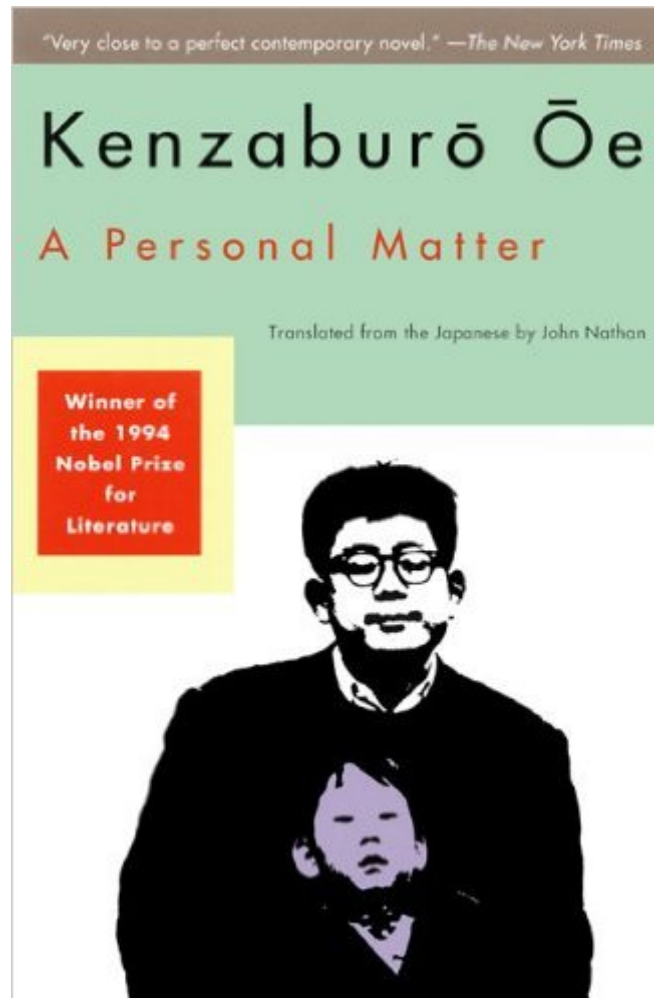


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A Personal Matter



Synopsis

Kenzaburo Oe, the winner of the 1994 Nobel Prize for Literature, is internationally acclaimed as one of the most important and influential post-World War II writers, known for his powerful accounts of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and his own struggle to come to terms with a mentally handicapped son. The Swedish Academy lauded Oe for his "poetic force [that] creates an imagined world where life and myth condense to form a disconcerting picture of the human predicament today." His most popular book, *A Personal Matter* is the story of Bird, a frustrated intellectual in a failing marriage whose Utopian dream is shattered when his wife gives birth to a brain-damaged child. ¶In writing novels there is no substitute for maturity and moral awareness. Kenzaburo Oe has both.¶Alan Levensohn, *Christian Science Monitor*

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In this, his most famous book (says the blurb on the cover) Oe examines the devastation, fear and shame of fathering a brain-damaged child. This interpretation is oddly off-mark. "A Personal Matter" does not really examine these issues; it examines how a man avoids facing his own, quite different feelings. A sense of shame does pervade the novel, but it is an emotion that is felt most strongly by characters who think in a more conventionally Japanese way. Bird, the main character of the novel, is a 27-year old man in a failing marriage. He teaches at a cram school and dreams of escaping to Africa. He is drifting through a life that has no meaning or direction (not that he bothers). The birth of his brain-damaged son forces him to face the question "what is the right thing to do for me?". He dodges the question as long as he can, plunging headlong into a drinking binge, a sexual affair, and

eventually a scheme to have his son killed by a quack doctor. But the question does not go away. It is his very own personal matter. No one can help him. The question corners him (not surprisingly, several scenes of the novel prominently feature blind alleys), and finally he finds HIS answer. Or rather, the answer finds him - he did not consciously look for it. More than anything that is impressive about this novel - the evocation of a stifling atmosphere, the restrained, matter-of-fact tone of the narrator, the stark realism, the depiction of the sense of shame and horror that the birth of a handicapped child evokes in the Japanese - more than all these things I admired how Oe managed to convey a sense of the unconscious humanity of the man Bird (who, after all, does not live up to any moral standards when he begins an affair while, at the same time, his wife is about to give birth in hospital).

This book is about human responsibility. Bird, the teacher of a cram-school, has always, in his own words, been running away--from himself, from his marriage, from society, and from the duties he owes to his newly-born deformed child. The place which embodies his escapist tendency, where he self-deceivingly believes happiness resides, is Africa. He collects maps of Africa and buys books written by African writers. The author depicts a spiritually and morally empty modern Japan whose citizens, like Bird and Kimiko, live purposeless lives. Their quiet reckless acts of abandon hidden and bound behind a quiet orderly society reveal an intense desperation that is so insidiously harmful on the psyche because it cannot take form in overt revolt. This desperation can take either the aimless route of escapism or the dead-end road of suicide, to which the author has admitted his life had been heading. Kimiko's husband committed suicide for no apparent reason, thenceforth causing the wife to go on a crash course of sexual abandon. Bird's irresponsible sexual escapades with Kimiko are despicable, in light that his child and wife are committed to hospitals, but one is sympathetic to his degraded condition. One's knows that the birth of this monstrous child is the ultimate test, from which he will be surface like a hero from the darkness if he is able to confront his despicable character, take moral responsibility for his actions, and assume responsibility for others besides himself. His psychological journey is the mythic journey that all humans must take at least once in their lifetime. The book's unadorned language that sometimes borders on realistic crudeness is a marked contrast to Kawabata's poetic simplicity and Mishima's detailed psychological analysis.

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