



## Stupeur et tremblements

*Amélie Nothomb*

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Au début des années 90, la narratrice est embauchée par Yumimoto, une puissante firme japonaise. Elle va découvrir à ses dépens l'implacable rigueur de l'autorité d'entreprise, en même temps qu'elle découvre les codes de conduite, incompréhensibles au profane, qui gouvernent la vie sociale au pays du Soleil levant.

D'erreurs en maladroites et en échecs, commence alors pour elle, comme dans un mauvais rêve, la descente inexorable dans les degrés de la hiérarchie, jusqu'au rang de surveillante des toilettes, celui de l'humiliation dernière. Une course absurde vers l'abîme - image de la vie -, où l'humour percuteur d'Amélie Nothomb fait mouche à chaque ligne.

Entre le rire et l'angoisse, cette satire des nouveaux despotismes aux échos kafkaïens a conquis un immense public et valu à l'auteur d'*Hygiène de l'assassin* le Grand Prix du roman de l'Académie française en 1999.

## Stupeur et tremblements Details

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I had mixed expectations when approaching Belgium's enfant terrible, Amélie Nothomb having heard plenty of praise and criticism in equal measure. So it was with fear and trembling I approached Nothomb's Prix du roman de l'Académie française winning novel *Fear and Trembling*, aware of the author's reputation as a quirky, hip and contemporary writer. Little did I know that the novel, itself highly autobiographical, charting the struggles of a Belgian worker, Amélie, within the various rigidities of Japanese corporate culture, would be caustic in its entirety.

Nothomb embarrasses herself with her critique of a culture which she evidently plucks from stereotypes, never once examining the possible grains of truth within these superficial constructions of Japanese identity, but inflating them for crass, comedic effect. Supposedly a book highlighting the difficult intricacies of Japanese corporate culture, *Fear and Trembling* instead criticises the difficulty for somebody foreign, in this case Amélie, to function within a world of explicit hierarchy and tradition. Alas, Nothomb's novel is an attack on difference; the fish-out-of-water story is so thinly disguised as to milk the largest amount of sympathy for the 'Westerner' who must survive - but never become at one with - a culture that is described as evil, torturous and unthinking. Not only is the Yumimoto corporation hellish but the people within it Nothomb paints as the antithesis of the poor and victimised main character. Amélie's character never escapes the one-dimensional boundary of her girlish nature, both silly and supercilious; the divide between West and East, which many GR reviews pick up on, only paint Amélie as good, whilst the Japanese workers as unfair tyrants. Under constant attack, Amélie defends her privileged position with lines such as, *'Believe it or not, honor does exist in the West too'*. Alas, the novel is riddled with such hyperbole and stilted dialogue. The back and forth arguments which make up the majority of the novel are crude in their rough satire, revealing Nothomb as nothing more than a juvenile [and somewhat self-obsessed] writer. This grating chatty style, written without much thought, is both absurd and borders on outright discomfort at certain points when Nothomb, who obviously has little appreciation for political correctness, touches upon some troubling descriptions: there is the running joke that Amélie is suffering from 'developmental disorders'; whilst the berating of co-worker, Fubiki, by her boss Mister Omochi is described as a rape; and later Fubiki, angry, walks towards Amélie *'with Hiroshima in her right eye and Nagasaki in her left.'* There comes a point where Nothomb's writing becomes inflammatory minus rationality; the humour in the novel - perhaps its only redeeming point - comes from lazy depictions of the Japanese workers. In essence, *Fear and Trembling* is a slapstick novel, quirky yes, but just as tawdry, guns blazing and without purpose.

For such a short novel Nothomb surprisingly manages to include plenty of stereotypes: Mister Omochi is referenced as the *'Obese one'* who is always *'dementedly screaming'*, whilst Mr Saito is another demonic boss of Amélie's, forcing her to print again and again a heavy golf manual. Some critics have called the novel erotic, but fail to mention that the only power of sexuality given is towards Amélie. Only she, as the foreigner, is able to form friendships, connections and relationship; the other only female in the novel, Fubiki is robbed of her sexuality, individuality and is exoticised. Fubiko is the ideal fantasy of a Japanese woman. As Amélie [or can we as readers take this to be Nothomb's voice?] describes:

*'Not all Japanese women are beautiful. But when one of them sets out to be beautiful, anyone else had better stand back. All forms of beauty are poignant, Japanese beauty particularly so. That lily-white complexion, those mellow eyes, the inimitable shape of the nose...*

Thus Fubiko is the very poster-girl for Orientalism, as an exotic but always dangerous figure, as someone who functions robotically in the novel. Her only hope at sexuality is either through suicide or marriage: Amélie's assertion that these are the only two avenues for Japanese women are nothing more than racist and belittling, and stand alongside her proclamation that she has a *'profound admiration for any Japanese woman who has not committed suicide'*, whilst later *'Everyone knows that Japan has the highest suicide rate of any country. What surprised me was that suicides were not more common.'* This long segment where Amélie talks about the 'Fate of the Japanese Woman' is supposed to be a critique of the various dogmas that entrap the gender roles within Japanese society, however because the description is nothing more than an incoherent rant - written in second-person towards an imaginary audience - Nothomb dissociates away from the

connection any deeper meaning and political value. Her outburst means nothing because it has nothing to do with the characters. Such an oblique mention to feminism is lazy feminism at best - and yet hypocritically, in denouncing the institution which would force Fubuki to marry, Amélie then mocks Fubuki's attempts at flirting. To put the icing on the cake, ironically, the only man in the novel which could save Fubuki from her drone existence is a white man (!) Such painful contradictions litter the novel, turning it into a mess of cultural clashes and caricatures; Nothomb's style though easy to read, and stylistically very new-age, is equally disorientating at points where her descriptions become random and are composed of awkward imagery and irksome stylistic phrases, such as '*mashed-potato syndrome paralyzing my hand*'. However such repulsion may be the point: Nothomb wants to be shocking. And the novel is shocking, but for all the wrong reasons, and it is for all the wrong reasons that Fear and Trembling continues to keep receiving ludicrously high ratings and positive reviews.

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## Simon says

*Hahahaha - aren't Japanese people strange and weird and their culture is so crazy!!!*

I didn't enjoy this book. I take issue with anyone portraying Japan as some out-there foreign country. Having spent a short period of my life living in Japan (a fraction longer than Nothomb did in the book) and I'm the first to acknowledge that it's very different but books like this just add to the misconception that it's some sort of society gone mad. It seems to be one of the last countries where it is acceptable to treat as "crazy foreign people". Yes, the culture is very different to Western culture but does that make it fair to arrogantly look at it as wrong? And that's what I didn't like about *Fear and Loathing* - Nothomb seemed to be taking the high-moral ground as if she kept telling herself "I might be going down fighting but I'm not the crazy one".

Yes, it's a mono-culture. 99% of the population are Japanese. It doesn't look favourably an individualism. I remember being told they have a saying which roughly means 'the nail that sticks out gets hammered down'. It's a country that puts the group/company/others before themselves but by following that logic, others do the same for you and things work. There is also great shame in not doing what society expects of you. But is that really so crazy? It's a country with low unemployment, the lowest teen pregnancy in the industrial world and low crime. Their poverty rate is lower than the US and UK too. Yeah, crazy, aren't they??!?

I found many things about Japan a little strange but I acknowledge that's because their whole society has a different philosophy to the one I was born into. But it works and for that reason I will always jump to their defence with things like this. I miss many aspects of the country and find the Japanese to be lovely people (though I acknowledge I will always be a foreigner first to them) but the way Nothomb portrayed her time with the Yumimoto company was that of an arrogant young woman who refused to accept that to get by in Japanese culture you need to follow the unwritten social rules. You might not agree with them but if you don't then the problem is with you, not them. Their society is very different but it works.

Oh, and her comparisons in the book to rape are offensive as are some of her comments about Germany and World War II (though one about Belgium and Germany was amusing). I'll stop writing now or I won't stop. It gets 2 stars because it was short. A friend lent it to me thinking I'd like it. I'll now be reviewing the friendship.

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## Marco Simeoni says

**Voce densa di significati che spazza via gli ideogrammi**







androgynous fashion choices and petite builds, I'm guessing he confuses the shit out of them, but come on, grow the hell up girls. Then he gets mean stares from clerks because his Polish doesn't live up to their snooty standards. Oh and he gets hit on while in clubs by hoards of horny women who want to satisfy the itch for something exotic. Just to be even, he gets hit on in clubs by horny men too\*\*, again I think it's all about the curiosity and the exotics. All that is minor annoyances, the most worrisome is that my friend gets looked down by his coworkers. Even though he's the most involved of all the business partners, had invested the most \$\$ and is the only one among the bunch with the intricate knowledge of sushi making, he is treated as someone less worthy. Nothing better than racist colleagues, is there? People sometimes suck.

And if you put all that crap he's dealing with on top of the regular ex-pat maladies (homesickness, scarcity of home food, cultural misunderstandings, etc), it can really get nasty. So it made me wonder\*\*\*, for him to put up with this crap every single day, how bad the typical Japanese workplace can be? How awful Tokyo's corporate overlords? To my understanding my friend was just a regular guy, living normal life - no Yakuza, no kink.

Amélie Nothomb gives some answers to that, she did the opposite of my Japanese friend has done. She left her native Belgium to live and work in one of Tokyo's major corporations. From her book you get a taste of what work in such an environment is like, what's expected from a newbie and why some might find daunting. The book's funny (I got quite a few laughs), lyrical at times (much appreciated melancholic descriptions from time to time, and well crafted description at that) and a little... fake.

Nothomb lies her ass off. That's her writing style. Most of it is exaggeration and fact twisting, I'm sure it's done for comical relief and to prove a point, but still, to me that to a degree undermines the credibility of her story. In short, if you can live with shameless exaggeration, you'll enjoy the book. Otherwise - prepare yourself for a whole lot of teeth grinding.

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\* He was serious about it: medals, international competitions, crazy training sessions...

\*\* Some of it is due to confusion with his sex (he blames his haircut), some of it isn't.

\*\*\* We're finally getting into the proper review part of this review

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## **Fabian says**

"Fear and Trembling" embraces the strange with a wicked arsenal of irrational but noble thoughts and actions by the superb heroine. Her authentic recklessness captivates, no enamours, the reader. I had very strong feelings for this incredible novel because I lived EXACTLY the type of professional downward spiral that all but defeats you. Like a posher (!?) precursor to "The Devil Wears Prada," the entire plot unravels within the confines of the claustrophobic and limiting Workplace. This is an ugly child that you want to keep with you forever: it's really that wonderful.

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## **Teresa Proença says**

Descendente de uma família belga, Amélie Nothomb nasceu no Japão e, até à adolescência, viveu no Extremo-Oriente, onde o seu pai foi embaixador. Fala fluentemente japonês e trabalhou como intérprete em Tóquio.



## Rowena says

**\*3.5 stars\***

I must say, I was really surprised by this book. I work for a Japanese company here in Vancouver and I have noticed that my Japanese co-workers have to adhere to different standards and rules from the rest of us (we don't question it, what can you do?). It's been interesting working there because half of my co-workers are Japanese, the other half aren't. We've had to adapt to each other's cultures and I think we do so quite well. It does feel like we're split into two camps and I have often been approached by a Japanese co-worker to say something to the boss, something I can get away with saying as I'm not Japanese.

So because of my experiences working with the Japanese, and talking to them about corporate culture in Japan, I shouldn't have been too shocked by the content of this book but I was. Yumimoto Corporation sounds like hell to me and I felt sorry, for the most part, for Amelie, the Belgian girl who works there and quickly gets on the bad side of her female co-worker, who is villainous but feels the need to be as she is a woman working in a male-dominated world.

I'm still not completely convinced by Amelie though. She was born in Japan, lived there until she was 5 years old, yet when she moves back to Japan, she seems to have accepted the Japanese corporate life way too easily. As a westerner, Amelie is used to taking the initiative. That doesn't fly in Japan, apparently. She becomes a total pushover. It doesn't sound plausible that a western woman would do that without a fight.

This book was meant to be satirical. Not that I found too much of it funny, it was more sad than anything. And I was surprised by the comments Nothomb made about Japanese society, how there's only two ways out for women; marriage or suicide. I found that a bit harsh. It was weird because on one hand she loves Japanese culture, on the other hand she is so scathing of it.

I realize I've gone off topic and I'm not talking so much about the book now. Well, I did like the book. It was a quick read and Nothomb does have a graceful writing style. However, a few things didn't sit right with me.

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## Paul Bryant says

Japan sure brings out the bonkers in everybody, doesn't it.

(Bonkers : a demotic English term meaning crazy but with the element of horror removed and an extra squirt of I will never understand this in a million years – get me out of this room!)

I tried, you may know this already, to get on board with *The Wind Up Bird Chronicle*. That was a little too eyerollingly cute-weird for me. I had a go with the other Murakami guy (Ryu, not Haruki) and he was really strange.

Then there was Natsuo Kirino. The novel was called *Grotesque* and it really was.

And I must mention a little movie called *Love Exposure* by Sion Sono. Synopsis : *A bizarre love triangle forms between a young Catholic upskirt photographer, a misandric girl and a manipulative cultist.* Truly

madly deeply bonkers....!! One of my all time favourites. You gotta see *Love Exposure*! But not with your parents!!

So now this tiny novel-memoir which is Japan from a Western point of view. 22 year old Belgian girl gets job with huge Tokyo corporation – and a year of humiliation begins. It's a little hymn of hatred towards Japan and frankly borderline racist as Amelie Nothomb makes generalization upon generalization about all Japanese people and they're all profoundly derogatory. Japanese people should sue this book right now. It's so insulting.

Now I think Amelie is gonna say well can't you tell I really deep down LOVE Japan and its people. But the experience of reading this is like watching someone wrestling rather too strenuously with their pet dog – who's a naughty little doggy then? Are You a naughty little doggy? Are YOU the NAUGHTIEST NASTIEST MOST ANNOYING LITTLE DOGGY? Yes, you are!! YES YOU ARE. You get the strong impression there's some genuine aggression in there.

I'll just dish up a quote for you, in case you may think I may be misrepresenting Amelie. Here she is contemplating Japanese company men :

*Everyone knows that Japan has the highest suicide rate of any country in the world. What surprised me was that suicides were not more common.*

*What awaited these poor number-crunchers outside The Company? The obligatory beer with colleagues undergoing the same kind of gradual lobotomy, hours spent stuffed into an overcrowded subway, a dozing wife, exhausted children, sleep that sucked them down into it like the vortex of a flushing toilet, the occasional day off they never took full advantage of. Nothing that deserved to be called a life.*

Oh and how about this:

*A Japanese person genuinely apologizing happens about once every century.*

Ouch!

So anyway, it's a bitter, too-near-the-knuckle-to-be-really-funny memoir (why do they bother to call these things novels?) and I'm most curious to find out What Amelie Did Next.

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## **Ksenia (vaenn) says**

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