

**BOOK
CLUB
NOTES**

**CLARISSA
GOENAWAN**

SCRIBE



**THE PERFECT WORLD
OF MIWAKO
SUMIDA**

Dear Book Clubbers,

I'm often fascinated with the idea that we may think we know a person really well, but actually, we don't. How far would you go to uncover the truth? And what if the reality is more painful than the lies?

Those questions eventually led me to write *The Perfect World of Miwako Sumida*. It's a story of how a young woman's unexplained suicide shapes and transforms the lives of those she left behind.

I usually describe the book as a literary mystery with elements of magical realism set in Japan, and a coming-of-age story masquerading as a murder mystery. *The Perfect World of Miwako Sumida* deals with many difficult—yet important—topics, and I can't think of a better way to talk about them than within the safety and comfort of a book club.

The Perfect World of Miwako Sumida is my second novel. The book has been five years in the making and I couldn't be more proud. Just like my debut novel, *Rainbirds*, this book features a collection of my favorite things. You'll find a second-hand bookstore with no signage, beloved classic books, a whimsical cat that resembles *maneki-neko*, delicious Japanese comfort food, convenience stores, melancholic rainy days, and amidst them, small, everyday moments that dazzle me. In a way, I'm turning them into words with the hope of capturing these precious memories forever.

Thank you for picking up *The Perfect World of Miwako Sumida*. I hope you'll enjoy reading it, and that the book will spark a lot of conversation and discussion.

Warm regards,

Clarissa Goenawan

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The book is told from three points of views. Why do you think the author chose to do this? How different would the book be if it were written from only one point of view?
2. Whose point of view felt the strongest to you? Why?
3. What do you think of Miwako and her decision? How do you feel about her at the beginning of the book versus the end of the book?
4. The book is also regarded as having elements of magical realism. How do you think it compares with other works of magical realism?
5. What did you think of the twist at the ending of the story? Do you feel it was justified? Did you manage to catch the clues that lead up to the twist, or were you taken aback by it?
6. The book deals with many heavy themes, such as sexual violence and suicide. In your opinion, how has the author handled these themes?
7. The book features a transgender character. How has the author conveyed her character throughout the book?
8. The book is set in the late 1980s in Japan and features a fictional small village in the mountains. Can you imagine the same story being told in a different setting? How would the story be different?
9. After putting down the book for the first time, what emotion did you feel most strongly? What lingering feelings or questions do you have in regards to the character or the story after the last page?
10. Are there any particular people to whom you'd like to recommend this book? Are there any particular impacts you hope it would have on them?

A CONVERSATION WITH CLARISSA GOENAWAN

Why did you start writing?

It was my childhood dream! I'd loved reading ever since I was a kid and dreamt that one day, I would publish my own book. But I only started to seriously pursue the profession after I quit my banking job at age twenty-four (probably not the most conventional thing to do, but I never regretted it.)

What are some of your favourite and most influential books?

I'm a huge fan of Japanese novels. Some of my favorites are Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen*, Keigo Higashino's *Malice*, Hiromi Kawakami's *Strange Weather in Tokyo*, Fuminori Nakamura's *The Thief*, Yoko Ogawa's *The Housekeeper and The Professor*, and Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman*.

Tell us about your relationship with Japan. Have you spent time living there?

I've only been to Japan for holidays, though it's been my dream to spend a year living there and experiencing the four seasons.

My interest in Japanese culture started when I was about six. As a Gen Y kid, I grew up when anime, manga, and other Japanese pop culture gained popularity. I spent my afternoon watching Naoko Takeuchi's *Sailor Moon* on the local TV station, borrowing Aoyama Gosho's *Detective Conan* comic series from friends, and listening to Utada Hikaru's *First Love*. Soon after, I got my first taste of Japanese contemporary literary fiction—Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*. I got hooked and began to look for similar reads.

I've also studied the Japanese language and culture—on and off—since high school. Over the years, I've dabbled in several traditional arts, including the tea ceremony, kimono dressing, and Japanese dance. I always admired how much thought is put into every single gesture.

You have created beautiful imagery including old books, rainy days, and delicious food. What are some of your other favourite things to enjoy in Japan?

There are so many things I love about Japan. Beautiful seasons, peaceful temples and shrines, amazing food, you-can-find-anything-here convenience stores, charming cafés, quaint gardens—the list never ends. That being said, one thing that left a deep impression is their toilet bowls.

Most of the western-style toilets in Japan used sophisticated washlets (bidet toilets), which feature a dazzling array of functions. At first glance, they might look like the usual Western-style toilet. But behold, these high-tech toilets feature a heated seat, blow dryer, adjustable water jet, automatic lid opening and closing, sensor-based flushing, and even music!

You describe your novel as ‘a literary mystery with elements of magical realism set in Japan, and a coming-of-age story masquerading as a murder mystery’. How did you seamlessly interweave so many different genres and styles?

When I started writing, I didn’t really give much thought to how my work would fit into the market. I simply had stories I wanted to tell. Over the years, I realised my writings have different elements from various genres and do not fit into one particular category. My agent once described my novels as having ‘a crossover appeal’, and I’m crossing my fingers that they will resonate with a wide audience.

The novel is told from three different perspectives but not from Miwako’s. Is this a nod to the idea that no one ever really knew her?

I never really thought of that, but now that you mentioned it, it might very well be true. Each of the three narrators has their perspective of Miwako; none were wrong, but none has the full picture either. A friend of mine once said we view the world through a tinted glass. Even the same thing might not look the same for everyone because each of us has our own bias.

Miwako’s secrets shape and transform her life, and the lives of those around her. Her story highlights friendship, young love, grief, trauma, and inner turmoil. What lessons can readers take from Miwako’s experiences?

I’ll take a rain check for this. I prefer to leave it to the readers to come up with their conclusions.

Miwako appears in your debut novel, *Rainbirds*. Will we see any of the characters in *The Perfect World of Miwako Sumida* in your future books?

Yes, definitely! I’m so glad that you asked. Do keep a lookout for the side characters, because they might be the main characters for the next book.

What do you hope your readers will take away from *The Perfect World of Miwako Sumida*?

As a writer, my wish is for the readers to enjoy the book. But if in some way, the book offers some kind of positive impact—be it courage or solace or newfound joy in reading or whatever it is—then that would be my greatest joy.

THE PERFECT TEMPURA OF CLARISSA GOENAWAN

I LOVE cooking Japanese food and Tempura is one of my favourites. It is a popular dish of deep-fried seafood or vegetables encased in light and crispy batter. The beauty of tempura is its versatility—use whatever ingredients are in season. Have a look at my [Mixed Vegetable Tempura](#) and [Shiso Tempura](#) for inspiration. It makes a wonderful snack for book clubs too!

INGREDIENTS

- Seafood and vegetables of your choice
 - Seafood: prawn, squid, octopus, fish
 - Vegetable: green bell pepper, eggplant, sweet potato, sweet pumpkin, carrot, Shiitake mushroom (my favourite!), shiso leaf (another favourite!), lotus root
- Tempura batter:
 - 1 cup of all-purpose flour, sifted
 - 1 cold egg (keep it in the fridge)
 - 1 cup of cold water
- vegetable oil for deep frying
- Tempura sauce for dipping

METHOD

1. Cut all the seafood and vegetables into your desired size.
2. Beat the egg. Add in cold water and flour. Mix using a pair of chopsticks.
3. Heat the oil. Dip the seafood and vegetable (step 1) into the batter (step 2) one by one, making sure they're fully coated. Put them into the oil for deep frying.
4. Once fully cooked, remove and place them on a tray lined with oil-absorbing paper to drain the excess oil.
5. Serve with tempura sauce.





TIPS

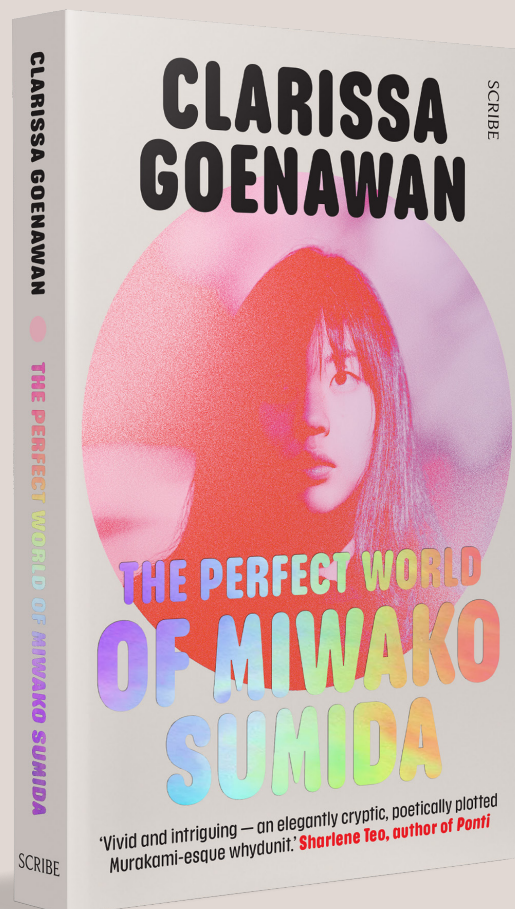
- The key to the crispiness is to keep the batter cold. If you live in a tropical climate like me, or if the weather is hot, it's a good idea to put the batter on top of a bowl of ice cubes.
- As tempting as it might be, don't try to fit as many ingredients as possible while deep-frying. Give them enough space to cook properly and evenly.

Clarissa Goenawan is an Indonesian-born Singaporean writer. Her debut novel *Rainbirds* won the 2015 Bath Novel Award and was shortlisted for three further prizes. Her short stories have won several awards and been published in various literary magazines and anthologies. *The Perfect World of Miwako Sumida* is her second novel.



Connect with Clarissa on social media.

-  @ClaireClaire05
-  @clarissagoenawan
-  @clarissagoenawan
-  clarissagoenawan.com



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