contemplation at my shadow, noting how strange it looks, blocked and cut short by the angle of the next stone riser, and this strangeness leads me to climb a further step. Here I look up at the sky. Tiny stars twinkle in its drowsy depths. There’s a poem here, I think, and so to the next step – and in this manner I eventually reach the top.

That Soseki wrote (or published) this in the same year as the youthful *Botchan* seems incredible. If, as he claimed, he wrote it in a week I’m stunned. With the refinement of the calligraphist or woodblock-printmaker, in a single bound, he joins the masters. That he’d never write like this again makes it all the more precious. As I said, this time around, there were days on which I didn’t *quite* feel up to this. Ask me after my third reading and I might tell you it’s an all-time favourite.

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## **Zak says**

If there were such a thing as 'reading meditation', this book would be it. Its languid pace takes the reader on an introspective journey filled with acute observations and insight. With vivid imagery, every sentence was a delight to read. In truth, nothing much happens but it is a welcome departure from the usual hustle and bustle

of most contemporary literature.

Final rating: 4.5\*

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## **Inderjit Sanghera says**

A meditation on life and beauty beneath a kaleidoscope of colours and images, a paean to beauty set against a harlequin shimmer of colours, from the reflections of a sun-light on a the leaves of a tree or the bucolic blooming on the whimsically white flower petals beneath the inky blue night sky. The incandescence of the night-sky, the warbling of the sky-lark beneath leaves of a tree laden with rain, the pale, indescribable iridescence of sun-light on a mountain slope, the poetry-laden atmosphere of Japan, these are the images which dominate Kusamakura, a kind of homage to the Chinese poetry and haiku, which were more concerned with the natural world than human psychology; as the narrator states, beneath the indifference of nature lies an acceptance which is not possible in the human world, a freedom from the endless restrictions of society.

“As I get back to my feet, my eyes take in the distant scene. To the left of the path soars a mountain peak, in shape rather like an inverted bucket. From foot to summit it is entirely covered in what could either by cypress or cedar, whose blue-black mass is stippled with the pale pink of swathes of blossoming cherry. The distance is so hazy that all appears as a single wash of blurred shapes and colours.”

The story follows an intinerate artist as he traverses various parts of Japan. As well as his appreciation of the natural world, the artist ponders the meaning of art; art is the vehicle by which people can recognise beauty, art is the tool with which the human mind can comprehend the inner luminescence of the world, art is the medium by which the human mind can rise above the mediocrity which besets the world, the artist, lachrymose, lugubrious and misunderstood, yet the sole individual who can comprehend the mellifluous melancholy or the world, who can use art to to overcome the impermanence life and gain immortality;

“We owe our humble gratitude to all the practitioners of the arts, for they mellow the harshness of the human world and enrich the human heart. Yes, a poem, a painting, can draw the sting of troubles from a troubled world and lay in its place a blessed realm before our grateful eyes. You only have to conjure the world up before you, and there you will find a living poem, a fount of song. No need to stand before your easel and limn with brush and paint-the world’s vast array of forms and colours and sparkles with the inner eye.”

A wonderfully innovative and deeply imagined celebration of life, ‘Kusamakura’ is the ultimate textbook on beauty, on life, on the gentle shimmers of sun-beams or the dazzling colours of a camelia flower.

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## **Praj says**

*“And when its difficulties intensify, you find yourself longing to leave that world and dwell in some easier one- and then, when you understand at last the difficulties will dog you wherever you may live, this is when poetry and art are born...”*

For the very first time on a murky morning, I saw a set of colours come alive on the wall of my living room. The orderly row of comatose crayons suddenly sprang like a newborn foal twirling on the pasty canvass.

Amid the angry voices of my parents I giggled as I indulged in my very first act of vandalism. The fiery red miraculously transformed into a royal shade of purple with the touch of blue, the yellow gave birth to orange when it embraced the stylish red. I was captivated by this odd-looking rainbow and then from that day onward, I scribbled and drew on every empty space found on paper, walls and even on my bare palms. The razor sharp pencil became a tyrant and I a lawless anarchist, each forming and defying the norms on their own terms. Over the years, common sense shackled my fearlessness and creativity became another tomb in my life. Soseki's words made me realize that until now I had failed to distinguish the art that always shaped in front of me. It is not mandatory to entrust one's thoughts to paper; art is right in front of you. In the assorted colours of your world, let your eyes be the naked canvass in which an artist's creates a masterpiece, as you conjure the beauty of the world the mouth will sing a poet's song and let your heart be the camera that garners and captures every purest sentiment from this sullied world. Art begins and ends with life. Life imparts art and nature embraces both of these elements. So, don't be a pampered child who throws tantrums when things don't go as planned, find a way where your sorrows simply melt in the abyss of happiness. Happiness had always been a ruthless stranger, thus do not drive it away for it rarely knocks on the door without any sorrowful repercussions. And, when no words seem to emerge or the brush trembles on the sight of the ghostly canvass, one is still the wealthiest of person, as he can view the human life through the eye of an artist in the realm of magnificent purity. After all *"human world is not an easy place to live in."*

### **A young artist**

#### **Beauty flirts**

#### **On grass pillow.....**

The novel opens up in the midst of a philosophical exploration establishing an artist's vocation in the quest to attain serenity and beauty in the evolving art. A young artist pointlessly walks into an isolated hot-spring village of Nakoi, to perceive a world that is detached from human sentiments that adulterates the purity of art. Soseki, stays true to the words of the artist when experiences are recorded first-handed and the magnetism of the attractive Nami-(the divorced daughter of the hot-spring inn establishment), somehow entices the young artist to evaluate his observations of life, art and its vulgarities.

*"I'm a human and belong to the world of humans so for me the unhuman can last only so long no matter how much I enjoy it."*

Salvation from the vulgar world; it is actually possible? Will the mind ever obey the words of the mouth? As the young artist seeks salvation from the human world debating on ways to achieve a **"non-emotional"** and **"unhuman"** state that will not contaminate the pristine splendor of his art, Soseki carries out a literary experiment inferring that it is rather impossible to break away from the muddled emotions of humankind. Life eventually touches you irrespective to the resistance. The **"smell of human"** at end reeks from every pore of one's body. Loneliness maybe an artist's blessing, for the mind is more imaginative and powerful when silent, yet the darkness that follows the recluse may bring crudity in terms of excessiveness resulting in the death of beauty. Soseki emphasis how plays (Noh), poetry, novels, painting become alive with human feelings. A book is loved when its characters come alive in one's room when every new sensation is attached to the dried ink making it flow through plethora of budding thoughts. A Noh drama has its own sensitivities emitting through the immense layers of make-up, amalgamating in to a perfect blend of raw human emotions and tranquility. For a solitary traveler, detachment from the human world could be blissful, but would this kind of non-attachment create an exquisiteness of an art. The painter who roamed the streets of the picturesque Nakoi desired to stray away from worldly emotions yet somehow the shadows never left him. To the artist's surprise the echoes of the ongoing Russo-Japanese war was heard among the icy solitary mountains of the village. The air brought the metallic smell of the blood that was being spilled hundred miles away and the voices of guns being fired became stronger with the whistles of the steam engine, roaring to go, carrying one of its important passengers –Kyuichi, as he volunteered during the war. That is life and this

very debate of **detachment v/s attachment** to human presence, portrayed Soseki's melancholic quandary about changing times. Life had even touched Nami's portrait and the cloistered Japanese culture.

*“The artists is the one who lives in a “three cornered world” in which the corner that the average person would call “common sense” has been sheared off from the ordinary four-square world that the normally inhabit.”*

Soseki asserts that artists are madder and foolish as they romanticize nature with human affairs. Art mellows the severity of the human world. Soseki illustrates the paradigm of a heartbreak becoming the subject of an art. For an average man, Soseki asserts, heartbreak brings nothing but skepticism and agony, but for an artist who forgets the soreness and perceive the objectiveness of the heartbreak, encompasses the moments of empathy and wretchedness through literature and art. Thus, bringing a sort of emancipation to the heart that is suffering. Similarly, the process of penning a **‘haiku’** brings a sense of enlightenment. The 17-syllable marvel may look uncomplicated and dainty, yet it withholds the clandestine stories of several tears and pleasure. Fascinatingly, Soseki compares writing a poem or rather a haiku, to the tedious process of mixing the arrowroot gruel by chopsticks. Initially when the gruel is a mere liquid, the circular strokes of mixing seem rather effortless, but as the stirring continues and the two substances become viscous with each movement, the gruel transforms into a thick glue that ends up sticking the chopsticks together. That is how a poem is formed. Numerous loose emotions, thousands of blurry images stringing together, glues compactly the syllables into one solid picture. Isn't Soseki a magnificent artist? He certainly speaks the language as his prose talks about every form of art, be it poems, prose, painting or music. Soseki questions the true obligation of a poet; he refers to Greek sculptures, the works of Oscar Wilde, compares the faces of old women to the mountain crone of Nagasawa Rosetsu's painting, the prose of Tristram Shandy and the poems of the Orient to conclude that the obligation of an poet (or artist in general) is **“to dissect his own corpse and reveal the symptoms of its illness to the world.”** In a world where an artist is classified by their subjective and objective approach towards art, imparting life and translating the external mood onto the canvass, which is then designated as a “true artist”? Is it a person who resembling the Abbot of Kankaji views life without hindrance and fetches beauty from the most trivial situations in life or is it someone akin to the protagonist who has to take refuge in an isolated land where his poetry can sing the song of a skylark without fearing the deep crimson strokes of the camellia oozing out from the painting like blood on an icy wintry slope. Is it possible to be artist in a true sense without being subjected to the menace of detectives who tend to count people's “farts”?

Why do we always read books from beginning to end? Why must the prologue always be read first? Why can't the story begin from the middle and instead of comprehending the plot first, we appreciate the characters and then revolve the narrative around them? Art is formed in this haphazard way. It never begins with a preamble, it just needs one perfect emotion, one stroke, one note or one word and a whole world is build around it. Art is formed when the artist can ultimately say, **“Ah, here it is! This is myself!”** Art has always freely flown in the narrow lanes of the mind and heart that is the place where creativity flourishes in its embryonic stage. Nonetheless, as the world modernizes eradicating human slavery, the art in turn becomes a slave to prejudicial judgments, defending its freedom at every step in the society. If creativity has to be justified at every corner then is the artistic community committing a crime by exposing art to political scavengers? If every brush stroke, every poetic syllable, every written word is interrogated, then will art succumb to being a mere regulated display behind the glass door forever waiting for a stamp of approval? Soseki was troubled as his melancholy viewed the changing world through a glass door questioning whether Japanese traditions will be lost in the chaos of modernization, and true art will be lost among the malodorous farts.

*“The world where falling in love requires marrying is a world where novels require reading from beginning*

*to end.”*

Life changes, old familiarity bring new lonesomeness as beauty is transient. If our shadows can bear the pain of its disappearance as the night falls only to find joy the next morning, why does man fear change and prefers to dwell in the shadows of an haunting past rather than embrace the joy of future? Although, Natsume Soseki spent several of his studying years abroad (London), his heart belonged to Japan and it's embedded culture. Soseki came from a world where books were read from the middle and random passages. Akin to the novel's protagonist, Soseki was apprehensive about the onset of the 20th century. The author's derision to modernity can be unmistakably seen with his dismissal of nude art for lack of dreamy innocence that is perceived in the artistic depth of the Geishas and the annoyance for the train describing it to be **“a serpent of civilization that comes slowly writhing along the glittering tracks, belching black smoke from its jaws.”**

Reading these thoughts of the author, I infer that more than the advent of modernization (since Soseki did bring in quite a Western influence in his prose), he was skeptical about the state of the preservation of Japanese traditional art. I wonder what Soseki would think in today's world where artists are thrown in jail or labour camps (Ai WeiWei) or have to resort to clandestine Banksy performances. Were Soseki's inferences accurate when he concluded that **“modern civilization gives each person his little patch of earth and tells him he may wake and sleep as he pleases on it, only to build iron railings around it and threaten us with dire consequences if we should put a foot outside this barrier?”**. Has the modern world shackled the essence of art? Is a pure emotion of 'pitying love' susceptible of being exposed to the vulgarity of its world? Has art become so vulnerable that it can only sustain pristinely in a secluded atmosphere without being tainted by the human world? In the chaos of modernization and the ambivalent relationship to aged traditions, where does Soseki's literary naturalist grass pillow stand among the terrains of human entanglement and realism? At a time when Japan was tumbling into a new world whilst being haunted by its traditional past, Natsume Soseki expressively penned the quandary of a country and its people trying to find a concrete place in between the two worlds.

*“My aim on this journey is to leave behind the world of common emotions and achieve the transcendent state of an artist's....”*

In Japanese, the word '*Kusa*' = grass and '*Makura*' = pillow; resting on the aesthetics of nature in this haiku-style philosophical zephyr, Soseki's prose(which he wrote in a week's time) embodies a journey that not only encapsulates beauty of a timeless past but also an memorable experience of appreciating modernity and traditional complexities of art that stood on the periphery two entirely different centuries along with its artist.

**Shadows of life  
Three-cornered world  
Soseki dreams.....**

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**Emilio Berra says**

"... nel paese delle candide nuvole"

La trama del romanzo non è di per sé molto rilevante : si tratta del percorso di un viandante, durante il quale incontra luoghi e persone, storie suggestive, ma soprattutto l'ambiente naturale nelle sue varie forme e meraviglie. La voce narrante è quella di un artista, poeta e pittore, capace di posare lo sguardo sulla bellezza ovunque sia.

Nel libro, oltre a questo tema e profondamente legato a esso, emerge la piena e serena accettazione della caducità delle cose e della vita stessa. Aspetti strettamente connessi alla cultura giapponese, ma estendibili all'intera umanità.

C'è la consapevolezza che "in tutti i piaceri è insita la sofferenza, perché traggono la loro origine dall'attaccamento alle cose" ; gli artisti invece "si nutrono di nebbia, bevono la rugiada (...), nel loro copricapo squarciato penetra l'infinita, azzurra tempesta".

Questo approccio 'innocente' alla natura può ricordare la poetica del Fanciullino di Pascoli, di cui Soseki era contemporaneo (il libro è del 1906), anche se spazialmente e culturalmente c'è tutta la distanza che separava l'Italia dal Giappone ad inizio '900. Ma la coincidenza , fra i due scrittori, sulla funzione del poeta e dell'arte stessa è evidente : "dove il volgo guarderebbe cieco, l'artista scopre innumerevoli gemme, infiniti tesori".

Ciò che pure colpisce leggendo il testo è ciò che I. Calvino, in "Lezioni americane", chiama "leggerezza" ; qui infatti prevale un uso straordinario e bellissimo di un linguaggio spesso metaforico fatto di immagini lievi, 'senza nulla che pesi o che posi' , nella convinzione che, "se si tenta affannosamente di rendere la bellezza ancor più attraente, si ottiene al contrario il risultato di sminuirla. Come dice il proverbio : 'Completare è diminuire' ".

C'è quindi qualcosa di antico e, nel contempo, di straordinariamente moderno in questo elogio della semplicità e dell'essenzialità.

Ecco dunque la contemplazione della 'bellezza delle cose fragili' che quasi paiono esistere momentaneamente per destare il nostro stupore. Si coglie "nell'aria un presagio di pioggia". "La pioggia è tanto tenue che sembra aspergere segretamente la primavera".

" In quale luogo sostare ?

Lontano nel paese delle candide nuvole ".

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## Rowena says

**“Yes, a poem, a painting, can draw the story of troubles from a troubled world and lay in its place a blessed realm before our grateful eyes.”- Natsume Soseki, Kusamakura**

Natsume Soseki might soon be a new favourite of mine. This is a book I read after reading Praj's wonderful review.

Kusamakura tells the story of an unnamed artist looking for artistic inspiration while walking through the Japanese mountains, and his encounters at the on-sen (Japanese hot spring) where he encounters the beautiful Nami.

Kusamakura is one of the most beautiful books I've read all year, one that hooked me from the first sentence. This book was a philosophical look at poetry, nature, beauty and art from a Japanese perspective, often contrasting that perspective a lot more favourably than with other perspectives. Though not an artist myself, as an art-lover I could appreciate the opportunity of looking into the mind of an artist, and viewing his thought process.

As trite as this may sound I realize that Japanese literature speaks to my soul on a deeper level. I really think

it has a lot to do with my introvertism. Authors like Soseki, Tanizaki and Mishima have a very introspective way of looking at things, beauty in particular, and it's something I can really relate to.

Several adjectives came to mind while I read this. Delicate was one, calming and elegant were others.

I didn't agree with Soseki's negative critique of Chinese art and European literature though:

**“All such Chinese household furnishings, indeed, have the same rather dull and unimaginative quality. One is forced to the conclusion that they're the inventions of a race of patient and slightly slow-witted people.”**

And this is just conjecture here, but as this book was written in the same year as Okakura's "The Book of Tea", it does seem to me that both authors were worried about foreign influence on Japanese culture and were looking at ways to show the superiority of Japanese art. I can't side with one form over the other as I believe all art forms are valid and carry different energies and emotions. It's a pity Soseki didn't look at it in this way.

Apart from that little gripe this book was wonderful. I'm really looking forward to reading more Soseki.

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## J. Watson (aka umberto) says

Formerly translated in an edition entitled "The Three-Cornered World" by Alan Turney, this is a new translation by Meredith McKinney. Reading this compact novel by Natsume Soseki was similar to reading a haiku-like one that requires literary interpretations according to, I think, one's interests, backgrounds and appreciation. The more we read it farther from Chapter 1 onwards, we'd gradually realize why Soseki has rightly been acclaimed as "the father of modern Japanese literature" and in his own words, Kusamakura is "a haiku-style novel that lives through beauty." (back cover)

First, his readers will never know the name of "I" as the events proceed, in other words, we'll know him as a male narrator in his 30s who has traveled alone from Tokyo in search of somewhere to paint or to write his haiku poems in a remote rural town in the mountains near the sea. Eventually, this mysterious protagonist literally intensifies his readers' curiosity and perplexity. However, it's our relief to know the name of the lovely daughter who has her own mysterious ways in taking care of him as her guest arriving at night and during his stay with the family there. Her name 'Nami' meaning beauty is appropriate in the fairly-romantic plot since, I think, it induces us to keep reading to know more.

Second, some readers may find this novel boring at first due to the author's lengthy descriptions with few dialogs, for instance, in Chapters 1, 3, 6, etc. However, I understand he's tried to describe the contexts, the characters, the natural settings, etc. as related to the novel's theme. I found reading Chapter 3 (pp. 35-39) so entrancing that I scribbled 'one of the this word suggests partly or nearly all of its key theme, that is, it focuses on its shimmering great chapters' at the end. Moreover, another unthinkable chapter keeps haunting and challenging me for my vision, that is, its subtlety is nearly beyond my imagination and this is one of the reasons why Soseki's superbly-written works have since been admired. The chapter in question is Chapter 7, I think we may find it a bit hard to visualize such illusive description.

Finally, I liked its fine translation by Dr Meredith McKinney and I noticed the adjective 'shimmering' has been used in two sentences (p. 60) and in another (p. 115). Therefore, I think romantic (or semi-romantic if we don't take the affairs between Nami and 'I' seriously) story between two strangers who happen to meet each other somewhere in the mountains in rural, seaside Japan.

In conclusion, the novel has its own way in ending the story and allows its reader to ponder happily, neutrally or unhappily I'm not sure. That remains mysterious and challenging to its readers to try reading it as one of the most shimmering Japanese novels I've ever read. Find a copy and enjoy!

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## **Eddie Watkins says**

Pure simple enchantment, with a healthy helping of farts. Soseki set out to write a "haiku-novel" and Kusamakura does bear many resemblances to Basho's haiku travel book, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*; but it is less a novel than a treatise on "aesthetic living", which in the context of this book is akin to a path to enlightenment. So it is filled with asides, with brief discourses on how to live "non-emotionally", free from petty social entanglements, so to clear the way for reaching the "heart of things".

The nameless narrator, who is a painter on a journey through the mountains, realizes the heart of things on occasion throughout the book, and these moments are described exquisitely. Many of these moments occur in the natural world amid flowers and trees and streams, but the true heart of things is embodied by a woman he encounters at a hot spring. This woman, Nami (whose name means "beauty"), is considered mad or loopy by some, but to the narrator she embodies spontaneity and enlightened aesthetic living (without the need to even practice an art). She has lived her life with a crazy innocence upon returning to her small village after a disastrous marriage. Throughout the book she haunts and teases the narrator, sometimes intentionally, sometimes unintentionally, goading him to refine his quest for non-emotional living. There is no real hint of sexual attraction, though at times I suspected that just by being herself she would dismantle his carefully cultivated and refined way of life. Instead he ponders how to paint her, but there's always something missing in her expressions, some vital component. He doesn't figure out this missing piece until the very end when her cousin is heading to Manchuria for the Russo-Japanese war, and she looks at him with a look of "pitying love". The war itself has acted as a distant but ominous shadow throughout the book.

The narrator never completes a painting in the book, though he writes quite a few poems, but in his philosophy being an artist is not an end in itself, it is a practice that can help one perceive the heart of things, so to paint or not to paint is of no consequence. In the end he feels a sense of deep completion when he completes Nami's portrait inside his own mind with this expression of pitying love.

I mentioned farts because one of the chapters is positively fixated on them. The narrator is griping about city living where people "count your farts". I don't know if this is a Japanese idiom or whether it was coined by Soseki, but it reminded me of another highly refined Japanese artist, Yasujiro Ozu, who was also fixated on farts in one of his last movies, *Good Morning*.

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## **Elie F says**

If *The Gate* reminds me of the evanescence of autumn, Kusamakura reminds me of the drowsiness of spring:

the presence of the soul is forgotten, and the human spirit is forged into nature and elevated to be the realm of pure poetry. Unlike *The Gate* which is so full of weariness and melancholy, Kusamakura has abundant elements of sarcasm and humor which makes it sound like the inner voice of an adolescent boy who is still trying to imagine the immortal beauty of his own self. Adolescent years, still unconvinced of "common sense" and, knowing nothing about weariness, always poised for action like a Classical Greek sculpture.

I can see the transition of Soseki from his early sarcasm to his late melancholy in this novel. The narrator starts with an energetic searching for poetry but gradually slips into inaction. During the past eleven days I spent in Japan, I see a culture of both confidence and inaction. It is a country satisfied with itself and not so much interested in others; it is a country that dares not accept the guilt of its past, that dares not change and assimilate. Already past adolescence, but where exactly does it lead from there?

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## **Maribel says**

"Clearly I am thinking about nothing. I am most certainly looking at nothing. Since nothing is present to my consciousness to beguile me with its color and movement, I have not become one with anything. Yet I am in motion: motion neither within the world nor outside it- simply motion. Neither motion as flower, nor as bird, nor motion in relation to another human, just ecstatic emotion."

To me, that is the "nonemotion" from Kusamakura of life as nature as art as life as poetry. In my own hazed definitions I tell myself that it's my human naturism, as well as outside naturism (like normal people would call it). Walking outside after a storm and the senses pick up the clean smells of the earth and sky. No one else is around so things don't "matter" in the way of consequences. I feel cheesy trying to name it. Haikus! Kusamakura is Soseki's "haiku novel". Nature! It is what Robert Bresson said about not chasing poetry and letting it slip in your walking joints as ellipses (he said it better than that, I'm paraphrasing). That's it. Ellipsis motion... Kusamakura is my ellipsis motion novel.

"I simply gaze at it with pleasure. The word "gaze" is perhaps a little strong. Rather say that the phantom slips easily in under my closed eyelids. It comes gliding into the room, traveling soundlessly over the matting like a spirit lady walking on water."

This! The unnamed protagonist sets off into the other corners of his world to forget the self-interest found in identifying in emotions of life as stage. I don't think I could go anywhere and not make more of that. Stories are my life, and I read it into everything. But I think I need the painting kind of naturism/haiku... Life as thousands of years ago or a thousand years away. It can't touch you and you cannot touch it. Is that kind of love capable of burning as fire? Probably not. But it can be an image made whole. It might not do a damned thing about loneliness but a painting is unbroken hearted. I think I get why it was good for him to go in search of his nonemotion artistic life.

"When a thing finishes abruptly, you register the abruptness of its ending, and the loss is not deeply moving to you. A voice that breaks off decisively will produce a decisive feeling of completion in the listener. But when a phenomenon fades naturally away toward nothing with no real pause or break, the listening heart shrinks with each dwindling minute and each waning second to a thinner forlornness. Like the beloved dying who yet does not die, the guttering flame that still flickers on, this song racks my heart with anticipation of its end and holds within its melody all the bitter sorrows of the world's transient springs."

I read this edition of Soseki's work, translated by Meredith McKinney under the title "Kusamakura" rather than "The Three-Cornered World" (translated by [I have to look this up! Translators have never had this level of attention from me before goodreads, unless the work is a particular favorite] Alan Turney). It was a new translation (by Jay Rubin. Him I don't have to rescue from the tip of my tongue) of Sanhiro too. I'm not sure why there were new translations done. McKinney's introduction talks about how impossible it is to

capture the simplicity of Soseki's Japanese into English. She chose an old fashioned style of English writing to reflect the losing to times style of the Japanese. I was at the least in McKinney's touch, if not her hands, because I cannot read the Japanese. The old-fashioned style is like a "Do" telling kind of thought. "One must..." instructions. If I were on this walk I think I'd want to close the eyelids a bit more and not chase with the "Musts". McKinney is all I've got. Maybe it is the scholarly bent of the philosophy, not to mention her "How I did it" introduction, that made me feel it was bent that way. I know I'm convoluted at best trying to define any of this stuff... (Well, isn't everyone alone in their naturist moments?) Maybe McKinney's instructional method works better than my inner describing it to myself stuff.

"The Three-Cornered World" is a great way of explaining the disregard of "reality" in a make believe world of art. I have no way of knowing what the literal translation is. I'm going to refer to "Kusamakura" in this review all the same, because that's what my copy was called. [Useless Mariel trivia: I refer to foriegn films to the title it was packaged as when I saw it. Some French titles, some in English.]

"If you see something frightening simply as what it is, there's poetry in it; if you step back from your reactions and view something uncanny on its own terms, simply as an uncanny thing, there's a painting there. It's precisely the same if you choose to take heartbreak as the subject for art. You must forget the pain of your own broken heart and simply visualize in objective terms the tender moments, the moments of empathy or unhappiness, even the moments most redolent with the pain of heartbreak. These will then become the stuff of literature or art. Some will manufacture an impossible heartbreak, put themselves through its agonies, and crave its pleasures. The average man considers this to be sheer folly and madness. But someone who willfully creates the lineaments of unhappiness and chooses to dwell in this construction has, it must be said, gained precisely the vantage point as the artist who can create from his own being some supernatural landscape and then proceed to delight in his self-created magical realm."

[I'm going to betray my every day idiotic ramblings now. It is good to sit quietly in nature to escape myself, you know? The cover is a portrait of a woman in a kimono. Okay, that is left open to reveal breasts. I've been getting a lot of used Japanese classics that have covers like this. Why are covers for classics so unoriginal? I suspect I'll start seeing the same covers used for Japanese classics just like those chinless girls or cottages on English classics from the eighteenth century. "I've already read this! No, wait, I haven't. Her dress had puffed sleeves! This kimono reveals a bit more cleavage than that other one! I mean, the peach cleft hairline thingy... Um....."]

Soseki is said to have written Kusamakura in a week! Fuuuuck. This is only my third Soseki and I'm already convinced he was something of a genius. I feel like he could be one of those long ago puzzle peices that makes my whole painting. I know, the Kusamakura protagonist didn't believe in "detective" work. It isn't a complete fit. I don't want it to be. What I love about detective work is figuring out the differences and the sameness. I DO care about the hows and the whys.

"What we call pleasure in fact contains all suffering, since it arises from attachment. Only thanks to the existence of the poet and the painter are we able to imbibe the essence of this dualistic world, to taste the purity of its very bones and marrow. The artist feasts on mists, he sips the dew, appraising this hue and assessing that, and he does not lament the moment of death. The delight of artists lies not in attachment to objects but in taking the object into the self, become one with it. Once he has become the object, no space can be found on this vast earth of ours where he might stand firmly as himself. He has cast off the dust of the sullied self and become a traveler clad in tattered robes, drinking down the infinities of pure mountain winds."

Yukio Mishima said about Kawabata that he was the "eternal traveler". That might be a more appropriate description of Soseki. The traveling as ellipsis! Yeah!

"The fact of the matter is that the realms of poetry and art are already amply present in each one of us. Our

years may pass unheeded until we find ourselves in groaning decrepitude, but when we turn to recollect our life and enumerate the vicissitudes of our history and experience, then surely we will be able to call up with delight some moment when we have forgotten our sullied selves, a moment that lingers still, just as even a rotting corpse will yet emit a faint glow. Anyone who cannot do so cannot call his life worth living." This! I know I said it borders on a self-help style too much to underly the true meaning of beneath the gaze... But moments like this? This is the true definition of natures. Does anyone else like to watch making of about their favorite films? Kusamakura feels a bit like that. I remember my mouth hanging open in astonishment over one behind the scenes story about Klaus Kinski from Werner Herzog. I don't need the behind the scenes to feel anything about Klaus Kinski (I really do. Feel something), but knowing how Kinski would keep his feet planted and rotate the rest of his body for the camera to pick up how he entered the frame larger than life? I was impressed. First wall, second wall, third wall... I love it when they don't have to break and exist at the same time. Kusamakura is that kinda behind the scenes rather than just the story. No matter what the "pure" artistic aim was in its construction to exist outside of emotion... The construction of the painting was not without spirit. Emotion is spirit, as far as I'm concerned. I loved Kusamakura for being about this because I'm going to need more stuff like this to explain how one goes about building this life.

P.s. This review is crazy, isn't it?

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### **Tim says**

I think this book is the perfect example of a "very good book that is simply not for me." The writing is beautiful, the language poetic. I must heap praise upon the translator as this must have been quite a challenge. Every line is seemingly trying to evoke a sense of awed beauty and the translator does an admirable job... and yet almost every page I wished the book would just end and let me be done with it. I only finished it out of stubbornness and because it is only 146 pages... and they seemed like some of the longest 146 pages I've ever read.

The book is about an artist. He seeks artistic "nonemotion" to view the world like a painting, though of course that only works so much for him. Our unnamed narrator expresses his views of art quite frequently, often going on for full chapters about his theories on aesthetics and declares them all as the proper way of viewing art. Frankly I've known people like him in real life and I can't stand them. They are the sort who declare all their opinions as fact and sneer at anyone who voices otherwise (a great example comes of this in the novel where the owner of the inn he is staying at shows him some art pieces, and he can't help but show his disgust at a piece deemed too plain and then too gaudy once its origin is told). All is to be viewed in the name of their art, and I personally found it grating.

As I said, entire chapters could be said to just be (definitive in the character's mind) statements about art, theory and aesthetics. Though the book is short, I'd say over 70 pages could be summed up as just the narrator talking art. At one point I stopped mid-chapter where a page began with the line "But what does theory matter?" and had I been the praying sort, I would have prayed to every deity that he wouldn't answer that question.

*He did.*

If this is the sort of book you're looking for, by all means, I think you will enjoy it. Everyone I've seen/talked to has loved it, and it seems the reviews on Goodreads are almost all positive. Indeed as I said it is well written and it gets an extra star because of it, but I personally took no enjoyment from reading it.

As a brief aside, I find it interesting that it was published the same year as the only other book I have read by the author; "Botchan". These books are practically polar opposites, as our lead in Botchan is very definitely

not an artist and that book is more about plot and humor than the prose. Also, they are curiously opposites in terms of translation, as I will praise Kusamakura's translator despite disliking the book, whereas I really enjoyed Botchan, but felt its translation flawed.

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## **J. Watson (aka umberto) says**

DEAR FRIENDS,

PLEASE DO NOT VOTE 'LIKE' FOR THIS REVIEW BECAUSE IT IS IN FACT FOR 'KUSAMAKURA' (PENGUIN, 2008): IF YOU LIKE IT, VISIT THIS PAGE AND VOTE THERE:<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

AS FOR THE FOLLOWING 6 WELL-WISHERS: Sonja, Ben, Aubrey, \*Bar\*, Garima, and Aziz, please move your 'Like' by relicking your 'Like' on this review (for 'Unlike') then click 'Like' on this one for the right book review: <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...> thanks for your kind help. However, I have to resend my request to notify your 'Like' needed, so that I would delete this page.

I'm sorry for the inconvenience caused due to such a persisting technical problem.

Translated in a previous edition entitled "The Three-Cornered World" by Alan Turney, this is another edition by another translator. Reading this compact novel by Natsume Soseki was similar to reading a haiku-like one that requires literary interpretations according to, I think, one's interests, backgrounds and appreciation. The more we read it farther from Chapter 1 onward, we'd gradually realize why Soseki has rightly been acclaimed as "the father of modern Japanese literature" and in his own words, Kusamakura is "a haiku-style novel that lives through beauty." (back cover)

First, his readers will never know the name of "I" as the events proceed, in other words, we'll know him as a male narrator in his 30s who has traveled alone from Tokyo in search of somewhere to paint or to write his haiku poems in a remote rural town in the mountains near the sea. Eventually, this mysterious protagonist literally intensifies his readers' curiosity and perplexity. However, it's our relief to know the name of the lovely daughter who has her own mysterious ways in taking care of him as her guest arriving at night and during his stay with the family there. Her name 'Nami' meaning beauty is appropriate in the fairly-romantic plot since, I think, it induces us to keep reading to know more.

Second, some readers may find this novel boring at first due to the author's lengthy descriptions with few dialogs, for instance, in Chapters 1, 3, 6, etc. However, I understand he's tried to describe the contexts, the characters, the natural settings, etc, as related to the novel's theme. I found reading Chapter 3 (pp. 35-39) so entrancing that I scribbled 'one of the great chapters' at the end. Moreover, another unthinkable chapter keeps haunting and challenging me for my vision, that is, its subtlety is nearly beyond my imagination and this is one of the reasons why Soseki's superbly-written works have since been admired. The chapter in question is Chapter 7, I think we may find it a bit hard to visualize such illusive description.

Finally, I liked its fine translation by Dr Meredith McKinney and I noticed the adjective 'shimmering' has been used in two sentences (p. 60) and in another (p. 115). Therefore, I think this word suggests partly or nearly all of its key theme, that is, it focuses on its shimmering romantic (or semiromantic if we don't take the affairs between Nami and 'I' seriously) story between two strangers who happen to meet each other somewhere in the mountains in rural, seaside Japan.

In conclusion, the novel has its own way in ending the story and allows its reader to ponder happily,

neutrally or unhappily I'm not sure. That remains mysterious and challenging to its readers to try reading it as one of the most shimmering Japanese novels I've ever read. Find a copy and enjoy!

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### **Stephen P says**

A thirst for the purity of an openness that eschews all restrictions of internal will or external codes. The rare locale of an artist. A place of imagination and dreaming existing apart from the vulgarity of movement-the world. Seeking it removes any chance of finding it. The locale is something which arrives. A splendor of reverie for those patient enough to wait. A book that replenishes the inspiration of awaiting.

We travel with the narrator, a 30 year old Japanese artist. His steps takes him into a valley, an Inn where he is the only visitor. What is to be sought in this quiet splendor is, what is an artist? How is this manifested within a person, how is this manifested within a person's response to the world.

Residing within his mind , his thoughts which exist between the breaths of prose, verse carrying pearls of metaphor, we live through his travails, temptations, experiences, and experiences of experience. A dedicated pilgrim of the mind he has that unique gift to express the ephemeral in, beautiful language while carrying out a plot not inserted but grown from seed and carefully tended.

My only complaint, a small one, there was a couple of time the descriptive language slid over the borderline into overuse and slowed the narrative. A loss of a 0/5 stars.

However, due to the reading of this slender novel-memoir-autobiographical interlude-travelogue, I understand rather than know, one may be an accomplished artist without painting, composing, writing, playing a musical instrument. Living within each moment invites us to live within the world of art as opposed to the contrast of living within the taint of the disquieted world.

Please do not take my review as alluding to that this quiet writing is instructive. The author is filled with grace and gracefulness in the practice of his craft. The book was difficult to put down. During the day it proved a burdensome task to close its covers within my mind. It is difficult now to be in ANY situation as I had been before. Anything new is uncomfortable for me at first. There are riches here though. Many more than meets the eye.

4.5/5

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### **Michael Finocchiaro says**

This is a beautiful book which takes place a metaphorical and physical mountain climb. I would consider it Soseki's more interior-facing work and one of incredible zen-like wisdom and imagery. Again, do not expect laughing geisha and dancing no actors but rather the mature musings of a Japanese master writer grappling with middle age at 39.

Here is an example of his irony-laden highly reflective pose chosen at random:

*I eased my law-abiding buttocks down on the cushioning grass. One could remain in such a place as this for five or six days without the fear of anybody making a complaint. That is the beauty of Nature. It is true that if forced Nature can act ruthlessness and without remorse, but on the other hand she is free from all perfidy, since her attitude is the same towards everyone who harasses her.*

The story does include some other characters and a little bit of shadow theatre and is delightful in that melancholic Soseki kind of way.

The narrator is able to articulate his ideas near the end of the book in a highly evocative poem, here are the closing lines:

*Although yet thirty, my thoughts are those of age,  
But Spring retains her former glory.  
Wandering here and there I am as one who with everything in turn,  
And 'midst the perfumed blossoms, peace is mine.*

I certainly hope Soseki died with that peace and that I myself one day may attain it.

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