

A dose of magical realism for cat lovers

"We'll Prescribe You a Cat," by Syou Ishida.

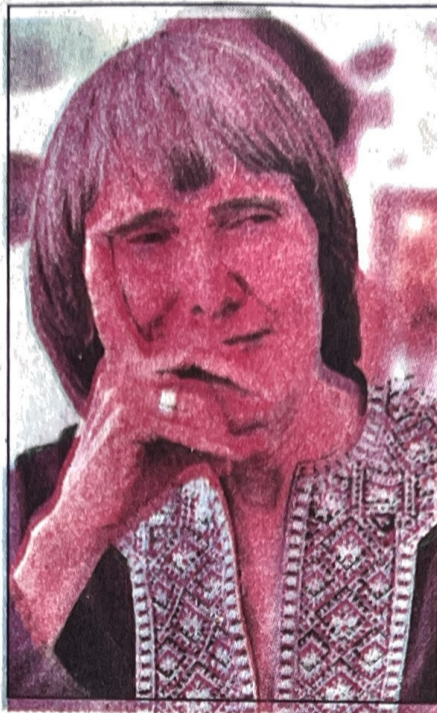
Translated by E. Madison Shimoda. Berkley, 2024

Ishida's book belongs to a genre of Japanese fiction that describes events revolving around a single place, in this case, the Nakagyo Kokoro Clinic for the Soul. Hovering on the fine line between a novel and a series of interconnected short stories, it tells the story of five different citizens of Kyoto, all so stressed by their lives that they visit the clinic, having only overheard word-of-mouth recommendations.

Its location is puzzling: east of Takoyakushi Street, south of Tomino-koji Street, west of Rokkaku Street, north of Fuyacho Street. There is no street number, and the building can't be found on any GPS. When the clinic appears (which it does not do consistently), it's in an old building hidden between two others in a narrow alley; it requires a five-floor walk up and the will to deal with a heavy door that's occasionally difficult to open.

Inside the immaculate office is Chitose, an unfriendly receptionist, and the unexpectedly young Doctor Nikkè, who listens sympathetically to his patients' problems and prescribes them a remedy: a cat, to be taken with a pet carrier and care instructions for a designated period, usually a week.

The chapters/stories are organized according to the cat the doctor prescribes, each one portrayed by a charming sketch. Bee, a mixed breed 8-year-old female, is prescribed to Shuta, a young man who, like oth-



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ers in the prestigious company he works for, suffers from constant fear of public humiliation by his (embezzling) boss.

Margot, a black mixed breed 3-year-old female, is prescribed for Shota, a patriarchal man in his 50s whose insomnia and nightmares are related to the enthusiastically positive comments of his new female boss and his alienation from his wife and daughter. Koyuki, a white kitten, is prescribed to Aoba, a 10-year-old who is struggling with fourth grade cliques and with her mother, Megumi, who dismisses her problems as ridiculous. Tank and Tangerine, American Shorthairs, and Ragdoll are prescribed to Tomoka, a talented handbag designer who is losing her staff to her

perfectionism, and is beginning to realize her easy-going boyfriend will never be able to hold down a job. And Mimita, a Scottish Fold, is prescribed to Abimo, a geisha who has been grieving for the loss of her prior cat, Chitose, for over a year.

The considerable charm of the stories lies partly in the unsentimental portrayal of the cats, who simply do what cats do: purr, meow, shed, scratch materials, engage in "zoomies" at night, escape, and pose for Instagram pictures. The stories of the cures are humorous and, to an alert reader, revealing studies of the pressures on middle class Japanese people, who are exhausted, keenly aware of accents, social status, and competition in business, and afraid of judgment by their peers.

The most fun of the stories, however, is their magical realism, as readers begin to wonder not just about the location of the clinic, but its relationship to the Suda Animal Hospital, the confusion of a geisha and a receptionist, the connections between the clinic and pet stores—not to mention, the mysterious identity of the clinic's owners.

The casual, humorous portrayal of the intersection of magic and reality has the kind of charm that touches Hayao Miyazaki's film "My Neighbor Totoro." Ishida's cats make wonderful, relaxing reading, not just for cat lovers, but for anybody who is looking for an amusing way to relieve holiday (or other) stress.