

In this novel, a young American woman disappears into Tokyo's underworld.

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

By Don Lee.
315 pp. W. W. Norton & Company. \$24.95.

By Tessa Hadley

THE central preoccupations of Don Lee's first novel feel like urgent issues for our times. The characters wrestle with slippery questions of race and identity, and the story unfolds in that liminal space where America interacts with another culture. Here it is Japan: a white-looking young American woman named Lisa Countryman disappears in 1980 into the underworld of Tokyo's sex trade. All the clichés that formula might evoke — wholesome American girl lost to the unfathomable corruptions of the Orient. Other — are complicated in this novel, however, and in the end flipped upside down. Lisa is in fact neither white nor straightforwardly American; and it is her quest for her "real" origins that has led her into danger. The truth about what has happened to her turns out to be comic-grotesque rather than tragic-poignant, and has more to do with her own angst and longings than with the machinations of any evil exploiter.

Rather than constructing the plot of "Country of Origin" around the conventional thriller certainties of us and them, Don Lee — he is the long-time editor of the literary journal *Ploughshares* and the author of "Yellow," a story collection — insists we become aware of the complex and shifting bases for our identity and our behavior. At first glance the world of this novel seems polarized between the American community, centered on the United States Embassy, and a busy, economically buoyant Tokyo. The Americans are assertively individualistic, the Japanese a conformist community hidebound by tradition. Beneath the surface of American confidence, though, lurks extraordinary anxiety about identity.

Tom Hurley, the young official assigned to Lisa's case, is half-white and half-Korean, but he habitually lies and says he's Hawaiian, "a declaration of racial neutrality." Harmless enough: but the lies, once they've begun, accumulate.

When Tom begins an affair with Julia, the American wife of a Japanese C.I.A. operative also attached to the embassy, he can't stop himself from telling her, falsely, that in Hawaii he was a top surfer and that he is a graduate of U.C.L.A. Meanwhile, Julia lets him believe, wrongly, in the old-

money, private-school image she projects. When Lisa Countryman's sister arrives in Tokyo, everyone involved in investigating the disappearance is thrown by the discovery that she's black; Lisa turns out to be adopted and half-black, half-Korean. Tom's fellow officers at the embassy — Benny, who is black, and Jorge, who is Chicano — grumble endlessly (and, the novel suggests, with some justification) about how their race prevents them from getting promoted. In this novel's American melting pot, racial identities stubbornly persist, and matter; on the other hand, they can't offer a definitive account of who anyone is. Tom is used to being asked, "Where are you from?" and "What are you?" This is code, he believes, for "You don't look like a real American."

The labyrinthine conventions that

to be moved from his shaming position at the dreaded window desk in the office, wishing he weren't stamped as a loser by the stigma of divorce. Whether he likes it or not, however, he's an embodiment of a Japan in the throes of profound change.

There's a touching moment when Kenzo burns a bundle of reeds on the walkway outside his apartment, a residual gesture that halfheartedly stands in for the full ritual of the Buddhist Festival of the Dead; it's not worth going home to the city of his ancestors because he doesn't know anyone there anymore. He's mistaken, too, about the identity of a boy he thinks must be his son. In Japan, as in America, identity is being shaken loose from traditional moorings. Kenzo's obsession with noise — he changes apartments to get away from the whirl of an air-conditioner, only to find himself tormented by the grinding motor of his new refrigerator — reflects his quest for a lost perfect peace and wholeness that can't really exist any longer in his contemporary troubled city.

"Country of Origin" doesn't altogether deliver on the promise of this interesting material. It has all the right ingredients for a thriller: a missing girl, a variety of suspects, two men on the case, entanglements in high places and a tour through some of the more bizarre aspects of the Tokyo sex trade. It's a good idea structurally, too, that the account of Lisa's months in Japan leading up to her disappearance is woven into the narrative of the search for her; this takes us into some fascinating locales and also underscores our urgent need to find out what has happened to her. But the unraveling plot isn't built with the right degree of ingenious tight fit. The few surprises aren't surprising or convincing enough; the final twist in Lisa's search for her roots, a nice curiosity in itself, doesn't feel adequately momentous to carry, as it must, the emotional weight of our loss and our discovery.

Lee never quite finds a comfortable register for the novel's language, which has a secondhand, superficial quality: "She had never had the audience of such an elegant, good-looking man before, and the wonderful thing was that he seemed interested in her." And there is not much evidence of an effort to remake perception freshly in words. People walk off "briskly"; Julia's singing performance is "rousing" and "soulful" and at the end of it Tom is "already half in love with her." This isn't a genre narrative where well-worn phrases become a stylistic choice; the sentences instead seem slack and loose. Whatever power a novel has to move us, and to make us think, depends on the power of the exact words chosen. □



MICHELLE McDONALD

Don Lee, whose characters wrestle with questions of race and identity in his first novel, "Country of Origin."

govern Japanese society start to seem fairly transparent by comparison — although there's no sentimentality about those, either. Lee stresses the unapologetic, institutionalized racial exclusivity of the Japanese, from high school girls giggling at an African on the subway to a maternity nurse's casual talk of how mixed-race babies have "polluted" the planet. The Japanese words scattered in Lee's prose habituate the reader to a Japanese perception of whites as dubious *gaijin* who emanate a "butter stink" from eating too much dairy. Kenzo Ota, perhaps the most sympathetic of the central characters, is a conventional enough middle-aged Japanese detective, longing

Tessa Hadley is the author of two novels, "Accidents in the Home" and "Everything Will Be All Right."

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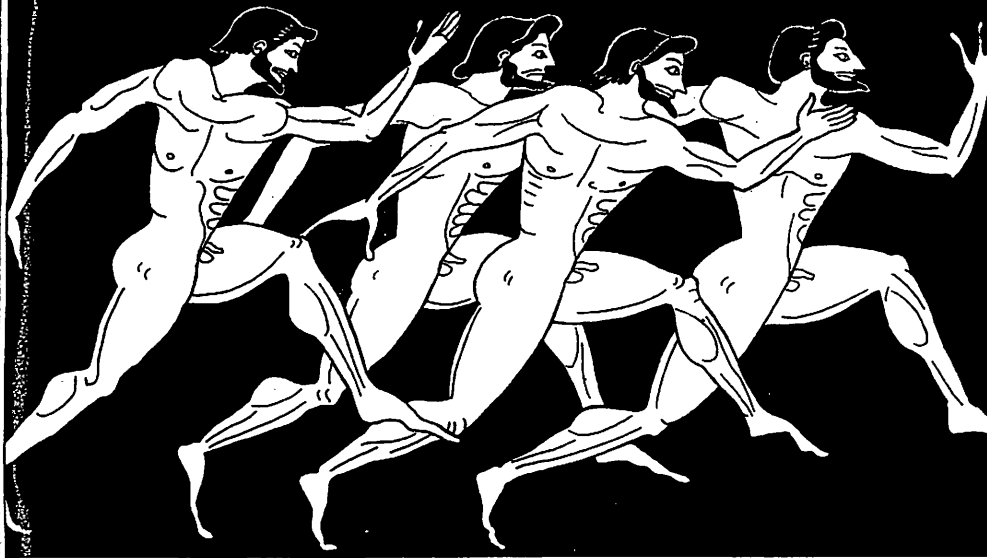
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BACCHANALIAN EXTRAVAGANZA: Revered as demigods, winners received amphorae of olive oil

A Gold Medal for Brutality

Today's Olympics are tame next to the ancient Games

BY MICHAEL MEYER

THE GAMES BEGIN. LET US brace ourselves for an unprecedented orgy of commercialism, jingoistic hype, logistical chaos and hubristic athleticism. Oops. Unprecedented? Not quite. As it turns out, the Olympics have always embodied such dubious attributes—starting in 776 B.C.

That's the picture Tony Perrottet draws in "Naked Olympics" (214 pages. Random House)—so titled because the original competitions were held in the nude. Laying bare the quaint myth of the ancient Games as a purist Arcadian rite, Perrottet evocatively re-creates the Olympics as the bacchanalian extravaganza it was. Even in antiquity, the Games drew spectators from around the world—some 40,000, from as far away as Spain and the Black Sea, who marched for days from Athens or the port of Piraeus to remote Olympia, 400 kilometers away in the southern Peloponnesus. Awaiting them was basically ... nothing.

Yes, there was the famed Temple of Zeus, and the stadium. But Olympic infrastructure, as we moderns call it? The sky was your roof and the fields your bed. When the eager throngs of fans arrived, they simply flung their belongings down and set up camp. For the next five sweltering days, Olympia would become a teeming tent city. The smoke of cooking fires hung over everything. Rivers dried up, and there was little water. Dehydrated spectators dropped like flies. There was dysentery, fever and plagues of biting insects. (Instead

of the ceremonial lighting of the Olympic torch—an innovation from the 1933 Games in Nazi Germany—organizers offered sacrifices to "Zeus Averter of Flies.") "Not for nothing does our word *chaos* derive from the ancient Greek," writes Perrottet. "With its lack of basic sanitation, the Olympic festival was the Woodstock of antiquity."

The Games themselves more resembled entertainment from "Blade Runner" than the almost effete competitions of today. Running, jumping and spear-chucking were hot, of course. But so were chariot-racing and the *hoplitodromia*, a sprint in full armor. The long jump, we learn, was performed with weights to the accompaniment of flute music. Then there was the savage *pankration*—essentially a mob mudfight, with the winner being the last man standing. Only eye gouging was banned. More brutish participants would snap opponents' fingers or tear out their intestines.

Without question, the athletes were a colorful lot. Stars paraded around in lion skins, like Hercules, brandishing clubs and engaging in prodigious feats of gluttony—consuming, say, a small bull in a single sitting. Nor did their exploits go unrewarded. Those crowned with the laurel at Olympia were treated as demigods forever after, and rewarded in the here and now with splendid villas and amphorae of olive oil—as good as cash, and lots of it.

No wonder the ancient Olympics ran uninterrupted, every four years on the second full moon after the summer solstice, for nearly 1,200 years. Who could stay away? ■

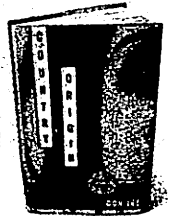
Snap Judgement

Our Critics Steer You Straight

BOOKS

Country of Origin by Don Lee

It's 1980, and Lisa Countryman, an exotic young American, goes missing in Tokyo. She had been working as a hostess at an exclusive bar, claiming to be doing research on Japanese women for her dissertation. But Lisa, half Asian and half black, has a secret agenda, which becomes clear only late in the book. Almost all the characters—including a junior U.S. diplomat assigned to her case and a Japanese cop on her trail—have complex issues with race. In this innovative first novel set on the eve of Japan's economic boom, Lee, a Korean-American who grew up in Tokyo and Seoul, tells a poignant story of prejudice, betrayal and the search for identity. —KAY ITO



The Generation of 'Uchira' and 'Osoro' by Yasuko Nakamura

In Japan, high-school girls have created numerous fads, including Tamagotch, extra-baggy white socks and text messaging.

Nobody knows them better than Nakamura, Tokyo's teen-marketing guru, who has worked with 100,000 girls during her 18-year career. This collection of essays, published in Japanese, reveals some of their girl talk (the title refers to slang words *uchira*, or "we," and *osoro*, meaning "in the same design"); how they spend their days (karaoke), what they treasure (cell phones) and what makes them sick (roaches, teachers and middle-aged men). An illuminating look at a little-understood group. —K.I.

Little Scarlet by Walter Mosley

It has always been Mosley's intention to write the social history of Los Angeles through the eyes of a black private detective. But who knew he would do it so well? "Little Scarlet," the eighth novel in the series, takes place in the aftermath of the Watts riots in 1965, when Easy Rawlins tries to find a white man suspected of murdering a black woman. This is a page turner that poses the question: how many different ways are there to define heartbreak? We lost count about halfway through. —MALCOLM JONES



"On the Revolutions of Heavenly Spheres by [Nicolaus] Copernicus. I brought it with me on a recent trip to Mexico but didn't actually get around to opening the book."

ILLUSTRATION/GREG MABLY

graduate student in English at the University of Kansas, his bossy girlfriend, a dry-docked Venetian gondola on an estate in Uruguay, and the mysterious literary legacy of an exiled European author. I think that he is one of the most gifted fiction writers at work today"

Compiled by John Freeman

A war has just ended. But men with guns roam the countryside, hunting and hiding, settling old scores. We are in a farmhouse somewhere. In this novel, we share the point of view of a little girl, curled in on herself, hiding in a hole beneath a trapdoor. She has been told to remain hidden and silent until the activity above her has finished. That activity results in the murder of her father

enchantment next door, attaches herself to Bel. She becomes a photographer, a maker of bright images. Bel exerts a powerful spell on all around her. Her children live in her thrall. As a dying old woman, she finally outlives her myth, but death is not her last performance.

Barbara Fisher is a freelance critic who lives in New York.

Dazed and confused in a perilous Tokyo underworld

Country of Origin

By Don Lee
Norton, 315 pp., \$24.95

By Roberta Silman

In his first novel, "Country of Origin," Don Lee continues to explore the plight of those born of mixed race, which he began in his prize-winning story collection, "Yellow." In this mystery, which begins in 1980, in Tokyo, a 24-year-old named Lisa Countryman goes on a strange date with an older man, is disillusioned, more than a little drunk, and through her own carelessness dies. That's what the reader knows.

What the other characters are left with is her disappearance, and the tension in the novel builds around the search for her, alive or dead. Those on the case are Tom Hurley, a junior officer at the US Embassy born of a Korean mother and a white American soldier, and Kenzo Ota, a has-been Japanese detective, one of the "window people," demoted to a window in his office, away from

all the action.

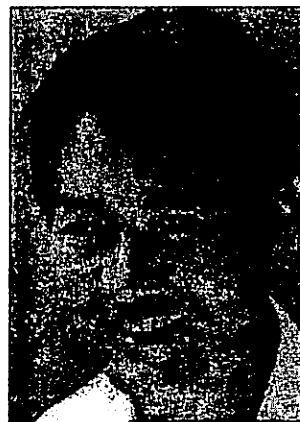
As the novel unfolds we learn that Lisa came to Japan to teach English and, because of various misfortunes, ended up in working in the sex trade, finally landing in the classy Rendezvous Club. Here Lisa, literally, finds her voice, becomes a desired "date," falls in love, and begins to travel with powerful Japanese executives and the CIA agents who spook them. One of these agents, slowly revealed to be the linchpin, is Vincent Kitamura; he is also of mixed race (Japanese and white American), has several names, and is married to Julia Tinsley, a white American as tinselly as her name.

In the first third of the book there is too much fussing with plot; more is told than shown, and too many of the characters seem superficial and off-putting. At first I thought Lee had fallen into the same trap as Dean Kim in "Yellow," whose "head still swam with delight at the first hint of a frame-up or a double-cross." Or that he was sidetracked by sex. There is a tedious slog through the Japanese

sex trade with the excuse that this is where Lisa worked, and most of the sex in this book has a cold, "professional" tinge, as Julia puts it. Yet Lee knows how to write and he surely knows that the reader has to have someone to root for.

What keeps the reader going until Lee hits his stride is Kenzo, a clumsy yet lovable character, reminiscent of Nabokov's Prnin, with his overly acute hearing, his longing for a normal life, his bumbling attempts at love, and his mistaken conclusions about Lisa's quest. He is a wonderful creation, Lee at his best. The writing in those passages is relaxed, funny, and compassionate. We feel Kenzo's loneliness as he courts his landlady, tails the fat biracial boy he thinks is his son, tries to sort out Lisa's "research," and lives with his disappointments and failures.

As the writing becomes more assured, the rest of the characters become more rounded and sympathetic. When we see Lisa embarking on a quest for her biological mother, trying to change her penchant for bad luck, and falling



PHOTO/MICHELE MCDONALD

DON LEE

in love with a man she knows as David Saito, we realize how difficult it has been for her to live in skin that looks white but is really half-Asian and half-black. Soon we begin to understand the terrible truth of what it means to be biracial in a country as homogeneous as Japan. Lisa's search for her biological mother reveals the shameful ways Koreans were

treated in Japan, during and after World War II, and becomes heart-breaking when she finds herself face to face with the woman who delivered her.

Lee, who has lived in Tokyo, knows the Japanese, with all their foibles and illusions. He portrays them as unhealthily interested in sophomoric sex, convinced of their uniqueness, and possessed of what they call *mono no aware*, "the Japanese penchant for poignancy and sadness." He knows the ins and outs of their systems of bribery and power just as intimately as he knows the goings on of the CIA and the US Foreign Service, and the book is interesting for its details about both groups.

But beneath the surface of this novel are those nagging and eternal questions: How deep the desire to belong really is, how vulnerable the mixed-race individual feels as soon as he realizes what he is, and how that vulnerability affects all kinds of choices. Here is Tom, musing:

"He lay awake in bed. . . . He

had not put up a single decoration, not acquired a single souvenir. . . . This was how he had always lived, how he had grown up. . . . He realized it was also a means of self-protection. If he avoided staying in one place too long, if he avoided relying on someone to be there with him, to accept him for what he was and wasn't, to look upon him with complete devotion, he would never get hurt."

At the end of the book, Lisa is dreaming about the hope of America, "a land where all was possible." And she thinks, "We are orphans, all of us. . . . And this is our home." Yet that's too easy, and Lee knows it. As I closed this fine novel I was reminded of a quotation from Paul Scott, who knew his share about exile and alienation: "A country was a state of mind and a man could properly exist only in his own."

Perhaps that is all any of us can hope for.

Roberta Silman's most recent novel is "Beginning the World Again: A Novel of Los Alamos."

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FICTION

An engrossing tale of origins, destinations

By Alan Chuse. Alan Chuse is a book commentator for NPR's "All Things Considered," a writing teacher at George Mason University and the author, most recently, of the short-story collection "Lost and Found." Published June 20, 2004

Country of Origin

By Don Lee

Norton, 306 pages, \$24.95



In 1980, a young American woman of mixed racial background travels to Japan, ostensibly on a quest to complete research for a doctoral dissertation. Once she arrives in Tokyo she disappears.

That's the central matter of Don Lee's engrossing first novel, "Country of Origin." Lisa Countryman, the main figure around whom all of the action swirls, is an enigmatic figure, especially to herself. Born in Japan in dire circumstances, adopted by a black American airman and his wife and raised in the U.S., she was cursed and razed most of her childhood because of her indeterminate racial characteristics.

The ferocity of this bias against her eased off when she reached puberty, when she began to be taken for Italian or Israeli or Hawaiian, American Indian—"something," Lee writes, "some sort of exotic dark mixture, but not really dark . . . not—God forbid—black."

When Countryman travels to her native Japan, she finds herself up against another sort of wall made of bias. The Japanese, insular and overtly racist, keep putting stumbling blocks in her path as she tries to figure out some of the main questions that have haunted her since her childhood: Who is her real mother? What are her true origins? Where did she come from? Where is she going?

The reader becomes caught up in some of these same questions as Lee conspires to make an engaging mystery out of the questing, somewhat disturbed young woman's sojourn in modern Tokyo. Though we witness her awful, pathetic death rather early in the unfolding of the story, we have to read on for quite a while, traveling back in time to get to know her. And she becomes quite an intriguing and lively character.

We follow her half-hearted attempts to do research about Japan's sexual underworld and pity her when she becomes romanced, and then enticed, by this way of life. We worry terribly about her when she joins the staff of Rendezvous as a high-class escort, and again when she hooks up with David Saito, a

Japanese-American CIA agent attached to the American Embassy. (By this time in the story we've already encountered the agent's photographer wife, Julia, who is having an enervating affair with Tom Hurley, a young half-Korean, half-white American diplomat who, ironically, is heading up the investigation of Countryman's disappearance, along with a somewhat sluggish but determined Japanese police detective named Kenzo Ota.)

All this makes up, among other things, a nicely textured travelogue of Tokyo's underlife, all a swirl of action, a whirl of love and sex and race and politics, local and international, with an interesting mix of characters and subplots.

Following Countryman's trail is a dark task. But along the way we encounter some bitterly comic scenes in which we witness the monstrous pathology of Japanese middle-class sexual mores. Lee has done his research about the rituals and zany delusions of Tokyo sex clubs (my bizarre favorite was the X-rated routine in which businessmen out on an alcoholic tear take up magnifying glasses "for a scrupulous examination," as Lee puts it, of the nether parts of the strippers at a club called the Red New Art).

But the real X-rated material here is Lisa Countryman's desperate search for identity and the embedded racism of the culture in which she stumbles along in her search. Don Lee has made a plain-spoken novel about origins and destinations that succeeds rather effectively in dramatizing all sorts of questions about where we have come from and where we are going.


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Cultural dislocation, intrigue in a sinister Tokyo

By John Freeman
 Special to The Seattle Times
 July 9, 2004

Sophia Coppola's film "Lost in Translation" spun a lyrical tale of two Americans suffering circadian meltdown in modern-day Tokyo. Washed up in that same city in 1980, the characters in Don Lee's atmospheric debut novel, "Country of Origin" (Norton, 315 pp., \$24.95), have it even rougher.

Being of mixed race but looking native, they fall prey to a kind of cultural vertigo. They almost blend into the mainstream with their Asiatic looks and their near-fluent Japanese, only to discover they are not accepted. The backwash of this experience is a nagging sense of betrayal.

In his debut short-story collection, "Yellow," Lee wrote about this feeling with a plangent realism. "Country of Origin" is an altogether darker and more thrilling book, one full of danger, crime, CIA operatives and sex workers.



MICHELLE MCDONALD

Don Lee is a third-generation Korean American who grew up in Seoul and Tokyo.

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As the action opens, an American woman named Lisa Countryman goes missing, and men from the police and diplomatic service fan out to find her. This search zigzags from downtown shop-fronts to the seedy red-light district — the last resort for unemployed American women. If this were a movie, Coppola senior — not his daughter — would be the director.

A lesser writer might lose control of such a story, turning it into pulp or, worse, some kind of half-baked noir. But Lee is a polished and extremely diligent writer, his focus first and foremost on his characters.

There's Tom Hurley, an arrogant Korean-American foreign-service officer who crabwalks into an affair with a blue-blooded American who happens to be married to a CIA mole.

There's Kenzo Ota, an obsessive-compulsive Japanese cop who, like Tom, is tasked with the job of finding this missing American. Finally, there's Lisa, who flits and floats through the story like a ghost, an example of the dangers of total rootlessness.

A third-generation Korean American who grew up in Seoul and Tokyo, Lee demonstrates an intimate knowledge of how cultural labels can be both slipshod and stubborn. Many of the characters in this book do not want to be seen as fretting over their identity, yet the need constantly to explain who they are to the locals is beginning to wear on them.

Visiting the American military base in Okinawa where she grew up, Lisa — who is half black, half Japanese — feels a strange lack of connection. The officer taking her around immediately picks up on this emotion:

"You look sad ... Don't be sad. I see this all the time. You're feeling a little lost these days. You were hoping, since you were here, that visiting would give you a little insight, the whole *Roots*, Kunta Kinte thing. But the problem is you're a Navy brat, a Third Culture Kid. Every base was exactly like the last one. Like I said, I see it a lot. It's a common syndrome."

The syndrome may be common, but it's still unsettling. In fact, in spite of their jaded panache, many of the characters in this book yearn for a sense of belonging. It is this desire which makes Tokyo feel almost homey to them.

A city nearly rebuilt from the ground up after the firebombing of World War II, Tokyo almost accepts the characters' jumbled past. It wraps them in a cloak of strangeness and hurries them along. This lonely limbo — not America proper — is Tom and Lisa's true country of origin.

Lee is wise, then, to spend a good deal of this longish novel making Tokyo come alive. Unlike David Mitchell's "Number9dream," or, say, one of Haruki Murakami's novels, Lee's Tokyo is not a 21st-century drug-and-light show. His is an altogether older and more sinister city, one where the Japanese mafia runs the places that make the money, and police forces operate more like a fraternity than a security outfit.

The city's patina of modernity sits lightly on top of all this. With "Country of Origin," Don Lee slowly peels back this prettified skin to reveal Tokyo's unbeautiful underbelly, and the sad souls who truly find themselves lost in translation there.

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Racial identity is key to this tricky, intelligent first novel by Ploughshares editor Don Lee.

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Its affectless title, a kind of pun, cleverly evokes the deadpan style of Lee's complicated portrayal of intertwined lives in 1980 Tokyo.

"COUNTRY OF ORIGIN"
By Don Lee
Norton (\$24.95)

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The novel pivots on the death of military brat Lisa Countryman, a Berkeley student ostensibly doing research in Tokyo.

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Using narrative overlap and flashback, Lee spins a yarn that is as much a mystery as a meditation.

On the surface, it's an exploration of the Tokyo demimonde, focusing on clubs and "love hotels," where businessmen indulge in nonconformist pleasures.

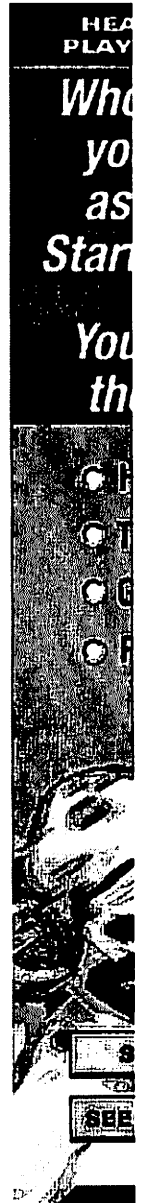
Lisa's research leads her to a brief, doomed career in these clubs.

Her quest is compelling, and Lee generally tells the story well. At times, however, the book feels overstuffed, and the explanation for what happened to Lisa -- apparently, she was caught in a nefarious business deal -- seems too little, too late.

Still, the story has good bones and Lee's treatment of race is fascinating. This is a novel of color in more ways than one.

Tom Hurley, the U.S. Embassy functionary charged with finding out what happened to Lisa, is a kind of mirror image of her. Like Lisa, he's racially mixed. But at least Hurley knows where he comes from; Lisa doesn't, and the "research" she does into Japanese mores is actually her investigation into her origin.

Kenzo Ota, a Tokyo policeman depressed by his divorce and stuck in his career, gives the book resonance, stability and narrative drive. Ota is not only uncomplicated and racially secure, he's funny and occasionally touching, unlike any other character.



The three stories interlock, giving the novel urgency.

None of the relationships is straightforward. Lisa Countryman does the sexual duty her courtesan-like job requires and falls in love with a Japanese businessman named David Saito (or is it Vincent Kitamura?)

Hurley enters into an affair with Julia Tinsley, a postcard-pretty photographer who's married to Kitamura (or is it Saito?)

And Ota, eager to rekindle his career and his sexuality, enters into a relationship with his landlady, Keiko Saotome, a love counselor on the side.

Ultimately, the relationships balance. They even make sense, and the mystery of Lisa's death is nailed down, though whether it was a murder remains an open question.

Otherwise, there is closure, if not comfort. The world since 1980, as seen through Hurley's eyes, "was a much meaner place now, more superficial, more corruptible. There were scandals, but nothing was really scandalous, because the worst things imaginable happened every day and were immediately packaged into entertainment. No one seemed to have any innocence left to lose."

Lisa Countryman is an innocent who had much more than innocence to lose. By hinging this story on her brief, unhappy and disturbingly colorful life, Lee has crafted a mystery-plus, artfully intertwining social issues and personality.

(Carlo Wolff is a freelance writer from Cleveland.)

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AN UNFINISHED SEASON

Ward Just

Novel (*Houghton Mifflin, \$24*)

Editor's Choice



Ward Just continues to expand his storytelling beyond his celebrated Washington, D.C., political novels with this beautifully languid, emotionally intense tale of Wils Ravan, a 19-year-old growing up fast in 1950s Illinois. Ravan's father owns a printing business; a middle-class striver, his rise is hobbled by his employees' decision to strike. Wils rebels quietly, attending the University of Chicago ("the hotbed of American socialism," says Dad) and working as a newspaper copyboy. He also falls in love with Aurora, a girl whose sexiness is her piercing wit and soignée reserve. Her father is a famous Freudian psychologist, the sort of worldly fellow esteemed by colleagues as well as Marlon Brando. As usual with Just, political events (Joe McCarthy's witch hunts and the Korean War) shape human ones. But it is the intricate contrasts between the fathers and their children, young adults who exult and err in love, that give *Season* a melancholy lushness tempered by a fierce, unforgiving realism. **A** —Ken Tucker

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

Don Lee

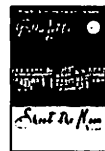
First Novel (*Norton, \$24.95*)

Lee, longtime editor of the literary journal *Ploughshares*, has written an elegant and haunting debut. Like many good stories, it hinges on a taut plot and then widens in concentric circles to become a novel of ideas.

When an American woman who has been working in Tokyo's "hostess" clubs disappears, an alienated policeman and an expat diplomat set out to find her. Shuttling between the formal society of Japan and its free-wheeling nightlife, *Country of Origin* concerns nationality and place, ultimately suggesting that even the most disenfranchised can find a sense of self. **A-** —Rebecca Ascher-Walsh

SHOOT THE MOON

Billie Letts

Novel (*Warner, \$24*)

In the spirit of her 1996 best-seller *Where the Heart Is*, Letts delivers a tender yarn of finding one's identity in a rural Oklahoma replete with single mothers, eccentric townfolk, and multiple Wal-Mart references. A man arrives in the sleepy town of DeClare looking for the woman who put him up for adoption. The stranger turns out to be Nicky Jack, the baby boy who went missing after his mother was brutally murdered nearly 30 years prior. Suddenly, DeClare stirs with reawakened memories of an unsolved mystery. Though the unfolding whodunit never quite meshes with Nicky Jack's journey of self-discovery, Letts writes with such earnestness and local color that you don't mind extending your stay to see how it all turns out. **B-** —Allyssa Lee

ALL THE CENTURIONS

Robert Leuci

Memoir (*Morrow, \$24.95*)

In his grizzled author photo, Leuci still looks a little like a longer-haired Treat Williams, who played the truth-telling NYPD narcotics cop in 1981's *Prince of the City*.

IT'S GOOD TO BE YOUNG



Before he ever picked up a guitar, Graham Nash was an avid photographer. This 1970 Neil Young Image and 30 years of Stills-filled stills are collected in *Eye to Eye* (Steidl, \$60).

This memoir is his own accounting of his ascension through the ranks and his extraordinary ordeal as he—occasionally working alongside future mayor Rudy Giuliani—helped blow the lid off corruption in New York's criminal justice system. Here, though, the movie-friendly story of Leuci's whistle-blowing bogs down in slack pacing and too many names. What really sings is the more familiar yet punchily assembled first part of the book, as young Leuci (a.k.a. "Babyface") busts dopers, cultivates informants, and struggles against succumbing to "the collective nervous breakdown of the system." **B** —Gregory Kirschling

numerous other characters with Lee, is not only unknown to the mainstream, but often was the doormat of a work-for-hire industry he helped define like no other artist. Though relatively light on analysis of Kirby's muscular style and why it was so influential, the book compellingly depicts the codependent relationship between the charismatic Lee and the rough-edged Kirby, as well as Kirby's retirement-age struggles to get a fairer return on work that netted his employers millions. The story packs as much pathos as any of the duo's signature supersagas. **B+** —Tom Russo

CRUISERS

Craig Nova

Novel (*Shaye Areheart, \$24*)

A dedicated state trooper and a lonely computer technician stumble unawares toward a violent confrontation in Nova's ambitious, multilayered novel. While Russell Boyd patrols the Vermont highways by night and grapples with his girlfriend's

TALES TO ASTONISH

Ronin Ro

Nonfiction (*Bloomsbury, \$24.95*)

As comics' longtime cultural ambassador, former Marvel honcho Stan Lee is familiar to many. The astonishing part of journalist Ro's tale is that the late artist Jack Kirby, who in the '60s created the Hulk, the Fantastic Four, and

Boston Herald

Daily News Tribune

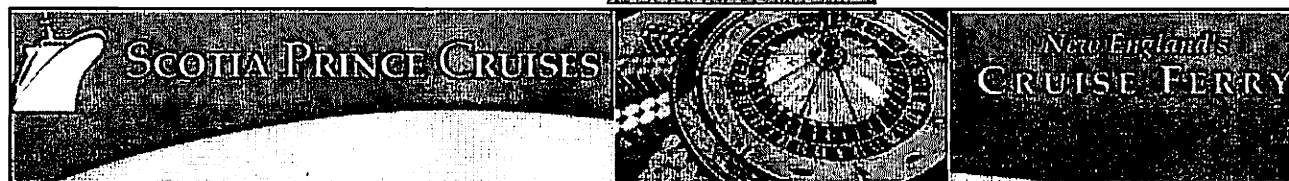
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Don Lee

Country of Origin

(Norton)

'Country' a masterful mix of mystery, racial analysis

Review by Rob Mitchell

Sunday, July 18, 2004

Lisa Countryman is a young biracial American. Lured by Tokyo's strange and unsettling nightlife, she finds work as a hostess in one of the city's shadowy sex clubs. When she mysteriously disappears, her sister draws the American embassy and the Japanese police into the case.

On the surface, the story linesounds like a fast-paced tale of intrigue and suspense - and it is. But in the cool, confident hands of Cambridge writer Don Lee, author of the short story collection "Yellow," it is much more. As might be expected from the editor of Boston-based literary journal "Ploughshares," "Country of Origin" is a smoothly written, carefully crafted, contemplative novel of race, identity and Japanese social conventions.

Lee is a third-generation Korean-American who, as the son of a career State Department officer, spent his childhood in Tokyo and Seoul. Most of Lee's principal characters are of mixed heritage, half-this and half-that, uncertain about their racial identity, confused as to loyalty. Lisa Countryman was born to a Japanese woman. Her unknown father was of muddled origins and she was adopted by an African-American couple. Under the pretext of writing a dissertation on Japanese bar girls, she's groping for her own heritage.

Tom Hurley, a junior officer at the American embassy, is half-Korean and half-white but tells people he's Hawaiian. The son of a GI from South Boston, Hurley tempts fate by pursuing a love affair with the wife of an important CIA officer.

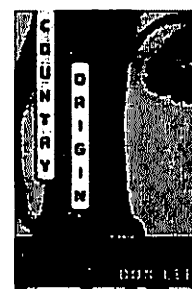
Kenza Ota is the Japanese police investigator assigned to the case. Divorced, lonely and struggling for his self-esteem, he is desperately seeking the respect of his colleagues.

Ordinary people with small strengths and debilitating flaws, Lee's characters are complex and lifelike. They live and work in a Tokyo that is dense, atmospheric, orderly and gritty. Particularly sympathetic is Ota, the Japanese cop, who learns that the worst thing one person can do to another is to awaken his loneliness, to remind him of his need for other people.

Without inhibition, Lee addresses the sensitive issues of racial homogeneity in Japan, and the country's racism toward blacks and Koreans. Dark and tense, the novel also has its lighter moments, such as when Lee describes the Japanese penchant for simulation and imitation - a fake indoor beach, a faux commuter train where the strap-hangers indulge in simulated groping.

The narrative's shortfall is that Lee's prose is so seamless and restrained that certain revelations lack the dramatic energy of a commercial thriller. As Lee works the variations on the theme of what it means to be of mixed heritage, it is the substance and content of his characters and their crisscrossing lives that take center stage.

Rob Mitchell hosts the radio talk show "Pages to People," which airs on WBNW-AM and WPLM-AM.



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A Reading Life

By KATHERINE A. POWERS

The intoxicating embrace of a good read

The single disagreeable thing about reading books for a living is that one cannot surrender to books as one did when one had horrible jobs from which books offered the only certain escape. In those days reading was an animal pleasure, pure and unprofitable, and finding a "good read" was the object of life. A "good read" is a book that possesses one completely, a book that one cannot put down except to stave off for a while the terrible moment when the last page is turned. Maybe I will never feel that grip so fully again, but I can still identify books that would have done the trick before I lost my innocence.

In fiction the qualities essential to a good read are generous portions of character, character development, and plot; a palpable sense of place and material reality; reoccurrences of situations and quirks that become an inside joke between writer and reader; some seriousness — though not solemnity — of purpose; and, above all, consistency and follow-through. You have to trust your writer not to let you down: not change the tacit rules of the narrative or simply be sloppy. He must not disobey the laws of nature or time. He mustn't cry wolf more than once or twice, or trump up spurious motives. And he will never be forgiven for simply calling it a day, leaving a mess of loose ends at the end. An excellent example of a recent novel that could have been a good read if the author had attended to his responsibilities is "**Bangkok Tattoo**," by John Burdett (Knopf, \$24). The book conveys a foreign place and material circumstances extremely well. It has characters galore, some fairly consistent. It is replete with incidents and complications, but to call them a "plot" would be going too far. The story is all over the map, literally, and its ending is implausible, inadequate, and annoying.



PHOTO/ROSEANNE OLSON

ERIK LARSON

I turned from this disappointment to "**Country of Origin**," by Don Lee, which is now in paperback (Norton, \$13.95). Before I was 50 pages in I knew that I had in my hand the genuine article. Set in Japan in 1980, the novel possesses an exquisite sense of place and material detail. It also manages to sustain three fully fleshed main characters. There is Tom Hurley, an American Foreign Service officer of mixed race: half white, half Korean. Tom is callow and given to exaggerating his accomplishments and exotic origins, and, as a result, finds himself in an excruciating pickle. There is Kenzo Ota, a Japanese policeman, divorced, lonely, neurotic, and a master of misunderstanding. His ability to misread what's going on around him is both poignant and vastly entertaining. Finally there is Lisa Countryman, an American graduate student, also of mixed race: partly black, partly Asian, partly . . . who knows? She has come to Japan to investigate her origins and has gone missing.

The novel possesses a central core that, put simply, is the conundrum of race, of mixed race, especially. In her relationship with the world, Lisa knows that she is "never black enough, or Oriental enough, or white

enough, and everyone always felt deceived if she didn't announce her ethnic taxonomy immediately upon meeting them, as if not doing so were a calculated sin of omission, as if she were trying to pass." Lee's extraordinary astuteness of observation and skill in showing the ways the problem of race plays out are two reasons the book is so thoroughly satisfying. Others are that the novel positively teems with adroitly conjured lesser characters, and everyone's doings and foibles intersect marvelously. Ota's misunderstandings, particularly, are deftly woven in throughout, opening up wonderfully absurd little chambers in the plot. This is a splendid book and a good read of the first water.

The nonfiction good read is usually history or biography. Memoir, autobiography, and travel are, if we insist on facts being facts, branches of fiction, and the rest of nonfiction simply hasn't the power to transport most people. Two books I push relentlessly as representing the quintessence of the nonfiction good read are David McCullough's "**The Great Bridge: The Epic Story of the Building of the Brooklyn Bridge**" (Simon & Schuster, paperback, \$18) and "**Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America**," by John M. Barry (Simon & Schuster, paperback, \$16). Both possess the essential ingredients of their fictional counterparts in the realm of good reads: character, plot, vividly rendered material detail, and an evocation of another time and place. Both just happen to make natural forces and feats of civil engineering comprehensible to the meaneast understanding and as exciting as a horse race. Both include considerations of social, economic, and political arrangements and conflicts that are dramatic and revelatory.

"**The Devil in the White City**:

Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America," by Erik Larson (Vintage, paperback, \$14.95), though not quite the brilliant achievement that McCullough's and Barry's books are, is still decidedly in the good-read category. Larson tells the story of the conception of the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, and of the design and building of the "White City," which was its material incarnation. The account follows the heroic efforts of architect Daniel Burnham and landscape designer Frederick Law Olmsted to change a swamp on the edge of Lake Michigan into an exposition that would surpass the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1889 with its galling Eiffel Tower.

The suspense is terrific as Larson describes the brutal pressure of time; the hideous interference, stalling, and dissension of various committees; the clashes of vision; the gargantuan logistical snarls; and natural disaster. Along with this, conquering all, are miracles of determination, labor, and ingenuity. This is the fair that introduced the Ferris wheel — to say nothing of shredded wheat and Cracker Jack. Running parallel with this story is the macabre one of a serial killer, a man of such ruthless evil and cunning in every department of life that he may have no peer. Finally, Larson follows the growing delusions of an Irish immigrant and future assassin. The three narrative strands and the wealth of material detail, from the stockyards to the dinner tables of the elite, produce an extraordinary picture of Chicago at its finest and most ghastly hour. Clutching my pencil all the way, I had almost forgotten its demands by book's end.

Katherine A. Powers, a writer and critic, lives in Cambridge. Her column appears on alternate Sundays. She can be reached by e-mail at pow3@earthlink.net.

Fiction

A starred review indicates a book of outstanding quality. A review with a blue-tinted title indicates a book of unusual commercial interest that hasn't received a starred or boxed review.

HAD A GOOD TIME:

Stories from American Postcards

ROBERT OLEN BUTLER. *Grove*, \$23 (267p) ISBN 0-8021-1777-5

After years of collecting early 20th-century postcards, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Butler (*A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*) takes 15 choice missives as inspiration for his latest volume of short stories—an ambitious writing exercise that even in his assured hands yields mixed results. The stories range in tone and substance, from the humor of “The Ironworkers’ Hayride,” in which a man lusts for a sassy suffragette despite her wooden leg (“her mouth is a sweet painted butterfly”), to the melancholy of “Carl and I,” about a woman who pines for her consumptive husband (“I breathe myself into my husband’s life”). A few stories amount to little more than vignettes or reveries: in “No Chord of Music,” a woman takes her husband’s car for an empowering ride, and in “Sunday,” an immigrant at Coney Island feels blessed to be in America. Other postcards trigger more fully realized stories. “Hurshel said he had the bible up by heart and was fixing to go preaching,” reads the card Butler takes as his cue for “Up by Heart,” a funny tale that addresses questions of faith and fundamentalism. “My dear gallie... am hugging my saddle horse. Best thing I have found in S.D. to hug,” wrote a woman named Abba, inspiring Butler’s poignant “Christmas 1910,” which evokes the loneliness of a young woman homesteading on the Great Plains. Though many stories are as slight as the postcards themselves, the collection as a whole adds up to a thoughtful commentary on America at the dawn of a new century: while some Americans were buoyed by their confidence in technology and progress, others, at the mercy of a disease-ridden, hardscrabble existence, could trust only in their faith in God. *Agent, Kim Witherspoon.* (Aug.)

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

DON LEE. *Norton*, \$24.95 (352p) ISBN 0-393-05812-3

★ *Ploughshares* editor Lee uses the racial homogeneity of Japan as a stark backdrop to this elegant first novel, a follow-up to his story collection, *Yellow*. Set in Tokyo in 1980, the book centers on the disappear-

ance of Lisa Countryman, a half-Japanese, half-black Berkeley graduate student who goes to Japan to research the “sad, brutal reign of conformity” for her dissertation and, perhaps more importantly, embark on an identity quest. Her mixed-race background gives her an exotic beauty, and after a teaching job falls through, it lands her a job as a hostess girl at a Tokyo men’s club. Echoes of Countryman’s identity crisis ring through the lives of all the characters affected by her disappearance. When she vanishes, it is first brought to the attention of Tom Hurley, a vain and careless junior diplomat at the U.S. Embassy who tells people he’s Hawaiian, though he’s really half-Korean and half-white. The case is turned over to Kenzo Ota, a glum, divorced police inspector, who spent three hard years of his adolescence in Missouri. Convinced that Countryman’s case could be just what he needs to put his career back on track,

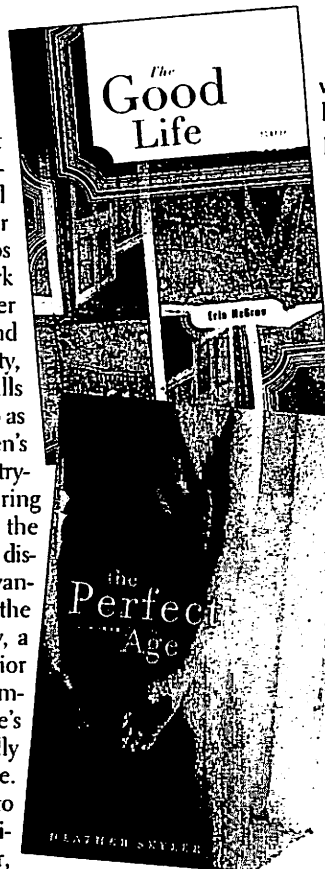
Ota resolves to find out what happened to her. The story of Countryman’s time in Japan and her efforts to learn who she is unfolds parallel to Ota’s efforts to learn her fate. Through the interlocking stories of Ota, Countryman and Hurley, Lee discourses on race, identity, the Japanese sex trade, social conventions and law. Sharply observed, at turns trenchantly funny and heartbreakingly sad, this novel could be the breakout book for *Lee. Agent, Maria Massie, Witherspoon Associates.* (July)

Forecast: *The novel’s insights into the Japanese sex industry make it a grittier counterpart to *Memoirs of a Geisha*, and its investigations of race and identity might, for some, recall *White Teeth*. Five-city author tour.*

RIFT

RICHARD COX. *Ballantine*, \$23.95 (256p) ISBN 0-345-46283-1

Cox’s debut techno-thriller offers a far-fetched plot, a fast-paced narrative and a well-drawn protagonist. Cameron Fisher, an unhappily married accountant for a tech corporation, NeuroStor, is about to be fired



A collection of poignant stories by Erin McGraw (p. 36); a tale of tangled love affairs by Heather Skyles (p. 37). Jackets by Mark Robinson & Georgia Liebman.

when his younger boss offers him a one-time opportunity: participate in a high-risk scientific project for the company and receive \$5 million. Cameron agrees, as much for the adventure as for the money. The project will theoretically permit near-instantaneous human transport; and sure enough, 45 minutes after he enters a booth at corporate HQ in Houston, Cameron emerges from another at the Phoenix office. Told to stick around for a couple of days, he meets his best friend, Tom. They go to a strip club where he is watched by two men and meets a dancer, Crystal, who somehow knows as much about the project he is participating in as he does. When the men follow Cameron and Tom to a golf course that same afternoon, he knows something is up; when they start shooting, the murder and espionage-packed plot kicks into overdrive. With the exception of the protagonist, whose backstory is astutely related, the characters are one-dimensional

(evil corporate execs, stripper with apparent heart of gold, cranky computer expert). Cox has enough natural storytelling skill to keep his audience hooked, but the innumerable twists and turns test the reader’s patience. Teleportation is just the starting point for a constantly morphing techno plot that even *Matrix* fans might find strained. *Agent, Matt Bialer.* (July)

DAY OF THE DEAD

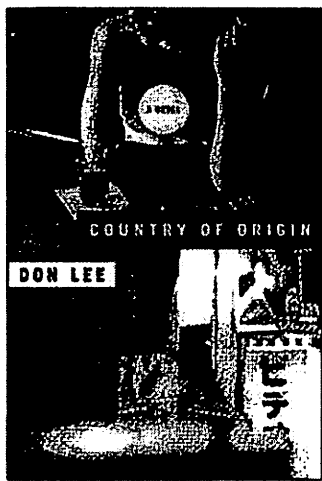
J.A. JANCE. *Morrow*, \$23.95 (384p) ISBN 0-688-13823-3

★ Jance’s third suspense thriller to feature ex-sheriff Brandon Walker and his family (after *Hour of the Hunter* and *Kiss of the Bees*) deftly mixes Native American mythology with a harrowing plot. An old Tohono O’odham woman, Emma Orozco, asks Walker for help in solving the brutal murder of her daughter, Roseanne, who was slain in 1970. Walker is able to take on the challenge because of his membership in T.L.C. The Last Chance, a privately funded agency that looks into old, unsolved crimes. This ingenious arrangement allows



★ **Lee, Don.** *Country of Origin.* July 2004. 352p. Norton, \$24.95 (0-393-05812-3).

General Fiction



It's 1980, a hard-fought election year in which the Iranian hostage crisis plays an increasingly critical role. But that intrigue exists a world away from Foreign Service junior officer Tom Hurley, a cipher hiding a cowardly episode of treachery in his past. He's coasting through a dull-but-cushy appointment to the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo and targeting a CIA operative's wife for a bit of dangerous fun. She blipped onto Hurley's radar screen by asking him about the seemingly routine case of Lisa Countryman, a U.S. tourist who disappeared after ditching an under-the-table job at a fly-by-night English language school. The ensuing investigation takes Hurley and clueless police detective Kenzo Ota into Tokyo's seediest corners. It also forces both men to confront their many human failings, and possibly even overcome them. Issues of race, class, and national identity drive this clear-eyed story of closure, redemption, and carving out a place in the world.

Lee expertly weaves a tiny new pleasure into every page, from fascinating forays into Japanese culture to wry lines in the vein of "People don't have affairs to get out of their marriages. They have them to prolong them." As satisfying as it is unsettling, this quiet literary triumph eschews plot pyrotechnics for fully realized, deeply felt characters who bumble and struggle their way toward grace much like the rest of us. —Frank Sennett

dre O'Brien, who, when the novel opens, is a Dublin housewife at the turn of the twentieth century. Her life, ordinary enough on the surface, in fact roils with unexpressed passion that reaches back into her childhood on the remote Blasket Islands. There, her mother, wild with the accumulated sorrows of a life where loved men were taken by the sea, killed herself, her husband following her with a brutal passion made more damaging by Deirdre's discovery of their sea-swept bodies. This submerged vision of love and death haunts Deirdre, to be brought out when her teenage daughters return to the very school to which she was sent as an orphan. McBride has created an eerie, compelling tale of pained love, in which the Irish setting is integral and never exotic. —Patricia Monaghan

McCandless, Sarah Grace. *Grosse Pointe Girl: Tales from a Suburban Adolescence.* June 2004. 192p. illus. Simon & Schuster, paper, \$12 (0-7432-5612-3).

Set in a wealthy suburb, where yards are "as green as the plastic grass from an Easter basket," McCandless' first novel is a hilarious, spot-on survey of the humiliations and perilous victories of a privileged adolescence. The story follows Emma Harris from her arrival in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, at 13 years of age through high-school graduation. Emma's first-person voice is an utterly convincing blend of self-absorption, detachment, and obsession over intricate social rules, her parent's divorce, for example, is almost a footnote in a chapter about Emma's plot to join the school ski club and win over a guy. Readers who were teens in the 1980s will recognize the cultural references, from the characters' Guess jeans to their Cure cassette tapes. Drawings from comics illustrator Christine Norrie capture the era, although the Archie-style is some-

times at odds with the tone of the words. But McCandless' wickedly funny descriptions and her unerring ear for teen dialogue will appeal to any reader who remembers, or is surviving, the stomach-twisting anxiety of becoming an adult. —Cillian Enghery

YA/M: *The 20-20 view of high school makes this an obvious YA choice, some sex and booze.* GE.

McFadden, Bernice L. *Camilla's Roses.* May 2004. 224p. Dutton, \$23.95 (0-525-94796-5).

Camilla and her husband have successful careers and a beautiful young daughter. Then she discovers a lump in her breast and realizes too late that she has turned her back on the people whose support she needs the most. Generations of women in her family, moving from a southern small town to Queens, New York, have carried the middle name Rose, and some have carried a legacy of breast cancer. But Camilla has been estranged from her unruly family since she went to college, leaving behind a drug-addicted mother, a grandmother raising scads of abandoned grandchildren, and an addled great-aunt. Ashamed of her family and her race, she lightened her skin and adopted a false background. She is living a complete lie when tragedy strikes. McFadden, author of *Sugar* (2000) and *This Bitter Earth* (2002), will enrapture readers again as she moves between the past and the present and the perspectives of different characters to tell a story of family and reconciliation. —Vanessa Bush

McFarland, Dennis. *Prince Edward.* May 2004. 368p. Holt, \$25 (0-8050-6833-3).

Summer 1959 was sweltering in Prince Edward County, Virginia, but it wasn't just the humidity that had the locals hot under the collar. The public schools were closing—a daring attempt to defy federally

forced integration. McFarland tells the story of that summer through the eyes of 10-year-old Benjamin Rome, who watches the fevered activities of the adults around him—his bigoted chicken-farmer father, his good-ole-boy brother, his melancholy pregnant sister, his tyrannical grandfather—with a certain detachment, concerned mainly about how their activities might impinge on his life and that of his best friend, Burghardt, the son of Benjamin's father's black hired hand. McFarland shows admirable restraint in telling this emotionally charged story; he draws effectively on the historical record, including several real-life supporting characters, but it is the family drama that draws us in and reminds us how history is made while ordinary people are cleaning out the chicken coops. The subject matter suggests *To Kill a Mockingbird*, of course, but the nicely modulated tone will also remind readers of Larry Watson's *Montana* 1948. —Bill Ott

YA: *A perfect follow-up for Mockingbird readers.* BO

McGraw, Erin. *The Good Life.* June 2004. 208p. Houghton/Mariner, paper, \$12 (0-618-38627-0).

Since McGraw has already published three well-received books and received several residencies at well-known writers' colonies, it shouldn't come as a surprise that she has produced another meaty short-story collection. McGraw is one of those writers with the rare gift of truly capturing real people in fiction. Each of her stories—many examining interpersonal relationships with a spiritual undercurrent—gets to the heart of the matter. They examine such issues as the family baggage we tote through adulthood; the sad truths revealed hurtfully in love relationships; and the bonds, as well as the envy, judgment, and denial underlying complicated friendships. McGraw is clearly a skilled writer, well educated in the school of human nature. She observes, analyzes, and philosophizes about life in a way that gives rise to characters who speak honestly and to stories that always ring true. This is a strong and engaging story collection. —Janet St. John

McGregor, Elizabeth. *A Road through the Mountains.* May 2004. 324p. Bantam, \$24 (0-553-80358-1).

McGregor's lyrical novel is a poignant tribute to the tenacity of love. Lingered in a coma after a car accident, gifted painter Anna Russell subconsciously fights for survival to reclaim a life and a love she thought were lost to her. Fearing that her daughter might not regain consciousness, Grace Russell contacts David Mortimer, Anna's one-time lover, informing him that he is the father of Anna's 10-year-old daughter. Taken unawares, David, an introverted English botanist who never quite recovered from Anna's abrupt abandonment, flies to Boston ill-prepared to meet the daughter he never knew existed. Caught up in a vortex of conflicting emotions, David learns that Rachel suffers from a rare form of autism known as

✓ Lee, Don. *Country of Origin*.
Norton. Jul. 2004. c.352p. ISBN 0-393-
05812-3. \$24.95. F

Some mystery authors manage to create works of entertaining literary fiction, but fewer are successful at using the form to examine social themes. What makes Lee's (*Yellow*) work so satisfying is that while the mystery is used as a frame to support issues of race, exploitation, and identity, the narrative as a whole doesn't collapse under the weight of this literary ambition. The story takes place in Japan at the close of 1980 and is effectively told from the perspective of three characters: Lisa Countryman, a young American postgraduate of African American and Asian descent who goes missing after getting mixed up in the country's sex clubs; Tom Hurley, the junior officer at the U.S. consulate assigned to her case, who is of mixed Asian American heritage and as a matter of convenience tells acquaintances that he is Hawaiian; and lonely, beleaguered Japanese detective Kenzo Ota, who ultimately undertakes the effort to locate Lisa. The characters are victims of both perception and their own defense mechanisms, and their emotional responses are consistently convincing. Highly recommended for all fiction collections.—*Edward Keane, Long Island Univ. Lib., Brooklyn, NY*

April 15, 2004

✓ Lee, Don
 COUNTRY OF ORIGIN
 Norton (352 pp.)
 \$24.95
 Jul. 2004
 ISBN: 0-393-05812-3

A handful of restless, intertwining lives in 1980 Tokyo.

Tom Hurley, Junior Officer in American Citizens Services at the American Embassy in Tokyo, receives a frantic call from a Richmond, Virginia, woman named Susan Counsman. Susan's sister Lisa, a graduate student in anthropology visiting Tokyo, hasn't contacted home in over a month, and Susan fears foul play. There's not much Tom can do, but he conducts a (fruitless) cursory investigation and gets in touch with the local police, who foist the dull assignment off on obsessive/compulsive Assistant Inspector Kenzo Ota. Lee's narrative jumps from Tom to Kenzo to Lisa, who, out of money and teaching opportunities, takes several hostess jobs at a series of gentlemen's clubs, each shabbier than the last. Womanizing Tom, on the rebound from a fling with coworker Sarah, enters slowly into an affair with bored Julia Tinsley, wife of CIA officer Vincent Kitamura. Their conversations about Lisa's case provide a pretext for growing intimacy, and an accident from which they unwittingly flee bonds them in silence. Insomniac Kenzo, at first engaging in psychological warfare with his landlady Sanoome over the suitability of his apartment, eventually opts instead to kill her with kindness. Deeper layers of longing and hidden agendas gradually come to the fore. Kenzo's wife left him several years ago and emigrated to America. She's recently returned to Japan with a son named Simon. Realizing the boy must be his, Kenzo begins working out a plan to meet him. Lisa may be working in the clubs not because she's down-and-out, but because she's doing research. Tom, breaking with his usual love-and-leave pattern, falls Julia, becoming more obsessed with her the more ambivalence she displays.

Thriller conventions draw the reader, like the characters, into a gallery of human enigmas. First-novelist Lee (*Yellow*, stories, 2001), the longtime editor of *Ploughshares*, leaves no fingerprints: his cool, precise prose captures his characters without overexplaining them. (Agent: Maria Massie)

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