

Not Horror, But Nonetheless Horrifying

By Tony Fonseca

Kasai, Yasuyuki. *Dragon of the Mangroves*. New York; Lincoln: iUniverse, 2006. 139 p.

The subtitle of Yasuyuki Kasai's *Dragon of the Mangroves* reads "Inspired by True Events of World War II." This is perhaps the understatement of the year. In fact, one can hardly imagine a more thoroughly researched work of fiction. Kasai's bibliography alone is three pages long, and includes diary entries and narratives of the Japanese campaigns in and near Burma in February 1945, as well as books on crocodile attacks. Although these two subjects might at first seem oddly matched, Kasai's introduction immediately cues readers in on the novel's purpose: "On February 19, 1945, when World War II was about to end, saltwater crocodiles killed nearly a thousand Japanese infantrymen trying to break through the siege of the Allies in a mangrove around Ramree Island, Burma." Although the author does his research and is quick to point out that the actual number killed was probably fewer (by hundreds), no reader would deny that this type of terrifying adventure fits the definition of horror.

The problem is that it is impossible to review *Dragon of the Mangroves* as a horror novel because none of the conventions of horror are present. Karen Halttunen in *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* (Harvard University Press, 1998) identifies many of these techniques and tropes: inflated language; graphic treatment of violence; shock so as to inspire fear, hatred, and disgust; incomplete, fragmented, and chronologically confused narratives (as in, for example, Peter Straub's classic *Ghost Story* or Toni Morrison's *Beloved*). These conventions can be used to render readers "speechless," causing disquiet as much as disgust. Expertly written horror goes even further, challenging readers' senses of reality and forcing them to question their long-accepted beliefs and preferences.

Kasai's story reads much more like a historical novel, with realistic dialogue, underplayed (or at most nervous) reactions to events, not to mention a lack of gore and atmospherics, as in this scene between the main character, Second Lieutenant Yoshihisa Sumi, and his guide Pondgi:

The sporadic firing of model thirty-eights didn't cease, but he didn't detect even the slightest hint of hostile return fire. If they fired even one shot at the dominating enemy, then there would be the devil to pay. Something was strange. If they weren't engaged in a gunfight, what were they shooting at?

The Sumi heard a weird sound. Mixed with the report of rifles, a strange shriek, like that of a monkey, came up from the mangrove where they had just witnessed the muzzle fire flashing. But it was obviously different from the monkey jabber they had heard many other times in jungles.

Suddenly every piece of the puzzle linked up in his brain, and he felt like his blood had frozen. He was listening to the screams of men. Then Sumi heard Pondgi mutter quietly, as if he shared the appalling conclusion: “Crocodiles are eating Japanese soldiers.”

This scene is indicative of the style used throughout the novel. Kasai’s characters are much more concerned with the psychological horrors of war than they are with the “dragons” which inhabit the terrain that has entrapped them. There is a conspicuous absence of gory violence. In fact, one could say that virtually all of the crocodile attacks in *Dragon of the Mangroves* occur offstage or off screen.

Although I doubt seriously that horror fans who are expecting a horror novel will be satisfied with this work, I would have no problem recommending it to readers who enjoy historically based fiction, or to readers of mainstream fiction. It is by no means the most masterful war (or possibly anti-war, as the case may be) novel ever penned, but Kasai can hold his own as a rookie author. Besides, *Dragon of the Mangroves* offers a viewpoint not often seen in Western literature concerned with World War II. It will certainly make students of history rethink the stereotypes of Japanese soldiers which they have been force fed most of their lives.

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