



Lost Girls and Love Hotels

By Catherine Hanrahan
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Introduction

Twenty-something Margaret is an English instructor at a stewardess training school in Japan. Trying to forget her miserable childhood in Canada, she throws herself into debauched Tokyo nightlife, aided and abetted by Ines, a flawlessly beautiful vagabond with a knack for landing on her feet, Adam, a drug-smuggling, priest-impersonating ne'er-do-well, and Jiro, the bartender who counsels in Beatles lyrics.

However, gorging on drugs, drink and kinky sex in love hotels still can't keep memories of her parents' fractured marriage and her brother's descent into schizophrenia at bay, so Margaret courts further danger by embarking on an affair with the married, secretive gangster Kazu.

Sharply funny and bitterly sad by turns, *Lost Girls and Love Hotels* is a story of a wounded girl's acceptance of her past, and of modern life in one of the most contradictory and intriguing places on the planet.

Questions for Discussion

1. Remembering an incident when she was six, Margaret thinks, "I could be invisible. I like the idea." Do you find it surprising that she worries about the girl who appears on missing-person posters while losing herself in Japan, nihilistically trying to obliterate herself?
2. In the flashback to Frank playing out his parents' marriage at age eight, we see that he was an unusually perceptive boy. Do you think his schizophrenia was triggered by his home life? When Margaret asks, "why is sanity so hard?" while watching children outside the temple, do you think her question has special resonance for exceptionally sensitive people?
3. How do Margaret's depictions of The-Guy-Who's-Name-Nobody-Knows and Mr. Shawn give credence to the fact that Orientalist fantasies are still alive and flourishing?
4. Are love hotels, like the rent-a-dog park and billboards of a geisha brandishing a power drill, examples of the "nightmare of modernity" that is contemporary Japan? How does *Lost Girls and Love Hotels* tie those aspects that seem incongruous and kitschy to Western eyes to the larger Japanese culture of honor, cleanliness, and harmony?
5. Consider parallels in the two narrative threads. Margaret flees when Frank tries to stab her, yet is eventually knifed by Kazu's wife. Frank attempts to cut his finger, and years later Margaret receives a box with Kazu's severed finger. Can we ever escape the past? What was the symbolic meaning of Kazu's amputation?
6. Ines says of Japan, "people think it's run by men but that's a myth. The women are in charge." How do events in the book bear out the truth of her statement? Is it possible to reconcile such contradictions in Japanese culture?
7. Margaret's father left a family that cracked while trying to meet his expectations of high-functioning, socially acceptable normality. Do you think Margaret retained his expectations? Is she trying to lose or punish herself with behavior that she recognizes to be "a sinful waste of youth"?
8. For Margaret, sucking her thumb is, "a retreat to an imagined past." How does she come to exorcise her guilt and accept the difficult reality of "Frank with his wild mind. Dad with his shiny new family. Mom with her soft new lovers . . . Me with the sweet pain of home"?
9. When Margaret panics about wearing her "Cherry Girl" room shoes outdoors, is that a sign that she is "turning Japanese"? America Used Freak is a "returnee" who's "Japanese-ness was less than others." What does it mean to be foreign, or does it depend entirely on the context?
10. "I used to think if I traveled around enough I'd eventually find the place where all the people are like me," Ines says. How is travel and finding "the uncanny joy of the alien" a metaphor for self-discovery?