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*S?seki Natsume , Edwin McClellan (Translator)*

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Hailed by The New Yorker as "*rich in understanding and insight*," Kokoro — "*the heart of things*" — is the work of one of Japan's most popular authors. This thought-provoking trilogy of stories explores the very essence of loneliness and stands as a stirring introduction to modern Japanese literature.

## Kokoro Details

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Author : S?seki Natsume , Edwin McClellan (Translator)

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## From Reader Review Kokoro for online ebook

### Praj says

*"How can I escape, except through faith, madness or death?"*

Kokoro is an epic melodrama of isolation and self-inflicted guilt. A beautiful heartfelt experience from the exploring friendship between a young graduate student and his mentor (Sensei). Soseki brilliantly unveils an intricate web of egoism, guilt, temptations and loneliness through various anecdotes on Sensei's reclusive living. No wonder Soseki succeeded Lafcadio Hearn as a lecturer in English Literature in the Imperial University (1903).

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### Michael Finocchiaro says

I have mentioned elsewhere that the later Soseki books tend to be darker and more melancholic not to say extremely pessimistic and Kokoro definitely fits this mold. I am NOT taking anything away from the gorgeous language and descriptions here nor the intimate conversations primarily by writing between the protagonist and his Sensei, but it is not something to read if you are down in the dumps. The narrative devices are original even for Soseki and his mastery of character and betrayal of emotion is unsurpassed here. A must read especially if you have already appreciated the lighter, younger, more optimistic yet always cynical Soseki of *Bothan* and *I am a Cat*.

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### Nancy Oakes says

11/30/2016 - update: thanks to my love for foreign films, British comedy and other shows which for some reason we cannot get here, we have multi-region dvd capability & so I was able to watch the movie based on this novel. Scroll to the bottom of this post if at all interested in the film.\*

*Kokoro* is, as I discovered, one of those novels where a second reading and a bit of research can completely change what you thought about it after the first time through. The second read was spurred by 1) discovering that a scholarly controversy had arisen over this book and 2) deciding to pick up and read another translation along with an introduction that explained said controversy. After much time to focus, think and absorb, well, the second time around actually clarified things I had trouble zooming in on after the first time.

The novel is structured in three parts. In part one, the narrator meets and attaches himself to an elder man he calls Sensei, and is soon "yearning for the possibilities of all he had to offer." However, Sensei, who reveals that he distrusts humanity, is reticent to open up about himself, and our narrator often finds himself frustrated when, as he says, "I failed to gain what I sought from him in matters of the mind." However, Sensei also reveals that while he is "suspicious" of most people, he realizes that the narrator seems "too straightforward and open for that," and that Sensei, before he dies, wants to "have trusted just one person." If the younger man could "be that person, ... sincerely in earnest," from his heart, then he will reveal to him the story of his past and leave nothing out, but not right away, since "It requires a suitable moment." What he wants in return is left unspoken for the moment. Eventually the narrator will learn all, but not before part two, which finds him back home with his parents. While there because his father's health is failing, he abandons his own family at a critical moment due to some disturbing news from Sensei, which sets up part three, where all is revealed. Sadly, since everything sort of turns on the revelations in part three, I have to keep silent, since to

tell would be to spoil, but this is actually the part where we come to understand Sensei and where we learn exactly what it is he expects from the narrator -- it isn't expressly stated in so many words, but trust me, it's there.

I wish I could make this post less cryptic, but there's a lot happening in this novel that a reader really needs to experience and sort out on his/her own. Look for thematic elements such as the formation of bonds, relationships, betrayal, individual vs. social responsibility, love, and above all, what it really means to bare one's soul/psyche to another. What I will say is that after the second reading, *Kokoro* became an even darker book than it was the first time through, which I didn't think was possible.

Highly recommended for readers of Japanese literature; it probably won't take everyone two readings, but I got a lot more out of it by doing it that way.

\* the movie:

Big differences between page and screen abound here, many of which are covered in the dvd liner notes. As just one example, it's easy to see just how the movie "simplifies" Soseki's novel, "reorders its plot and eliminates some of its subtext while playing up the homosexual implications that are merely latent in the original." I have to say that since the subject doesn't actually come up labeled as such in the novel, I was quite surprised to see a scene in this movie where Mrs. Sensei starts wondering out loud whether or not there's some sort of attraction between her husband and Hioki (the novel's narrator, given a name here) which Hioki quickly denies with an "it's not what your thinking!" response. On the other hand, there's a lot that's left out as well.

Much of the story is revealed through flashbacks, which I think is the best way to have done it, since so much of the novel turns on what happened in the past, which seems to be the overall point of the film. I've seen people criticize this approach used here, but I really don't see how else it could have been done. To tell it in a linear-narrative, chronological style would have wrecked things (as it would have in the novel as well). While the movie is certainly worth watching, the book is much, much better, and should definitely be read first.

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## Alex says

It's not that you've done something wrong! It's that you haven't done *anything*. The critical moment in this book will seem so familiar to you: you've not done something like it hundreds of times, or realized you were in danger of not doing it. A conversation must be had. You gotta break up with someone, or tell them you're in love with them. It's scary. You don't do it. These moments don't usually become crucial turning points in your life. You just move on, maybe a few degrees less happy than you might have been.

But this is what Soseki is getting into, in this landmark Japanese novel from 1914. What if that was the crucial moment? What if it changed everything? He piles a few of them on top of each other. (view spoiler) He says all this in one of those "Just thought I'd explain a few things" 80-page letters that only happen in books. In real life it would stop mid-sentence on page two as the recipient lost interest. The letter is to his protegee, and what even is he proteging? Like, what do any of these people do? They do nothing. They're "scholars," which, true, is a thing people legitimately used to say, but not because it wasn't bullshit.

Listen, these are a lot of awfully strong feelings these men are having about each other and not the woman,

who's most definitely along for the ride here. When the student hears that Sensei is in trouble, he (view spoiler) How gay is it? I can't really get a read on it. Some online research indicates that no one else can either but I'm definitely not the first person to ask the question.

Soseki was the first great novelist of the Meiji Restoration, when Japan sortof opened up to the world and a new era of Japanese novels began. Kokoro is a subtle, anguished book. It opens up this whole aching underground river of things I could have said, or said sooner, or said better. I think I'm good now. There are only people I love left in my life, and I hope I'm letting them know. Are there things you should be saying right now to someone? I'm seriously asking! I'm nosy! Tell me about your buried angst! And then maybe go have that talk with that person, before everyone ends up dead.

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## Carol Rodríguez says

Este ha sido mi estreno con S?seki (gracias al Club Pickwick), y he salido muy contenta con la experiencia. Es un libro pausado en la narración pero que me ha resultado muy ágil a la hora de leerlo; típico libro de autor japonés en el que parece que no ocurre nada, pero sí que ocurre. No sé muy bien cómo explicarlo, y puede resultar hasta contradictorio, pero siempre tengo esta sensación con los libros que llegan de Japón.

Lo cierto es que me ha gustado mucho. Se separa en tres partes, muy diferentes entre sí, de las cuales me quedo con las dos primeras y los últimos diez u once capítulos de la tercera. Es decir, la tercera tal vez sea la que menos me ha convencido, exceptuando el desenlace.

En la **primera parte** conocemos al narrador, un joven universitario, y a un hombre al que llama Sensei, con el que se cruza por casualidad y que en seguida le deja fascinado porque irradia sabiduría. En este apartado del libro vemos cómo progresa su relación en el Tokio de finales de Era Meiji, y se deja la intriga abierta sobre ciertos secretos del pasado de Sensei que guarda de forma celosa. El principio, debo confesar, me pareció un poco forzado, porque Sensei es un señor que rechaza todo vínculo social, y el chico se le acopla un poco "porque sí", pero la verdad es que en seguida se le coge el ritmo y todo empieza a tener sentido. Muy muy al principio pensaba que iba a ser una historia homosexual, pero resulta que no. Yo creo que Sensei se ve en cierto modo identificado con el chico y por eso le da acceso a su vida, a la par que le regala consejos útiles para aplicar en el día a día y el futuro.

En la **segunda parte** acompañamos al narrador a la casa de sus padres, en un entorno rural, ya que él viaja allí por una temporada porque su padre esta enfermo. Este apartado se me hizo especialmente fluido y atractivo y es con el que más he disfrutado, a pesar de que tal vez sea el más triste.

Y en la **tercera parte** será desvelado por fin el tormentoso secreto de Sensei, que también es un momento bastante triste y melancólico del libro, pero muy esclarecedor y que permite ir atando todos los cabos. Confieso que esperaba algo más violento a lo que acaba ocurriendo, pero ahora mismo la verdad es que no puedo imaginar otro final.

Una de las cosas que más ha llamado mi atención es que jamás llegamos a conocer el verdadero nombre de ninguno de los personajes, solo el mote, calificativo o inicial que el narrador les otorga, y aun así la empatía es máxima, porque están perfectamente dibujados.

El final me ha encantado, porque hay ciertos asuntos que no se ve cómo se cierran, pero se sabe perfectamente lo que va a acabar pasando. Esto es muy típico de los autores japoneses y me gusta, porque son muy de dejar cosas entre líneas, a la imaginación, o de no redundar en aspectos obvios de la trama. Sí, me gusta, porque no tratan al lector como a un tonto y no se lo dan todo mascadito. Aplaudo los finales

abiertos y ambiguos de los autores japoneses, que aunque con "Kokoro" no sea del todo el caso, aprovecho para decirlo, ya que pasaba por aquí.

Un saludo,  
Carol Rodríguez

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## Magdalen says

Kokoro is the story of an unnamed protagonist who meets his mentor whom he refers to as Sensei. Truth be told not much take place in the book as far as action is concerned so if you are looking for a page turner you'll probably end up disappointed. However, Soseki manages to portray a whole era masterfully and he really unravels the depths of human psyche. The themes included in the book are mistrusting people, dysfunctional communication, inability to relate to other people's feelings, sadness, love and finally redemption (& more i just pinpointed the ones i remember clearly)

What is also great about Kokoro, other than the story, the atmosphere of the book and the characters, is the fact that the chapters are short and the language is easy to follow (the translation obviously) Soseki brilliantly captures your attention from the very first page. And as you get more into the story and as the story eventually unfolds you can't help but wonder. "What happened to Sensei?" "why is Sensei a misanthrope?" And once you reach the last page you know and you understand.

Kokoro is definitely melancholic and sometimes depressing but it was a beautiful and a unique book. One thing is certain · i will be reading more works of Soseki in the near future.

Ps: it really hits me how a book so simply written can have a huge impact on a person.

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## Samadrita says

A languid, melancholic dream of a novel which pierces the heart of the reader with its quiet intensity.

Cautious in its narrative tread on the ground of contentious issues, delicate in its broaching of subjects like the indignity of death, sin and redemption, existentialist ennui, self-recrimination and misanthropy, *'Kokoro'* is a masterful recounting of a tragedy which unfolds against the backdrop of the dying years of the Meiji era. As Emperor Meiji breathes his last taking along with him the anachronistic echoes of an obsolete way of life rigidly shackled by the conservatism of the isolationist years, a hesitant Japan steps into the welcoming embrace of modern day materialism while simultaneously waging an inner war with the self-denying Confucian ideologies of its past.

A mysterious and scholarly middle-aged man only referred to as 'Sensei' meets our young protagonist in a chance encounter and the unique mentor-protege bonding, that forms between them subsequently, brings an indescribable joy and solace to both. While 'Sensei' eventually summons the courage to confess to past wrongdoings in a letter to the young man he barely knows and attains a kind of salvation through a self-imposed exile from society, his unnamed protege learns to look past the horror and agony of slow bodily death and accept the natural order of things. A powerfully written spiritual inquiry into the corruption of the human soul, an elegant acknowledgement of the juxtaposition of mournful endings and optimistic beginnings and a testimony to the fragility of human lives.

## Anh Th? says

m?y quy?n n?i ti?ng c?a Soseki ?a ph?n ??u ?ã bán ? Vi?t Nam. trong s? các quy?n ?ó, quy?n làm mình thích Soseki là G?i ??u lên c?, quy?n làm mình ph?c Soseki là Tôi là con mèo, quy?n làm mình say Soseki là M??i ?êm m?ng, quy?n làm mình ??ng c?m v?i Soseki là Sanshiro, nh?ng quy?n làm mình quên b?n thân ?i mà bu?n thay cho Soseki là N?i lòng.

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## Elie F says

**"I believe you don't really become a finer person just by reading lots of books"**

I know a lot of Westerners are obsessed with the East and our civilization, finding its mysterious inconclusiveness attractive in opposition to the somewhat dogmatic West. Nonetheless, it is one thing to be an outside admirer and another thing to have that blood in your vein. Kokoro is a novel of frustration, fragility, distrust, terror, and hopelessness of the blood the East has in its vein, a reflection on the superficial nature of our race hiding behind the appearance of moral grandness. Like in the story passed on through generations, those ascetic heroes who lashed themselves apparently for the sake of spiritual attainment, it is actually the cruelty, foolishness, vanity, and all kinds of superficial forces that drive the hustle and bustle of the shallow yet restless Eastern soul. I can sense the chill and frustration in Soseki's gentle description of how the Eastern souls are led astray to extremity, epitomized by those individuals who consciously or unconsciously, willingly or unwilling followed Emperor Meiji to death.

Indeed we don't become a finer person by reading books, by devoting ourselves to a certain occupation, by following any trajectory to its end, as long as the sin in our nature is still sweeping upon our heart and soul. This is the frustrating message that Soseki sends to me.

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## Camille Stein says

*El camino a la verdad es solitario, remoto, escondido.  
Pero con un corazón limpio, por él recorro pasados y presentes.  
¿Hay un yo en las aguas azuladas, en las azuladas colinas?  
Todo es cielo, todo es tierra: artificio no hay en ellos.  
En la luz mortecina del crepúsculo, la luna se aparta de la hierba;  
y la voz sorda del viento de otoño se queda entre los árboles.  
Olvidaré mis ojos y mis oídos; perderé el cuerpo.  
Solo en el vacío entonaré de la nube el blanco cántico.*

(Natsume S?seki, 20 de noviembre de 1916)

“Una persona capaz de amar o una persona incapaz de evitar amar, aunque no pudiera acoger con los brazos abiertos a quien deseaba llegarse a su pecho, tal persona era *sensei*.”

...

Narrativa interior, pausada y sigilosa, del desmoronamiento del alma, de la culpabilidad, de la compasión. Crónica de la elocuencia del detalle, péndulo de silencio y palabra. Relato de la lentitud, de la demora en el advenimiento de una trama mínima pero estudiada al detalle, que se abre con la naturalidad con que se manifiestan las estaciones o los fenómenos atmosféricos. **Kokoro** o la gestualidad verbal de la sutileza, novela de sentimientos sin residuos de sentimentalismo, traducción de códigos estrictos por los que se rigen los corazones enjaulados.

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### Siti Shakira Suhaimi says

This amazing 248 pages Classics was written beautifully, enough to get my attachment after few pages. It told stories on human relationship with one another, on different degree. Relationship that happen to everyone. The feelings that probably can be called 'love' of different angle, of different literary meaning, and individual's actions based on the feeling. Sometimes we didn't notice we did something because of love, as we didn't even notice the love is there. We thought we are doing it to fill the void that we have, although sometimes we do things truthfully because of the loneliness. As time pass, the relationship went stronger just because we already gave the person a place in our lives. We become more open to each other, trusting each other gradually, and manage to get into deep discussion of different opinion. The circle then getting larger. But it took a great effort to prove someone that they can trust us. Especially when they have painful history of being betrayed by the person they used to trust the most. It took real patience and time. We might not understand at the beginning but we will learn the truth as time passes.

This book also taught me that everyone has their own past that they regret, regret of doing, regret of not doing, and the heavy burden they carried with them since, causing the real sorrow and doom atmosphere, not knowing how can they repent those feelings that leave them being socially withdrawn. That some of people deciding on suicide would be the best way to end everything.

These feelings occur to almost everyone to some point of our lives, and somehow I easily drawn into this book from the beginning, because I know the feeling of looking up to someone that we can regard as mentor at the end, someone we call 'sensei', and our effort to show them how meaningful they are to us.

As the book went, I find it extremely easy to relate on the feelings of worrying on our family members' well-being, sickness, health and many others because they are important, wonderfully important people in our lives. We don't want to regret of not spending enough time with them, although they keep saying they are fine. Because family, they don't want trouble the people they love, especially of parents to children or vice versa.

This book splendidly brought up the theme of daily human interactions to each other in a handsome manner, that at the end I managed to say "the book couldn't be written any better and ended any better."

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## Marita says

The Meiji period in Japan during the second half of the twentieth century ushered in major changes. After the death of Emperor Meiji in 1912, Japan would be irrevocably changed. This melancholic novel reflects various aspects of this change.

The unnamed protagonist, a university student, strikes up a friendship with someone he admires and refers to as 'Sensei' throughout the novel, which translates as 'teacher' or 'master'. It is (let's call him X for the purpose of this review) X who actively pursues the friendship, as Sensei is rather aloof. X finds himself compelled to seek out Sensei. On one occasion X invites Sensei to go for a walk, and he didn't care where they went: *"All I wanted was to take him out beyond the city limits."* And in his own enthusiastic manner he tries to get Sensei to open up and to move beyond the limits he appears to have set for himself. At the start of his narration X tells us that in retrospect he now understands that Sensei felt himself unworthy and in fact despised himself. Our narrator says: *"Sensei was a man who could, indeed must love, yet he was unable to open his arms and accept into his heart another who sought to enter."* Later in the novel the reason for Sensei's behaviour is revealed, as well as the reason why he pays a solitary visit to a particular grave each month.

In the middle section of the novel X is called home for family reasons. He cannot help but compare his family with Sensei and feel embarrassed about them, and ironically it is X who behaves boorishly. *"Sensei, I thought, was more cultured and admirable than my father, with his unashamed delight. In the final analysis, what I felt was displeasure at the reek of country boorishness in my father's innocence."*

The latter part of the novel is narrated by Sensei in a letter addressed to X. He tells X of his friendship with K and slowly Sensei the man is revealed to us. We see how K embodies the old era and old world Japan. The young, unnamed narrator represents the new Japan, and Sensei... well, Sensei is pretty much smack in the middle of the change and doesn't really fit into either mold. In his letter Sensei explains to the young man: *"My morality is probably very different from that of young people today. But different though it may be, it is my own. It is not some rented clothing I have borrowed to suit the moment."* In telling his story Sensei ruminates on love, happiness and morality, and he offers his young friend advice, but...

The prose is languid and beautiful.

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## RK-isme says

As with many 'classic' Japanese novels, 'Kokoro' is a rumination on changing mores. Japan went through many culture shaking changes between the time in 1853 that U.S. Navy Commander and erstwhile 'diplomat' threatened Tokyo with bombardment if Japan did not enter into diplomatic discussions and the post-WWII period.

I found this book to be both fascinating and frustrating as it carries the reader over various times of change. Indeed, I often found myself to be quite upset at the characters as they all seemed to be either stumbling about in indecision or simply to be making bad decisions. But then, this can be seen as the skill of the writer as he takes me into his characters' world and makes me care, makes me want to shout out, "Stop prevaricating. Do it." But I do not shout out. The character stumbles again. And I'm frustrated again.

Values are something we all grow up with. We learn our basic values like we learn our first language, from the society around us. The difference is that we can learn another language without distorting the first one. Trying to shift values is often quite painful as we must either leave behind what is most central to us or

isolate ourselves in a past which continues to unfold.

Author Natsume S?seki poises the reader perfectly on the cusp of change between the young narrator and his older "Sensei", the man he chooses as his master to teach him. The older man struggles with his values and his guilt while the younger looks only for answers, clumsily pushing his way into the other's life.

S?seki's skill is clearly shown in that neither man falls clearly into a stereotypical role. Indeed, each has to deal with the changing values in his own life, forever being faced with dilemmas of his own.

At the end, I found myself a bit adrift as I was left with actions of the two main characters with which I was not comfortable and whose final outcomes I will never know. That strikes me as being very life like.

A good book for a thoughtful reader.

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## **Maribel says**

Kokoro translates to "the heart of things". I only know this because the translator's forward said it was so. I need a translator, from my heart's mind to yours (anyone?)... I am afraid that I will wander around in the dark mental spaces again. Gray shades of life experiences and emotional (not necessarily reality) experiences. Who could pick up on the undertones and relevances? I'm truly afraid that worse than making no sense, I'll be sitting at the feet (Muppet babies feet? Peanuts gang feet? Warbled voices of unknowable adult world? Something like that) in my open mouthed admiration again. In affection? Most definitely. This affection kept my heart in my mouth when reading Kokoro. That is mine! (Does anyone in my life ever understand that about me? I only hope... It feels wretched when I don't make sense. It is hopeless when I reflect cold.) It's a lonely and reserved affection. I AM going to make no sense again. I related tight rope walking style once again to the great divide in humanity and loneliness. The young student who sees in his Sensei a value of life experiences (damn it it is much, much more than that to him. A lifeline? A tugged line across various life shit. The best part is not holding it alone). Sensei who has willfully lived as dead for a long time from a past betrayal to himself and his friend (he deliberately severed another tugged line, in a sense. Over a girl. Try to make real book sense for a change, Maribel!). Willfully, not willingly. The resolve earlier made would have spared (not saved) him from a lifetime of suspended mental hell. Loneliness. The worst kind because company couldn't change the fact that your own company is unendurable. Not his student's (well, of a sort) affection in loneliness. Kokoro hit me hard because, well, I'm in both of those times all of my time. I believe in this "heart of things" because it is that watching and reaching out affection of lonely connections of the student to the sensei... The not being pushed away, no matter the pushing, future and life shit that could just at the wrong twist of fate and time break the tenuous hold. Lines are so damned hard to keep up. I really didn't expect to read this love behind all of this. (I needed it. It'd have been a MUST read if I'd known.) Now I wish I could ever be as sure as the student that these feelings and experiences give the good kind of heavy weight on the balance of that damned tight rope of depression and doubts... I have the affection... I don't have the surety. Sensei? Anyone?

Here are some passages that I marked off for myself.

"The memory that you once sat at my feet will begin to haunt you and, in bitterness and shame, you will want to degrade me. I do not want your admiration now, because I do not want your insults in the future. I bear with my loneliness now, in order to avoid greater loneliness in the years ahead. You see, loneliness is the price we have to pay for being born in this modern age, so full of freedom, independence, and our own egotistical selves."

But the fire behind the cold heart walls! Even I've got 'em...

"I was once deceived," Sensei said. "Moreover, I was deceived by own blood relations. I shall never forget this. When my father was alive, they behaved like decent people. But as soon as he died they turned into scoundrels. The effect of the injury that they did me in my youth is with me still. It will be with me, I suppose, until I die. What they did to me I shall remember so long as I live. But I have never taken my revenge on them. When I think about it, I have done something much worse than that. I have come to hate not only them, but the human race in general. That is quite enough, I think."

Not even words of consolation came to my lips.

I didn't think what his Uncle and family did stealing his inheritance was as shocking as all that. It was his own betrayal that killed. I don't care what Sensei says.

"It would appear that you are unable to distinguish between my ideas at present and the events of my past. I am not much of a thinker, but the few ideas that I do have, I have no wish to hide from others. I have no reason to. But if you are suggesting that I should tell you all about my past- well, that's another matter entirely."

"I do not agree with you. I value your opinions because they are the results of your experience. Your opinions would be worthless otherwise. They would be like soulless dolls."

I saved this for myself because I have long felt such remorse (close to shame) the times I've opened up about stuff. Like I had no right to. (Why am I admitting this? Because this book is more urgent to me than I was led to believe on amazon.com reviews. It's not a predecessor of No Longer Human. It's behind loneliness built up walls affection. Like weeds!)

"It is possible that, in a sense, I deserved his contempt. His point of view of everything was much loftier than mine. I do not deny this. But when the loftiness is merely in one's point of view, then one is hopelessly handicapped as a human being. I decided that what he needed, above all else, was humanizing. No matter how full one's head might be with the image of greatness, one was useless, I found out, unless one was a worthy man first."

Sensei may not have believed it but... Loftiness? What the hell is that good for? I get nosebleeds from looking up at that...

"Time and time again, I wondered what had caused K to commit suicide. At first, I was inclined to think that it was disappointment in love. I could think of nothing but love then, and quite naturally I accepted without question the first simple and straightforward explanation that came to my mind. Later, however, when I could think more objectively, I began to wonder whether my explanation had not been too simple. I asked myself, "Was it perhaps because his ideals clashed with reality that he killed himself?" But I could not convince myself that K had chosen death for such a reason. Finally, I became aware of the possibility that K had experienced loneliness as terrible as mine, and wishing to escape quickly from it, had killed himself. Once more, fear gripped my heart. From then on, like a gust of winter wind, the premonition that I was treading the same path as K had done would rush at me from time to time, and chill me to the bone."

I don't want to be Sensei. Whatever happened with K, that doesn't twist up his other lines. I would want to burn fires for him too.

"Then, at the height of the summer, Emperor Meiji passed away. I felt as though the spirit of the Meiji era had begun with the Emperor and had ended with him. I was overcome with the feeling that I and the others, who had been brought up in that era, were now left behind to live as anachronisms. I told my wife so. She laughed and refused to take me seriously. Then she said a curious thing, albeit in jest: "Well then, junshi is the solution to your problem." (Junshi means "following one's lord to the grave.")

Oh fuck that. There is no such fucking thing. There is no hope at all if that is true.

## Kinga says

My book club buddy made us all read it because he was dating a Japanese girl and wanted to learn more about her culture (I hope one day someone reads Prus for me, that would be real love). Anyway, they've been married for a while now, so that should give you an idea how behind I am with my reviews.

After all the melodrama of the Western literature, reading Kokoro was a refreshing experience of emotional restraint. It's an absolute classic, written in 1914, the end of Meiji era when Japan was going through somewhat tumultuous cultural changes after centuries of isolation.

All the reviews will tell you that 'Kokoro' means the metaphorical heart, the feeling, the heart of things. It's an apt title even if all those things remain unsaid, ambiguous and floating. Despite its delicate nature this book is really about a cultural clash of the Zen Buddhist values of calm observation and passionless life and the brave new world of obsessive individualism courtesy of the Western Civilisation. You can find the traces of the Western literature (so beloved by Soseki) in a certain despair and hopelessness that often characterises Victorian novels. However, the drama is missing, the passion if it exists is under a lock and key, so in its heart (see, what I did there?) it is definitely a Japanese novel.

The book opens with the narrator, a young student, observing an older man (henceforth called Sensei) bathing in the sea. I can't be the only one detecting some homoerotic undertones in the obsessive admiration that the narrator develops on spot. I mean, I probably think about sex too much, but come on! All that stuff about wind drying wet naked bodies. Come on!

What follows is a story of a baffling friendship between the two, where nothing of consequence is ever said. Ironically, the most important theme of the book is loneliness, the kind that can never be escaped, the kind that's the price that needs to be paid for the indulgence of choosing self over a group.

Kokoro fixates on the guilt and penance but somehow neglects to mention that the kind of penance chosen by Sensei is the one that punishes unfairly everyone around him too; it's the most self-involved kind of punishment. I fail to see anything noble about it.

So should you read this book? Do you care for occasionally exhausting existential ennui and a reminder that we are all alone inside our own heads, forever? If so, then yes, by all means.

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## Hadrian says

Reread, 4/29/2015.

I was reminded about this book by some of Kate Beaton's lovely comics (here, with some plot spoilers) and I thought to reread it again.

All humor aside, this book has stirring emotional set pieces which seem even more interesting and important on second reading.

**[P] says**

A few years ago I had arranged to meet up with a girl I was loosely dating. I liked her a lot, but as she is a DJ, who works late nights, seeing each other was not easy. I had agreed to go to the club she was playing at that night and wait for her to finish, which would be something like 3am. As I didn't want to spend the entire night stood at the side of the DJ booth waiting for her I asked my brother if he wanted to join me. I explained why I wanted to go out, I assured him that I would be free most of the night until 3am, and offered to pay for all his drinks. He agreed, and so we got ready and left our apartment around 9pm, to have a few drinks before we made our way to the club. However, in the first pub I noticed that my brother was spending a lot of time on his phone. When we had finished our drinks, I asked if he wanted another, and at this point he declined and started to groan theatrically, holding his stomach. He told me that he needed to go outside for some air. It was clear to me that he was playacting, so I offered to accompany him. He was not best pleased.

Outside, he kept taking exaggerated breaths as though he was going to be sick, and, as I wasn't taking the hint, eventually he told me he was so ill he needed to go home. I said that was fine, but pointed out that I didn't believe him and that if he was faking an illness to go off and meet some friend[s] I wouldn't easily forgive him. He maintained that he was very unwell and therefore I let him leave. I stayed in the bar for a while, had another drink, and then, after texting my girl to say I might be late or not make it at all, decided to go home and see if my brother was ok. Of course, the apartment was empty. By this stage, I was so disgusted and tired of the whole situation I decided not to go out again. Then, in the early hours of the morning my brother rolled in, extremely inebriated. He had, as I suspected, left me to go and meet up with some friends. Our relationship hasn't been the same since. Call it an overreaction if you like, but I can't tolerate deceitfulness.

It is possibly unfair, and an exaggeration, but I see my brother as a kind of poster boy for the modern age [the above anecdote is only one example out of thousands]. My generation has been raised to believe that you are important, that what you want is what really matters; we are encouraged to indulge ourselves, to choose ourselves if ever faced with a two courses of action, one of which will benefit someone else and one that will benefit the great me. Qualities like honour, sacrifice, duty etc are becoming increasingly rare. Of course, I am not perfect in this regard, I am not completely selfless, but I am not absolutely self-interested either. I believe that it is important to have integrity, and to be able to see outside of oneself. Unfortunately, I see less and less of this with each new generation.

“No matter how full one's head might be with the image of greatness, one was useless, I found out, unless one was a worthy man first.”

These concerns of mine are, I believe, one reason why Japanese literature resonates with me so much, as a sizable number of their most acclaimed authors, including the one under review here, wrote extensively about the tension between modern and traditional values, attitudes and behaviour. Indeed, the protagonists in Natsume Soseki's best novels are usually indolent and self-obsessed young men who find themselves at odds with their parents and the disappearing or declining 'old' ways of life. This is certainly true of his most famous work, *Kokoro*, whose title can be roughly translated as 'heart.' That title has a two-fold significance: heart as in love, which plays an important role in the text, and the heart of the matter. The matter being what we have been discussing, i.e. the changing face of Japan.

The novel is split into three sections, the first of which centres on the relationship between an older man, Sensei, and a young student who narrates the action. The student, whose name is never revealed, is away from his family, first at college and then at university in Tokyo. Like Daisuke in Soseki's *And Then*, he is the

archetypal modern Japanese. He is introverted, bored and unmotivated; he does study for his diploma, but leaves it until the last minute and doesn't appear to value it, when he has been awarded it, in the way that his parents do. I call these protagonists of Soseki's superfluous men because they have no direction, no goal towards which they are striving. The student, like many of us, goes to university, not with a career in mind, or even to learn, but because it is something to do. In fact, he values Sensei – whose acquaintance he makes almost by stalking him – more than his lectures or books.

Sensei is a kind of misanthrope, who has withdrawn from a world “so full of freedom, independence, and our own egoistical selves.” The closest word to Sensei, in meaning, in English is teacher; it is someone who is respected and knowledgeable. It is the young man who gives him this title, and so it is clear that the student is looking for guidance [although Sensei himself says that the boy is lonely and looking for love]. In this way, perhaps Soseki is saying that young people, living in times where morality and values are less certain, where freedom is almost absolute, need help or direction. It is, I think, the case that the more freedom one has the more lost or confused one can feel, that freedom is actually something that we find very difficult to cope with [this is, in fact, the clichéd modern dilemma]. In light of all this, it is not difficult to see the older man as having a symbolic function in the novel; he is, in this scenario, representative of the old or traditional world. Yet, while that might be true to a certain extent, his character is more complex than it appears to be initially.

As one progresses through the opening section, it becomes clear that Sensei is harbouring a secret, that something happened to him long ago to make him the way that he is. One would expect that this revelation [which comes in the final section] would involve him being mistreated, would involve some confrontation with the modern, selfish, dishonourable approach to life. And that is, at least partly, the case. As a young man Sensei was cheated out of his inheritance by his uncle after the death of his parents. As with Balzac, money, or more specifically a lack of it, plays a major part in Soseki's novels [the idea of being relieved of an inheritance comes up again in *The Gate*]. Is Soseki saying that an obsession with money is a disease particular to the new Japan? Perhaps, although I think he was making a point about how there are no truly good or bad people, that our values are reliant upon circumstances, that, for example, if you have the opportunity to steal then you will. We return again to the idea of freedom. I don't know enough about Japanese history, but maybe it is the case that prior to the Meiji era [when the novel is set] there was a strict moral prescriptivism that prevented these kinds of acts.

“You seem to be under the impression that there is a special breed of bad humans. There is no such thing as a stereotype bad man in this world. Under normal conditions, everybody is more or less good, or, at least, ordinary. But tempt them, and they may suddenly change. That is what is so frightening about men.”

In any case, if this was all that had happened to Sensei then his character would not be particularly engaging. What makes him fascinating is that he, in a sense, embodies the conflict that Soseki was writing about, because he himself does something that is considered dishonourable. I won't go into details about what exactly that is, but it is certainly something that these days would likely barely raise an eyebrow. Sensei, however, is severely damaged by it, to the extent that it dominates, and ruins, his life. This is the sense of honour that we have previously touched upon, which is for us, and for Soseki's modern Japan, disappearing. Yes, Sensei does wrong, but he feels overwhelmingly guilty about it, and, ultimately, he takes his own life [not much of a spoiler as we know Sensei is dead within a few pages of the book], as a way of atoning for his behaviour. There is something about the Japanese idea of honour suicide that I find extraordinarily attractive. I wouldn't be party to it myself, but to give up your life as a way of trying to make amends is very powerful. One could see Sensei, then, as someone who is both modern and traditional; he errs in a way that is consistent with the outlook of Soseki's contemporary Japan – i.e. he is prepared to tread on someone else to

get what he wants, is prepared to exercise his freedom – but responds to this dishonourable act in a way that is consistent with the Samurai code; it is, in effect, an act of nobility that is out of step with the times.

[General Akashi Gidayu preparing to commit seppuku]

Outside of all this modern vs traditional stuff, Soseki touches upon other [albeit related] themes. One is that of the city and the provinces. The student's parents live in a village, and one is, somewhat ungenerously, given the impression that village life is old-fashioned, even backward. As for the parents, they note immediately that Tokyo has had an effect upon their returning son. Yet, even here, the provincial is, essentially, a symbol of the traditional, from which the student is trying to escape. Likewise, death, which plays a major role in *Kokoro*, and the tension between generations, could both be seen to suggest change or the ending of an era. Finally, what of love? I wrote earlier that it is central to the novel, but have as yet said very little about it. Partly that is to do with spoilers, but it is also because I am not sure how it relates to Soseki's most obvious preoccupations. In his three greatest novels – *Kokoro*, *The Gate* and *And Then* - love could be said to be both a blessing and a curse. Indeed, in my favourite line, Sensei asks the student “do you know what it feels like to be tied down by long, black hair?” Is he saying that love in the modern age is also problematic, confusing, and difficult? If so, I guess he got that right too.

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## Emilio Berra says

La sconfitta

"Con malizia ho conseguito la vittoria ; ma, come uomo, sono stato sconfitto".

Scritto nel 1914, due anni prima della morte dell'autore, grandissimo scrittore giapponese, N. Soseki. La vicenda si svolge nel '12. Due i protagonisti : uno studente universitario e un più maturo signore, enigmatico e un po' inquietante, un uomo colto che vive di rendita, in modo agiato ma non propriamente ricco, insieme alla bellissima moglie.

Il ragazzo, colpito dall'intelligenza e dalla cultura di questo, lo chiama "Maestro".

Con rigorosa scansione temporale, periodicamente l'uomo s'incammina per una mesta passeggiata verso il cimitero ; evidentemente c'è un sepolcro che pare celare, "nell'umida oscurità della fossa, un qualche profondo segreto", e fin dall'inizio traspare nell'autunnale "suntuoso sfiorire della natura".

Il Maestro porta in sé un desolato pessimismo avvolto nel mistero : "Non è questione di quello che penso. E' piuttosto quello che ho fatto in passato che mi ha condotto in tale cupo abisso".

La vicenda tende a svelare sempre più l'enigma, finché la storia non emergerà in tutta la sua chiarezza.

La scrittura di Soseki è bellissima, poeticamente lucida, capace di indagare con sobrietà, lungo il dipanarsi di questo romanzo a sfondo giallo, le lunghe ombre scure via via sempre più percepibili, che tengono in pegno come castigo una vita intera.

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## Edward says

*Introduction*

*About the Title*

*Acknowledgments*

*Suggestions for Further Reading*

--Kokoro

*Notes*

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## **Carol says**

I aspire to compose a review. This book richly deserves it.

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