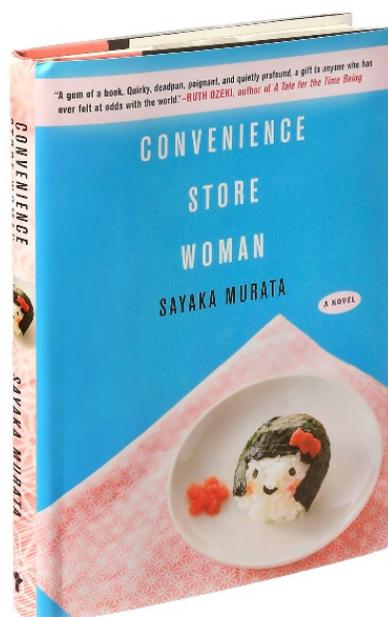




A Unique Love Story

Review by Jennifer Coe

Sayaka Murata. *Convenience Store Woman*. Grove Press, 2018.



The above image depicts a blue book. The words *Convenience Store Woman* are centered on the front, in white sans serif letters. Underneath reads Sayaka Murata, in smaller, black sans serif letters. The bottom half of the cover has a pink cloth napkin, folded, with a small white saucer sitting on top of it. On the saucer is an onigiri, or Japanese rice ball, which has been shaped and decorated to look like a little-girl's head. Her face and hair are made of nori, or flat seaweed wrap. The rice ball has a bow in its hair, which appears to be made from a red vegetable. A flower made from the same red vegetable sits on the plate next to the onigiri.

Keiko's only social group is comprised of friends from school, but even among this group of friends, Keiko is othered. In one instance, Keiko admits to the group that she has never been in love. She reflects, "I'd never experienced sex, and I'd never even had any particular

Convenience Store Woman, written by Sayaka Murata, an award-winning Japanese writer, was published in Japan in 2016. This is Murata's first book to be translated into English. The 2018 English edition, translated by Ginny Tapley Takemori, is the subject of this review and, because of my own identity, considered through a white, American lens. Set in Japan, the story centers on Keiko Furukura, a 36-year-old woman living in Tokyo who is single, childless, and working part-time at a convenience store named Smile Mart. What seems at first glance to be a delightful story about a woman dealing with societal expectations becomes, on a closer look, a fierce interrogation of amatonormativity and the reality of a life at odds with ways in which people are expected to build romantic unions.

The story begins with the narrator, Keiko, describing Smile Mart, a place where she feels true belonging. She says of her first day there, "for the first time ever, I felt I'd become a part in the machine of society" (20). Keiko's childhood was often difficult, illustrated in several flashbacks to elementary school: there was an incident with a dead bird in the park—her classmates were upset, but Keiko suggested bringing the carcass home to eat; a fight between classmates which Keiko breaks up by hitting a kid with a shovel; the time Keiko de-pants her teacher to stop the teacher's screaming. But even in adulthood, Keiko cannot make sense of what she did wrong back then. She has difficulty conforming to societal expectations but has found comfort working at Smile Mart.



awareness of my own sexuality. I was indifferent to the whole thing ...” (Murata 2018, 37). Her friends are bewildered, likely due to internalized arophobia, “the dislike of or prejudice against aromantic people” and acephobia, discriminatory attitudes against asexual people (AUREA-Basic Terms 2021). Later, Keiko meets a younger man, Shiraha, when he is hired to work at Smile Mart. He eventually gets fired from the store for being an abysmal employee who creeps on customers. Keiko decides to invite him to move in. They mutually agree to enter into a secret, sexless relationship, in an attempt to conform to the amatonormative pressure they both feel from their families and friends to partner-up.

Once Shiraha moves in, he treats Keiko horribly. He refuses to work, a major issue because Keiko makes barely enough income to meet her own needs, let alone another person’s. He takes up residence in the only bathroom—sleeping in the bathtub—meaning that Keiko has to pay to use a pay-shower down the street. He expects Keiko to take care of him as if he were a helpless child. However, everyone in Keiko’s life is ecstatic about the relationship, even when she explains many of the unsavory details about her relationship with Shiraha. She says, “Everyone seemed happier than when I’d told them I’d never been in love... It was as though everyone was saying that for the first time, I was part of their circle” (Murata 2018, 112 – 113). Shiraha eventually convinces Keiko to quit her job at Smile Mart and look for a position with more prestige and a bigger paycheck. Keiko is unemployed for weeks and, without the rigid expectations of Smile Mart, completely falls apart. On her way to a job interview, she enters a convenience store and feels familiar comfort, as if the store was talking to her and through her. She acknowledges that her first and only love is the predictability and structure of the convenience store and she announces her intent to get her old job back.

Amatonormativity, a term coined by Elizabeth Blake in her 2012 book *Minimizing Marriage: Marriage, Morality, and the Law*, is the “disproportionate focus on marital and amorous love relationships as special sites of value, and the assumption that romantic love is a universal goal,” devaluing other types of relationships in the process (Blake 2012, 88). *Convenience Store Woman* expertly portrays amatonormativity and the deleterious effects it can have on an individual. Keiko, because she is single and has never experienced an amorous relationship—and explicitly has no desire to—is judged negatively by both casual acquaintances and friends alike. Framed as representatives of society-at-large, arophobic folks in her life see her as immature and an outsider while she is single but grant her full-membership to their in-group when Shiraha moves in, because they assume their relationship is amorous. Additionally, they are more willing to accept that Shiraha is a poor partner, rather than accept that Keiko is perfectly content when intentionally choosing singledom and not pursuing sexual relationships. In this sense, Keiko displays feelings associated with being aroace; that is, both aromantic, “someone whose experience of romance is disconnected from normative societal expectations, due to feeling repulsed by romance, or being uninterested in romantic relationships” and asexual, someone “whose experiences with sex are disconnected from normative societal expectations, due to feeling repulsed by or uninterested in sex” (AUREA-Basic Terms 2021).

This book successfully interrogates the notion that there is inherently more value in amorous love relationships than other forms of love, including self-love. In the end, we see Keiko triumphantly choosing herself and her beloved Smile Mart over conforming to the expectations thrust on her from the pressures of amatonormativity. She explains, “I realize now ... I’m a convenience store worker. Even if that means I am abnormal and can’t make a living and drop down dead, I can’t escape that fact. My very cells exist for the convenience store”



(161). This unapologetic example of a person rejecting social expectations is a triumph, celebrating different modes of living and highlighting the absurdity of centering one specific type of relationship at the expense of everything else.

Works Cited

AUREA-Basic Terms. October 2021. Accessed March 22, 2022.

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Blake, Elizabeth. 2012. *Minimizing Marriage: Marriage, Morality, and the Law*. New York: Oxford University Press.

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