

A World with You In It: Reading the (Broken) Promise of a Happy Ending in Tamai Kobayashi's *Prairie Ostrich*.

Egg Murakami, the 8-year-old protagonist of Tamai Kobayashi's 2014 novel *Prairie Ostrich*, is an avid reader and student of children's literature. Neglected by her parents and subjected to relentless racist bullying at school, Egg turns to books—both the ones she reads on her own and the ones her older sister Kathy reads to her, including classic texts such as E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web* and Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*—because she “wants to know how to survive the worst things.” Whereas Egg relies upon these stories' happy endings to imagine a gentler future for herself, readers familiar with the texts Kobayashi references will realize that Kathy has rewritten them for vulnerable Egg, painting bright futures for figures who can find no such escape in their original narratives.

In my paper, I argue that in its representation of the sisters' sharing of stories, *Prairie Ostrich* exposes tensions between common adult understandings of what children's lives should be like and the (often) painful realities in which they live. It calls into question conversations surrounding young people's relationships to text, taking aim at beliefs concerning the role that stories should play in the lives of marginalized youth. In particular, I suggest, *Prairie Ostrich* provides a powerful counter-narrative to accounts of childhood reading that equate speculative happy endings with growing up.

I draw upon theories of narrative and queer theories of time to suggest that *Prairie Ostrich* provides a vision of what Sara Ahmed's provocative claim in *The Promise of Happiness* that “[w]e must stay unhappy with this world” might mean for children. For much of Egg's story, the promise of a happy ending functions as a way of managing living in a world that causes her pain. Egg's discovery of Kathy's retellings marks a shift in her understanding of the place of narrative in her own life. In turn, this pushes against the idea that the representation of happy endings can intervene in a broken present, instead arguing for a different relationship to the act of reading that locates moments of growth in chronic and repeated encounters with pain.