



Book Club Book of the Month: July 2020

***Smart Ovens for Lonely People*, Elizabeth Tan (Brio Books)**

Summary

Conspiracies, celebrities and therapies underpin this beguiling short story collection from Elizabeth Tan.

A cat-shaped oven tells a depressed woman she doesn't have to be sorry anymore. A Yourtopia Bespoke Terraria employee becomes paranoid about the mounting coincidences in her life. Four girls gather to celebrate their fabulous underwear.

With her trademark wit and slicing social commentary, Elizabeth Tan's short stories are as funny as they are insightful. This collection cements her role as one of Australia's most inventive writers.

About the author

Elizabeth Tan is a Perth writer and sessional academic at Curtin University. Her first book of fiction, *Rubik*, was published in 2017, and went on to be published in North America (The Unnamed Press) and the United Kingdom (Wundor Editions). Australian production company Photoplay bought the film option for *Rubik* in 2019. Elizabeth Tan co-edited the 2019 anthology *In This Desert, There Were Seeds*, a collaboration between Margaret River Press of Western Australia and Ethos Books of Singapore. *Smart Ovens for Lonely People* is Elizabeth's second book.

Questions for discussion

1. Discuss the therapeutic function of the Neko Oven in the titular story 'Smart Ovens for Lonely People'. How much progress has Shu made by the end of the story and how much of this can be attributed to the Neko Oven?
2. Tan grants varying degrees of sentience to everyday objects throughout the collection. Examples include: play equipment having feelings; washing machines all having an anomaly on the same day; balloons returning to take over the sky; and a restaurant's mermaids turning carnivorous.
 - a) What factors influence whether an object's consciousness is frightening to humans?
 - b) What do people's reactions to this phenomenon reveal about themselves or society in general?
3. From Myer's Miranda Kerr posters to Icebreaker billboards to the monetisation of ASMR fame, what do the advertising campaigns in these stories reveal about marketing and consumer behaviour?
4. How different is the Perth in 'Eighteen Bells Karaoke Castle (Sing Your Heart Out)' to our reality?
5. Many of the stories touch upon the power of mantras, slogans, common phrases, songs and passwords.
 - a) Compare and contrast the conspiracies in 'Mounting Sexual Tension Between Two Long-time Friends; Tom Knows that Ant is a Spy but Ant Doesn't' and 'Ron Swanson's Stencilled 'Stache'. What does it mean for trigger or activation phrases to exist? What do the secret agencies represent?
 - b) What is the significance of the pigeon reciting popular song lyrics in 'Shirt Dresses that Look a Little Too Much Like Shirts so that it Looks Like You Forgot to Put on Pants (Love Will Save the Day)'?
 - c) Is the spoken word more powerful than the written word?
6. What can we take away from the group dynamic in 'Happy Smiling Underwear Girls Party'?
7. 'Excision in F-Sharp Minor' unfolds in reverse chronology. How does the non-linear structure aid in telling this particular story?

8. Are advancements in technology always positive? Discuss with reference to 'Pang & Co. Genuine Scribe Era Stationery' and 'The Meal Channel'.
9. In 'This is Not a Treehouse', the narrator speaks to the reader as if the reader is the builder of the treehouse. What effect does this have?
10. Are there any parallels between the cats in 'Yes! Yes! Yes You Are! Yes You Are' and those in 'You Put the U in Utopia (or, The Last *Neko Atsume* Player in the World)'?
11. In the final story, the narrator observes:

[Bernice] says her thesis is about degenerate utopias, which are different from dystopias. She says that true utopias are critical: they are designed to encourage you to compare the utopia with your own less perfect world and question the way that your society works. [...] Degenerate utopias, however, are not critical; they're just empty reproductions of what is already familiar to you. They might look different from the real world, superficially, but they ultimately protect the cosy lie that worlds can only be one way - which means, most of the time, predicated on capitalism.

Which of the worlds in this short story collection would you consider to be degenerate utopias?

If you liked this book, you may also like...

Rubik, Elizabeth Tan, Brio Books

Portable Curiosities, Julie Koh, UQP

The Paper Menagerie and Other Stories, Ken Liu, Saga Press

Overland, Speculative Future(s) edition (Online)

Kill Your Darlings' Speculative Fiction & Fantasy Showcase (Online)