Espen Brante

The Greatest Multiverse Novel You Haven’t Read (yet)

I feel like within the past two or three years, the mention of “the multiverse” has had the tendency to make others groan in exhaustion. Look at any random superhero movie; nowadays, with the studio desire to keep everything in the same storyline, they’ve used this idea of “the multiverse” as an easy out to keep their storyline in check. *Everything Everywhere All at Once* was a refreshing new take on the idea of other life possibilities without the baggage of needing to watch 40 movies to understand what’s happening. Still, the general tone and subject matter of the movie was very overwhelming, and the initial mention of this multiverse film aligned with the release of the Doctor Strange movie that same year, adding to multiverse fatigue. This seems to be an issue with “the multiverse.” It must be chaotic. It must contain madness. It must have everything meet and all the possibilities fight each other. But, may I interest you in something lighter? Something that takes all those ideas of the multiverse and makes them more average in scale. I am, of course, referring to *The Tatami Galaxy* by Tomihiko Morimi.

Published in Japan in 2008, *The Tatami Galaxy* has become much more accessible with its English translation being published for the first time in 2023. The novel takes place during the junior year of a college student living in Kyoto. He begins questioning if he’s used the last two years to his full advantage, regretful that he hasn’t devoted himself to his studies, interact with the opposite sex, and “temper [his] flesh.” The novel is told in four sections. In each section we see his adventure to correct the trajectory his life has been on, but each time there’s one little difference: the club he decides to join in each particular world. In each one he finds a companion in the mischievous Ozu, a friend he seems to have made in every world despite what decision he’s made. The other characters that decorate the world show up in all four parts of the book. Each time we learn a new side we haven’t seen before and problems they face off the page in other parts of the book. It’s a fantastic adventure through the fun that happens in the mundanity of college. It seeks to show us that maybe things could be different, but there’s a good chance that other possibilities could turn out more similar than one would expect, and that even if you think you’ve wasted time— the best may still be on its way.

Just to be clear, this is not a story where our narrator meets the versions of himself from four other universes and they all help him get the girl he’s in love with. It’s far simpler than that. It’s more *Groundhog Day* than it is *Spider-Verse*, where we encounter this unnamed man in slightly different life patterns. It’s humorous, heartfelt, and comfortable, more mystical than sci-fi, and one of the most fun experiences I’ve had while reading a book. I don’t think I’ll soon forget my time with *The Tatami Galaxy*.