

The  
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# Reading Guide



## Heaven

Mieko Kawakami

Translated by Sam Bett and David Boyd

Picador

[thebookerprizes.com](https://www.thebookerprizes.com)

## What the judges said

'An intense, claustrophobic novel, *Heaven* uses its tale of middle school bullying to enact Nietzsche's critique of morality. The power of Sam Bett and David Boyd's translation lies in its ability to communicate both Mieko Kawakami's abstract, philosophical ideas and her harrowing human drama.'

## About the book

Told through the eyes of a fourteen-year-old boy subjected to relentless bullying, this is a haunting novel about the threat of violence that can stalk our teenage years.

Instead of putting up resistance, the boy suffers in complete resignation. His sole ally is a female classmate similarly outcast and similarly preyed upon by the bullies of the school. They meet in secret in the hopes of avoiding any further attention and take solace in each other's company, completely unaware that their relationship has not gone unnoticed by their tormentors...

*Heaven*, Mieko Kawakami's deceptively simple yet profound work, stands as a testament to her remarkable literary talent. Here she asks us to question the fate of the meek in a society that favours the strong, and the lengths to which even children will go in their learned cruelty.

## About the author

Mieko Kawakami was born in Osaka in 1976. She is the author of the internationally bestselling novel, *Breasts and Eggs*, a New York Times Notable Book of the Year and one of TIME's Best 10 Books of 2020. Kawakami made her literary debut as a poet in 2006, and published her first novella, *My Ego, My Teeth, and the World*, in 2007. Her writing is known for its poetic qualities and its insights into the female body, ethical questions, and the dilemmas of modern society. Her works have been translated into many languages and are available all over the world. She has received numerous prestigious literary awards in Japan for her work, including the Akutagawa Prize, the Tanizaki Prize, and the Murasaki Shikibu Prize. She lives in Tokyo.

## About the translators

Sam Bett is a writer and Japanese translator. Awarded Grand Prize in the 2016 JLPP International Translation Competition, he won the 2019/2020 Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission Prize for his translation of *Star* by Yukio Mishima (New Directions, 2019). Sam has translated fiction by Yoko Ogawa, NISIOISIN and Keigo Higashino as well as essays by

Banana Yoshimoto, Haruomi Hosono and Toshiyuki Horie. With David Boyd, he is co-translating the novels of Mieko Kawakami for Europa Editions. He lives in Portland, Maine.

David Boyd is Assistant Professor of Japanese at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. He has translated novels and stories by Hiroko Oyamada, Masatsugu Ono and Toh EnJoe, among others. His translation of Hideo Furukawa's *Slow Boat* (Pushkin Press, 2017) won the 2017/2018 Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission (JUSFC) Prize for the Translation of Japanese Literature. With Sam Bett, he is co-translating the novels of Mieko Kawakami.



## The author says...

'Having my work translated for the English-speaking world feels like going home, the same as always, and opening the door to find all these people there: someone who feels like an old friend even though we've never met, someone who means the

world to me but I can never see again, somebody crying, somebody laughing, people from far away — and I'm there, too. We don't talk about anything special, but we're all there, just sharing time.'



## The translators say...

'*Heaven's* unflinching focus on bullying prompted public conversation of this major problem in Japan that has had lasting positive effects.' (Sam Bett)



'The cover image for the Picador edition was Mieko's idea. In other words, what you see here is the author's own vision of the novel's main characters. That's not something you see often in published fiction.' (David Boyd)

## Further reading

Mieko Kawakami *Breasts and Eggs*  
Mieko Kawakami *All the Lovers in the Night*  
Ichiyo Higuchi *Growing Up*  
J.D. Salinger *Fanny and Zoey*  
Peter Hedges *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*  
Haruki Murakami *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*

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