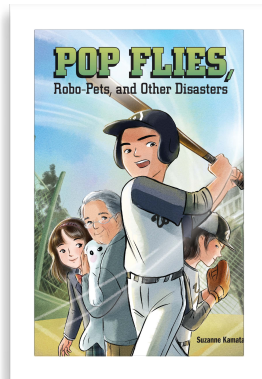




INDEPENDENT BOOK REVIEW

A CELEBRATION OF SMALL PRESS AND SELF-PUBLISHED BOOKS



Pop Flies, Robo-Pets, and Other Disasters

By Suzanne Kamata

Genre: Middle Grade Fiction / Sports

Reviewed by Jenny Catlin

A thoughtful middle-grade baseball novel with more on its mind than winning

Suzanne Kamata's *Pop Flies, Robo-Pets, and Other Disasters* opens with a setup that might sound familiar. Satoshi Matsumoto has returned to Japan after three years in Atlanta, where he was the star of his middle-school baseball team. He comes back with a good swing, strong English, and the assumption that baseball will still make sense. It doesn't.

That gap between what Satoshi expects and what actually greets him gives the book its shape. Back in Japan, he isn't exactly an outsider, but he's not fully an insider anymore either. He knows the language but not always the social code. He knows the game but not the structure wrapped around it. Kamata is strongest when she lets that in-between feeling do the work. Satoshi is marked almost immediately by his English, his habits, and the fact that he's come back with the wrong instincts for how to move through school and team life. Even the things he's good at can make him stick out in the wrong way.

Mr. Tanaka, Satoshi's English teacher, is one of the book's more believable antagonists because he's not especially dramatic. He's petty, insecure, and backed by the quiet authority of the classroom. He singles Satoshi out, embarrasses him over small things, and seems especially irritated by the fact that this kid has a kind of fluency he can't entirely control. Kamata gets something right here about schools and teams and other childhood institutions: they often care less about fairness than about whether a kid knows how to fit the shape that's already been made for him.

The baseball team, which ought to be a refuge, doesn't offer much relief. Kamata understands that sports aren't just sports, especially for kids. They're also hierarchy, ritual, and social pressure. Satoshi can play. He can hit, bunt, learn the signs, and still

not quite belong. The team wants skill, sure, but it also wants obedience, patience, and the right kind of attitude. Satoshi isn't always good at giving it that.

Satoshi is a standout middle grade protagonist. He's not a saint, and the book is better for it. He's proud, thin-skinned, and desperate for the kind of big moment that might fix everything at once. He wants to prove himself quickly instead of earning trust slowly. He wants the story to break his way. Kamata is smart to let him be messy in such a deeply believable way. His mistakes don't just come from bad luck or unfair treatment. They also come from pride, homesickness, and the very kid-sized belief that one shining moment can solve problems that are actually much bigger than that.

Shintaro, his rival, is less interesting at first, mostly because he enters the book in fairly familiar bully mode. But Kamata does eventually give him more shape. His father's pressure hangs over him. His struggles in school threaten his place. His attachment to baseball is ugly sometimes, but it's also real. That doesn't excuse the cruelty, but it does keep him from feeling completely flat.

The book's emotional center is Satoshi's grandfather, Oji-chan. That relationship gives the story real depth and keeps it from being *just* a sports book about grit and teamwork. Oji-chan is a former baseball figure, a local legacy, and a man whose memory is beginning to fray. His confusion changes the rhythm of the household and quietly reshapes Satoshi's life. Kamata handles that well. She doesn't turn it into a lesson so much as a lived condition of the family's days.

She's especially good on the tangle of feelings that come with care. Satoshi loves his grandfather. He's also embarrassed by him, frustrated by him, protective of him, and burdened in ways he doesn't always know how to admit. He wants to be at practice. He wants his own life. He wants, like any kid, to be selfish sometimes without feeling terrible about it. The book doesn't force that tension into something neat, and it's better for that.

The prose can be a little over-explanatory in places. Kamata sometimes tells you what a scene means when the scene was already doing the job. But for a middle-grade novel, it doesn't land as a fatal flaw so much as a slight lack of trust in material that's often already strong. Younger readers are likely to stay with it just fine, and the best parts of the book have real emotional clarity without getting sticky about it.

Pop Flies has more going on than its packaging might suggest. Kamata understands shame, belonging, and the way kids can make a mess of things not because they're bad, but because they want so badly to be seen in the right way. Satoshi wants to stand out in a world that keeps demanding he fall in line. He wants home to feel like home again. He wants baseball to mean what it used to mean. The book is at its best when it admits that those wants are real, painful, and not always enough.

Pop Flies is not trying to be perfect or profound. It's trying to tell the truth about a kid caught between countries, expectations, and family need. And it does just that.