

hoopla

digital: **What's your favorite warm drink? Is it coffee?**

Toshikazu Kawaguchi: Oh, I wish I could say, "Yes, coffee is my favorite," but to be honest, Japanese green tea is my favorite warm drink. Even in the summer I drink hot green tea with each meal. I assume it is because I've been drinking it since my childhood. I think I was a middle school student when I first drank coffee, and I was shocked by its bitterness, so it didn't become my choice of drink back then. But now as a grown-up, I am roasting my own coffee beans. I'm not yet good at it, it's very difficult.

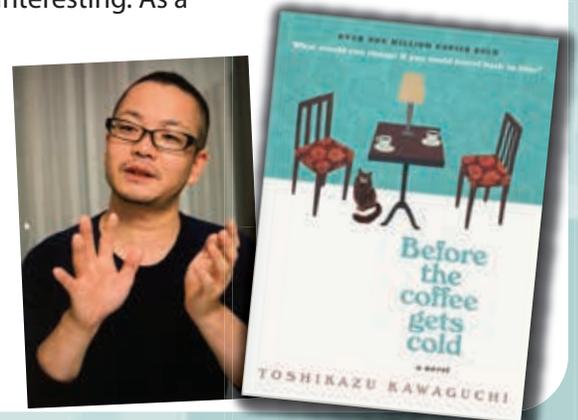
hd: **Discuss how your creative process as a playwright affected the writing of this novel. How did this benefit you? Are there any ways it made the new format a challenge?**

TK: It first played as a theatrical drama, then I happened to adapt it into a novel after I was approached by my editor who watched the stage play. Going through the creative processes of writing a play and watching actors' performances, my experiences as a playwright and director influenced me a lot when I started to write this novel. I could easily recall each character's motion since I watched them so many times at our rehearsal hall. I tried to capture what I saw on the stage when I started to write this book. I tried to write as if what was going on stage was reality (reality on stage) instead of writing everything from my imagination. My intention was to express actors' real performances by words. *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* was the very first novel that I wrote, and when I started to write, I realized that I was immature as a writer and didn't have a clue how to start. Yet during the process of translating my play into a novel, I tried to be very careful about one thing, which is to capture the same vibe as in the play so that the audience who watched the play won't have a sense of discomfort when reading the novel, and vice versa. Yet the expression of a play and a novel are totally different matters. In a play, we express emotions through actors' performance. In a novel, an author should express emotions through his writing skill. As I mentioned, I never wrote a novel before, and I suffered for a long time finding my way to express what I wanted to express in words.

After a long, troublesome time writing, I came up with the answer: that I should build up the background of each character. These backgrounds weren't mentioned in the play. For example, how Fumiko and Goro got to know each other, the reason behind the magazine that Fusaki was reading, and why she couldn't write words. Why Hirai and her sister Kumi grew apart, how Nagare Tokita felt when his cousin Kei Tokita told him that she wants to travel forward. I added those episodes to put more richness to the story.

hd: **We read in *The Japan Times* that Japanese literature "is not known internationally for signature work on time travel." Did this gap in subject matter in your country make you want to write specifically about time travel, or were there other factors?**

TK: Oh, I didn't know about that particular article, and never thought about whether there are signature works on time travel in Japanese literature. That is interesting. As a playwright and an author, I always imposed upon myself the goal to write a story which is universal. A story that people back in the 1980s or 30 years from now can read and sympathize. A story can be read and understood by people from any background. I used time travel because I thought it is a universal theme. In that way, I was lucky to use the concept of "travel backward" or "time travel" which is very popular not just in Japan, but in other countries, too.



hd: Discuss how you settled on the four reasons these characters would go back in time. They seem very universally relatable, yet distinct.

TK: I was thinking about reasons which carry universal feeling. First, I came up with the relationship for each character. There are "Lovers," "Couple," "Sisters," and "Parent and Child." Then together with those relationships, "Farewell" came up as a mutual theme. This is also universal. In the story of "Lovers," farewell means one needs to physically move far away. In the story of "Couple," one loses her memory. In "Sisters" and "Parent and Child," farewell means death. This is the frame of the story, then by adding the rule of "but after all, the reality never changes," I think readers can read it with empathy even though the story itself is fantasy. Well, I am talking like an analyst, but when I was writing, I was caught up in the moment and had those specific intentions at the time.

hd: The four individuals who have elected to travel back in time in your book are all women. Was that decided from the start, or did it happen naturally as you moved through writing the novel?

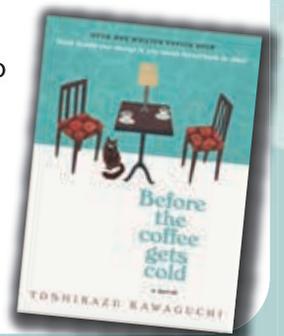
TK: I must be honest. I told you that it was originally a play before turned into a novel. I first wrote this play for an amateur theatrical company. In this company, there were 3 male and 9 female actors, which means I needed to create more women characters. So naturally, all individuals who traveled back became women. There was an idea of creating male travelers when I wrote this novel, but as I mentioned in the previous question, I really wanted this to be the written version of the actual theatrical play and for both to share the same atmosphere, so I kept all the travelers as women. By the way, in the sequel to this book, I created male travelers.

hd: The rules in this novel can be downright maddening to your characters! Discuss developing the rule set. Which rule came to you first, and how did you know when you had created enough of them?

TK: Oh, they just popped up naturally. I always place high importance on a flash of inspiration. If I think too much, I start to waver between believing my ideas and other possibilities. First of all, I decided that the title would be *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* and that the story is held in a short, limited time. After this was set, I came up with a rule that reality never changes even if you can travel back and try to redo things. Other rules gradually came up to me after that, but before I thought I created enough, I ran out of ideas.

This may be off topic, but I would like to share how I came up with the rule of "Reality won't change even if you travel back." This particular rule came up to me when I met this guy named Mr. Suda who was introduced to me by a friend of mine. Mr. Suda lost his legs in a severe car accident and became disabled. I couldn't imagine how he could overcome this harsh reality. But Mr. Suda was such a positive, fun character loved by people around him. He has a wife, and when they decided to get married, her parents opposed their marriage because they were worried about his disability. At the time, she told her parents: "I'm happy to marry a guy who has such a strong, healthy mind. There are so many people who are able-bodied but have a weakness of mind. I believe I can have a happy life with this man with a healthy mind."

In my story, I didn't intend to write about "regret," but wanted to write about how we accept it and go forward. Mr. Suda and how he lives his life was exactly what I wanted to portray. I'm not as mature as him, so I still regret the past and am not able to take everything positively. But I was impressed and wished to be a strong person like him. As an author, I would like to face my work just like him.



hd: We at hoopla discussed a lot about the ghost! We're sure you can't reveal how she ended up perpetually at the coffee shop, as that feels like another book entirely, but can you share a bit about coming up with that character?

TK: Oh, I wrote about her in the sequel. I hope this will be published, too. Here I will share the story of how I created that character.

So as mentioned, the story was originally written for a theatrical company with more female actors. There is a reason I created this ghost who just sits and reads through the whole story. There was this actor who also worked for another company, and she was playing on another stage until just a week before our play was performed. She just didn't have enough time to prepare for our play, so I created a character who just sits still on the stage. I think I'm good at creating a small things like this for the stage. The real thrill of creation is that something small can sometimes grow up and play an important part in the end.

hd: For library patrons interested in reading more translated works, are there any books you love and would recommend?

TK: To tell you the truth, reading was a great pain for me when I was a kid. Reading words induced me to fall asleep, so I preferred reading comics. I started to draw manga comics when I was in elementary school, and my dream was to be a manga artist. But when I was 19 years old, I came across a great series of novels titled *Hattori Hanzo* written by Shinjuro Tobe, who is known for his historical novels. This is the story of a ninja, and is a 10-volume series. As a person who hardly read one book, I read the series of 10 volumes in a blink. It was almost 30 years ago, but I still read them repeatedly. The author passed away a long time ago, and the books are out of print, but I'm still in love with his works.

Before starting to write *Before the Coffee Gets Cold*, I read the Harry Potter series all at once. I thought this could help me to learn how a story is developed which attracts people, and I ended up devoting myself to the wonderful world of imaginative storytelling.

I was over 40 when I first wrote a novel, and I didn't know how to write it. So for practice, I once transcribed all the words of *Devotion of Suspect X* by Keigo Higashino, a wonderful bestselling storyteller who is famous in Japan.

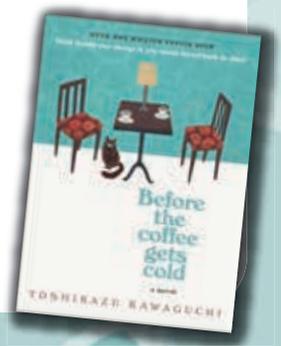
hd: What do you think will be the biggest question book clubs will ask and discuss about this novel?

TK: "If you are the one who time travels, which direction would you like to go?"

I'm personally interested in asking this question to the readers, together with asking their reasons and who they would want to meet. Also, discussing about the ghost must be fun. Who she is, and why is she there. Speculating why Nagare stayed in Hokkaido during the very important traveling time of his wife must be fun, too. Answers for those questions are in the sequel.

hd: In the last story, the protagonist travels forward in time rather than backward. Which time travel direction was more satisfying to write about?

TK: It is satisfying to write both directions, but forward was more difficult for me to write. It may be because I have countless regrets in the past and so I have much to talk about regarding going back in time and redoing things. On the other hand, forward is so vast and you can choose from so many possibilities.





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12 QUESTIONS WITH TOSHIKAZU KAWAGUCHI

hd: *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* has now been in print, on stage, and on screen. Discuss these adaptations. Did anything surprise you about any of these formats once finished?

TK: I'm very amazed, and at the same time honored, to see my work adapted into different media. There must be people who like to watch theatrical plays, but don't like reading books. There must be people who love reading books, but don't really watch movies. By taking multiple forms of expression on a same subject, this work has more chance to be found by people. This is exciting. I heard the book was translated into 25 languages, which I can hardly believe. I am amazed by the offers coming from publishers, movie directors, and theater people from all over the world. This wouldn't be happening without people working on the project. I'm lucky to have strong supports with me.

hd: What is next for you—another novel, a play, or something else?

TK: I'm writing my fourth novel, a sequel to *Before the Coffee Gets Cold*. Also, a play titled *Couple* is scheduled to be performed in October 2021 in Tokyo. My next dream is to direct a movie. I also started my own YouTube channel, which I film and edit.

Toshikazu Kawaguchi Channel

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC5OPpehVjJxDs_cEZ3_qvhw

Ready to discuss *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* with your book club? Find hoopla's exclusive discussion guide and meeting planner at theclub.hoopladigital.com. Then, let us know what you think on social using @hoopladigital and #hooplalbookclub!

