

NOTES FROM: *The Memory Police*, by Yoko Ogawa

SUMMARY: Another random bookstore find, this is a sparse, dystopian novel that will stay with me for quite a while. The “book hangover” from this one lasted a long time!

Actually, the more you think about the book, and consider the structure – the hidden meanings, the references – the more you come to appreciate the craft and the care that went into writing it.

Not surprisingly, it was a finalist for the International Booker Prize, it and the author have received a *crazy* number of other literary awards, and it has been favorably compared to 1984, *Fahrenheit 451*, and others.

The basic plot is that, on an unnamed island, the unnamed narrator tells of the “disappearances” from the island of things like photographs, novels, even birds, and she explains how it’s the job of the Memory Police to find people who still remember - and eliminate them.

Or at least “disappear” them as well since it’s never really clear what happens to them once the Memory Police take them away.

That’s what’s so eerie and cool about this book: hardly any of the main characters are named (there’s “R”, her editor, “the old man,” her closest friend, etc.) – nothing is fixed in time or place, and that gives this novel a disorienting, uncomfortable feel that meshes perfectly with its exploration of memory, loss, and significance.

The ending, too is just...*phenomenal*. I’m so glad I picked up this book in a bookstore I forget the name of, on an island I rarely go to, during a time in my life I’ll never forget.

“The room had changed completely. The traces of my father’s presence, which I had done my best to preserve, had vanished, replaced by an emptiness that would not be filled. I stood in the middle of that emptiness, feeling myself on the verge of being drawn into its terrible depth.”

“A heart has no shape, no limits. That’s why you can put almost any kind of thing in it, why it can hold so much. It’s much like your memory, in that sense.”

“Memories are a lot tougher than you might think. Just like the hearts that hold them.”

“The moon and the stars were nowhere to be seen, as though they had been scattered by the brilliance of the flames, and only the corpses of burned books lit the sky.”

“‘No one can erase the stories!’ The last words she said as they dragged her away were the only ones I was able to understand clearly.”

“We continued throwing the books, one after the other, without flipping through the pages or so much as glancing at the covers. We repeated the movements almost automatically, as if performing some solemn duty. Still, as each volume left my hand, I felt a slight twinge, as though the hollow place in my memory were being enlarged book by book.”

“Men who start by burning books end by burning other men.”

“A mind that we cannot see has created a story that we can.”

“I close my eyes, realizing that the end is coming soon. Just as I did when I lost my voice, I pray it will come without pain or sadness. But I suppose there’s no need to worry. It must feel much like a typewriter key falling back into place after rising for a moment to strike the page.”

“‘Do you really have to go?’ he asked, gathering to his chest the air he held in his hands. ‘Good-bye...’ The last traces of my voice were frail and hoarse. ‘Good-bye.’ For a very long time, he sat staring at the void in his palms. When at last he had convinced himself that there was nothing left, he let his arms drop wearily. Then he climbed the ladder one rung at a time, lifted the trapdoor, and went out into the world. Sunlight came streaming in for one moment but vanished again as the door creaked shut. The faint sound of the rug being rolled out on the floor came to me from above. Closed in the hidden room, I continued to disappear.”