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Review of *On the Origin of Species and Other Stories* by Charlotte Gislam

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## “WHAT’S SO PRECIOUS ABOUT DYING IN THE SAME FORM YOU WERE BORN INTO?”

Review by Charlotte Gislam

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**Kim, Bo-Young. *On the Origin of Species and Other Stories*. Translated by Joungmin Lee Comfort and Sora Kim-Russel, Kaya Press, 2021. Short-Story Collection.**

Evolution is a process playing out over multiple generations that, to us, as twenty-first century humans, moves so slow that it is undetectable. We can chart a course from our primate ancestors back into the primordial soup, but where this process of transformation will take us as a species is unknown and full of possibilities. *On the Origin of Species and Other Stories* (2021), a short story collection by famed South Korean Science Fiction (SF) writer Bo-Young Kim, explores evolution, adaptation, and transformation from numerous ‘what if’ premises spanning aeons of time. The stories, which are connected by this thematic thread, present imaginative and thought-provoking scenarios, which would be of interest to any reader drawn to posthuman fiction. However, the unique draw of Kim’s work comes from the combination of her large-scale ideas with how she focuses on producing a narrative that is empathetic towards the character’s experience as individuals caught up in these worlds. It is from this blend that the collection’s understanding of the posthuman SF subject, as an agentive force in the world rather than the primary source of change, can emerge.

Outside of a handful of stories being individually translated for anthologies and magazines, this collection, alongside *I’m Waiting for You and Other Stories* published by Harper Collins, marks Kim’s 2021 English language debut. Therefore, this publication makes it almost twenty years since her Korean language debut novella, *The Experience of Touch* (2002), was awarded the Korean Science & Technology Creative Writing Award. Kim’s ideas are original, and her writing is exemplary; hopefully, this initial burst of English publications signals the beginning of an increased translation of her work.

The collection begins with an introduction by Kim entitled “A Brief Reflection on Breasts.” This starting point aims for a naturalisation of the relationship between women and Science Fiction. Kim argues that breasts and science are often seen as the main feature of each, respectively, either repulsing or attracting those who view them. However, Kim states that both breasts and science are simply a part of their respective whole, beautiful and interesting in much the same way as the rest of the body/narrative is. As Kim’s categorisation as an SF author has come from her readers and not herself, she states that she did not consciously add science to her stories as much as she has not needed to add breasts to her body.<sup>1</sup>

Although Kim states that science is an unconscious part of her fiction, one of the first stories in the collection, "Between Zero and One," puts scientific frameworks under the microscope. The story posits whether learning either Newtonian or Quantum physics could change how someone may view the world. In the story, those taught Newtonian physics argue that there are rigidly defined ontological categories that are created through averaging the individual points of data, saying, for example, that "kids are all the same." However, for those who have always known quantum physics, these categories contain infinite possibilities because there is always the probability of  $1 + 1 = 0$ ; therefore, the kids are not all the same as each point of data has the possibility of being different. "Between Zero and One" presents a fictional version of Korea that has undergone shifts in its social and cultural spheres because of the epistemological and ontological implications of quantum physics. As such, Kim may say she does not consciously add science into her fiction, but this story shows that she has a keen interest in contemporary science and the possible 'what if' ramifications of the thought processes it produces.

With quantum physics acting as an early touchstone in the collection, the interest in breaking down rigid ontological categories is continued in the two stories which surround "Between Zero and One" as they both focus on a midway transformation between the human and the non-human. "Scripter" is the first story in the collection and is set inside a game world that has been abandoned and is facing destruction as a glitch condenses all the matter contained within. Meanwhile, "An Evolutionary Myth" focuses on a deposed prince as his body transforms into a multitude of creatures to survive the current harsh political and physical climate. Parts of his body transform to take on the aspects of cats, snakes, fish, deer, and eventually a giant dragon. Both deal with the melding of the human with non-human matter and how that can signal either death or survival depending on the intent surrounding the transformation. By focusing on intent and the mental processes behind the transformations, rather than the body-horror visuals, Kim presents an empathetic imagining which does not rely on a verifiable "humanness" to express agency in their surroundings.

In contrast to these explorations of the fluid boundaries between human and non-human entities, "Last of the Wolves" presents an irreconcilable split between the perspectives of humanity and dragons, which challenge whether our understanding of non-human life is affected by our own capacities. Dragons have taken residence on Earth, and humanity's best chance of survival in this new world is to be kept as pets. The dragons do not consider humans intelligent as they have senses which humans do not have. This causes misunderstandings which the protagonist of the story struggles to contend with, resulting in an outpouring of grief for what cannot be shared. For the humans in this story, adaption and evolution cannot be achieved by force of will; the inability for the species to understand one another means that they are distanced from each other even though they occupy the same space. As a result, this story questions whether our mental and physical capacities create limitations on our ability to empathise with other perspectives outside our own and interrogates the drive to try regardless.

The setting of "Last of the Wolves" and many of the other stories take place on some version of Earth that is radically altered from the borders set in the twenty-first century, where the

specific location is either unnamed or within Korea. "Stars Shine in Earth's Sky" is unique as it has a contemplative view of Earth, set on a version of the planet that is much closer to the centre of the universe where the sky is a constantly glowing carpet of stars. The story is written as a letter sent from a woman to her brother detailing her experience of what their society labels a chronic illness, but a twenty-first century reader of the collection will likely experience every day. The drive to identify a cause of change and how the unknowable nature of the body has a hand in the obscuration of past evolutionary adaptations takes centre focus in a story where unproductive changes which lack cause are considered dangerous.

Similarly, the loss of knowledge is also a key element of "On the Origin of Species," which provides the title to the collection. It has an unusual structure to the rest as it is split into two parts. The first follows Kay, a robot who is part of an all-robot society that rose long after human and non-human organic life went extinct. Their dissertation unknowingly begins a new science, organic biology, which attempts to prove that organic matter grows by taking in nutrients, something which the all-robot university discredits. The first part of the story leaves Kay dreaming of creating organic life, while the second part picks up after that dream has seemingly been realised. The organic biology department has proven that organic matter grows, but their findings have the staff raptured in cult-like reverence. Kay, having left the department before these events, is convinced to return and finds a creation that threatens the continued existence of robotkind. What follows feels as close to horror as the collection gets, as adaption is conceived as a threat where sight alone of what was grown in the lab is enough to break all logic functions and cause a disintegration into madness. The reader is confronted by robot body-horror, a cult closing ranks, and a gory slaughter scene that gives the final notes of the collection a distinct feeling of existential dread often found within Weird fiction.

The metamorphoses which the posthuman protagonists of Bo-Young Kim's stories either pass through, witness, or attempt to will into being are not simply positive or negative actions. This is not a collection that attempts to pass moral judgment, transformation is simply either happening, not happening, or has happened, and those characters caught up in its effects are aiming to survive no matter the odds. Instead, Kim's writing is deeply empathetic and able to inhabit its characters effectively, often lingering within the character's mind to focus on their thoughts and feeling surrounding the narrative's broader ideas. The result is a collection containing scenarios that dig into the ontology of the posthuman subject, which any potential reader will find thought-provoking, whilst simultaneously being able to drill down into the characters and present them as more than example showcases for plot points but rather individuals who affect and are affected by the situations in which they find themselves.

**NOTES**

1. Kim makes clear that breasts are not a necessary requirement of being a woman, a statement which I believe places Kim's work as at least provisionally trans-inclusive, pending any statement from the author herself. I will state upfront that the collection did not to my mind contain any transphobic elements, however, I say all this as a UK cisgender reviewer whose knowledge of the politics of Korea and its treatment of its transgender population is limited.

**BIONOTE**

**Charlotte Gislam** is an AHRC funded PhD student at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. Her research is focused on interrogating the ways in which non-human matter, such as artificial intelligence and game space, is used in the generation of narrative in digital games. Her other research interests include spatial theory, Science Fiction, Gothic, and film. She can be found on twitter @Gislam93.