

## VERTICAL BOOKS

STORY BY MAGGIE KINSER HOHLE

Seminal rule in writing: don't use a foreign word when one in your own language will do. So what about translation? What if, by definition, you're dealing with not only foreign words, structures and concepts, but also events, settings, even names? Ideally, a translation is imperceptible, an invisible conduit for the original voice. The best translations won't exude even the faintest odor of exotica.

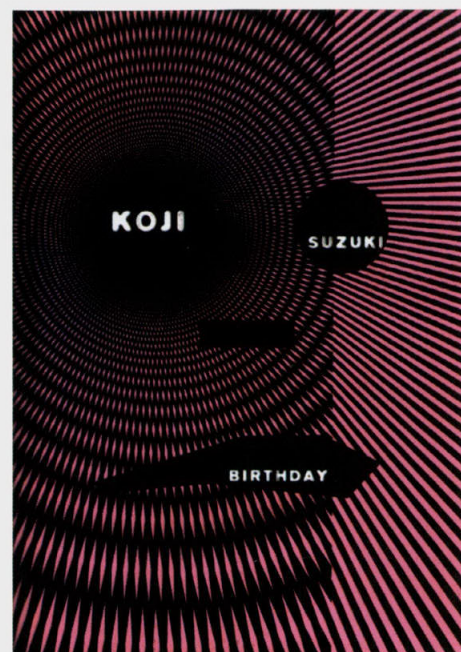
September 4, 1990, 10:49 p.m.

Yokohama

*A row of condominium buildings, each fourteen stories high, ran along the northern edge of the housing development next to the Sankeien garden. Although built only recently, nearly all the units were occupied. Nearly a hundred dwellings were crammed into each building, but most of the inhabitants had never even seen the faces of their neighbors. The only proof that people lived here came at night, when windows lit up.*

This is the first paragraph of the first book to be published by Vertical, Inc.: the popular Japanese thriller *Ring*, by Koji Suzuki. So how come it doesn't feel foreign? Partly because Vertical, the first publisher to concentrate on modern Japanese entertainment literature, finds the right books, and partly because they found the right translators in Robert Rohmer and Glynne Walley.

Unlike Japanese publishing giant Kodansha International, which also offers translations of Japanese books, Vertical is an American company that chooses books based on their appeal to U.S. readers. And by "U.S." they mean Middle America, regular people who could care less about Japan. Vertical Editor Ioannis Mentzas says that for an American to enjoy it, a book needs



“a strong story arc and a good plot line, as opposed to many Japanese books, which are essayistic.”

*Ring* is a good example, as its ghost story structure and Japanese setting traveled well across cultural borders. Vertical has since published a new Suzuki title every year, maintaining a better clip than the original releases in Japan.

Vertical has typically published between 10 and 16 titles a year. This year, after accepting serious investment from a powerful book distributor in Japan, hiring Random House as its distributor, and moving into new offices in Manhattan, Vertical will publish twice that many, including *Ode to Kirihito*, by Osamu Tezuka, author of the award-winning *Buddha*. The print run on the latter was 10,000, and *Ode to Kirihito* will print 30,000. Not bad for the new kid on the block.

The translator's charge is to *become* the voice of the writer—in the language of the reader. Translators of fiction need to know both languages, but not in the same way; they have to be able to read the first language, and write good novelistic prose in the second. Because Vertical doesn't use teams of translators, it must find both abilities in each of its translators. It's a rare find, partic-

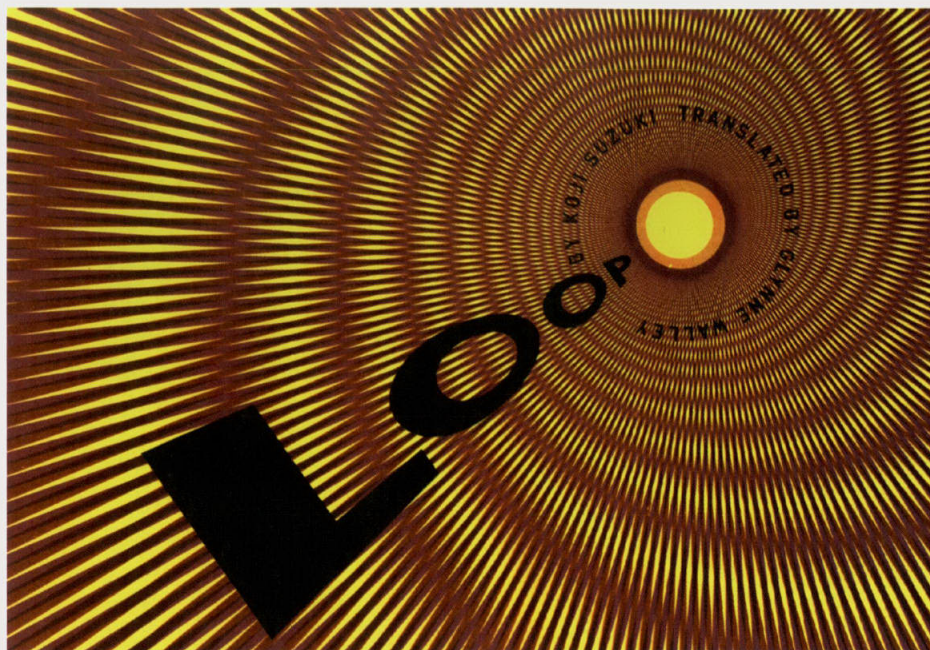


ularly with Japanese, because it's such a difficult language to learn how to read. (Only after 12 years of education have Japanese schoolchildren mastered *Kanji* well enough to read a newspaper.) The small pool of proficient non-Japanese readers of the language certainly lowers the odds of finding good translators for something as challenging as fiction.

Kerim Yasar is a Turk who grew up in the U.S., got his Ph.D. in modern Japanese film and literature at Columbia, and did a masterful translation of *The Fall of Constantinople*, earning him a full time post as a Vertical editor. Yasar has translated nonfiction and film subtitles as well, so is intimately aware of the distinctions among them. For fiction, he says, "You not only have to get the voice of the narrative right, but also catch the tone of a whole cast of different characters."

Acquiring these necessary skills is also, it turns out, an excellent education in crafting prose. "Translating forces you to be precise, to find the right word, whereas if you're just writing your own thing, you can evade that responsibility. And of course you're getting down into the nitty gritty of it. You have to analyze. You learn about things like characterization, about dialogue, about plotting....It's intense. It's rigorous."

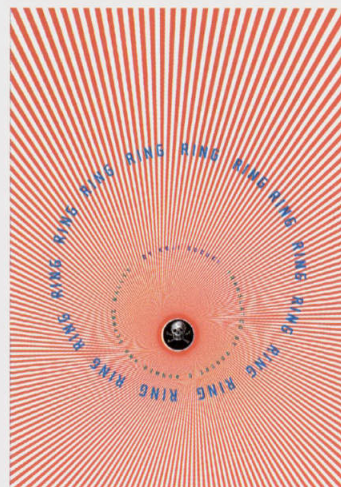
Translators also have to love the kinds of books they're translating. Vertical makes readers comfortable in its world because it chooses its translators well, and treats them well. "Our *Sayonara, Gangsters* translator, Michael Emmerich, loved the author (Genichiro Takahashi)," says Ishii, "and you could tell." And Vertical loves its translators. From its birth five years ago, the company decided to give translators not only decent money and an array of options for payment/royalty splits, but even, in most cases, cover credit. Before a book prints, Mentzas or Yasar, who have read the original, read through the English manuscript, and then check the entire text against the Japanese. Despite this



meticulous cross-editing Mentzas figures that Vertical is slightly quicker than average in producing translations, because that's what the company's built to do.

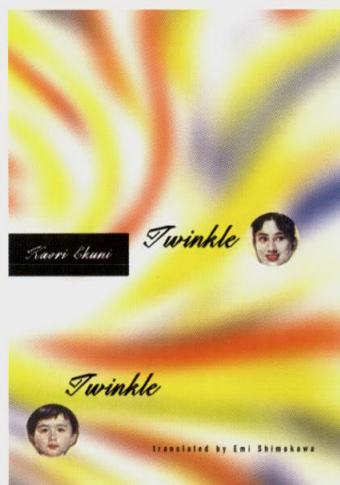
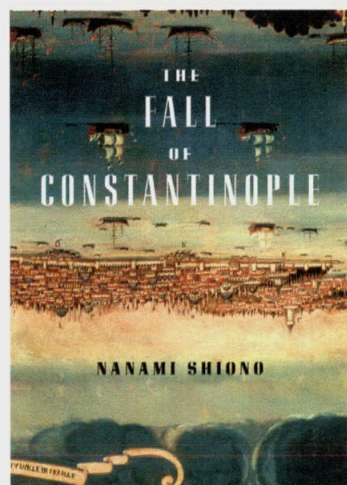
Vertical's success has convinced other publishers, mostly those who do *manga*, to get into translated Japanese novels, albeit those tied to their comic mainstay. Viz, Dark Horse, and Tokyo Pop are three notables. This means it's a translator's market, and publishers have had to reach farther into the ranks of the less accomplished. While this may be a hardship in the short run, making more work for editors, the art of Japanese-English translation will no doubt benefit, and hopefully critics, mostly incapable of reading these books in the original, who sometimes denigrate translated text as "stiff," will enjoy the luxury of the growing cornucopia of Japanese voices expressed in our language.

With the good fortune that sometimes smiles upon start-ups, Vertical found the perfect visual translator for its vision: the superb graphic designer Chip Kidd. Editor Ioannis Mentzas and Hiroki Sakai, Vertical's president, heard about Kidd from a contact





# FOUND IN TRANSLATION VERTICAL BOOKS



in a publicity firm, Googled him, found out how big he was, ignored their tremors of self-doubt, and called him up. They've never looked back, and neither has he. After three years with the company, Kidd writes in an e-mail that he continues to "thoroughly enjoy the hell out of working with Vertical." The company has always supported Kidd's unusual choices, and he says he's "inspired by their list to take chances on the designs (though hopefully not foolish chances)."

"I don't think of myself as a literal interpreter, I don't want to precisely depict any part of the story on the cover," writes Kidd. Instead, he lets the books give him ideas for what he hopes is "a visual suggestion of the mood or temper of the book." Because Kidd believes that Vertical's books must function first as objects, he has used die-cuts, belly-bands (*obi*, common in Japan), and idiosyncratic visual cues to create a unified look for the publisher while maintaining the individuality of the titles. Designing the covers for Osamu Tezuka's graphic series *Buddha*, for which he undertook a "wonderful scavenger hunt" for the art, was a particularly meaningful experience for Kidd, who had admired the series for ages, and considers his association with it a great honor. The fact that Vertical's is the only English translation of the entire series doesn't hurt either.

"I don't buy a book because Random House puts it out," explains Sakai. "I buy it because I want the book or I like the author." Thanks to Sakai's taste, the focus of Vertical's unique mission, dedicated translation, intense cross-editing, and the superior talent of Chip Kidd, an entire world of new stories can be translated even to your average American who could care less about Japan. ☺