



# The Changeling

By Kenzaburo Oe

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Oe introduces Kogito Choko, a writer in his early sixties, as he rekindles a childhood friendship with his estranged brother-in-law, the renowned filmmaker Goro Hanawa. Goro sends Kogito a trunk of tapes he has recorded of reflections about their friendship, but as Kogito is listening one night, he hears something odd. "I'm going to head over to the Other Side now," Goro says, and then Kogito hears a loud thud. After a moment of silence, Goro's voice continues: "But don't worry, I'm not going to stop communicating with you." Moments later, Kogito's wife rushes in; Goro has jumped to his death. With that, Kogito begins a far-ranging search to understand what drove his brother-in-law to suicide. His quest takes him from the forests of southern Japan to the washed-out streets of Berlin, where Kogito confronts the ghosts from his own past and that of his lifelong, but departed, friend.

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## Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. In 1997, Juzo Itami, one of Japan's most successful film directors, jumped to his death in Tokyo. Nobel laureate Oe (*Hiroshima Notes*) was Itami's brother-in-law, and he transposes Itami's suicide, under a fictional disguise, into a dazzling and elaborate maze of memories and meditations centering on the suicide of film director Goro Hanawa. Goro has made a series of tapes for Kogito, his world-famous writer brother-in-law, as groundwork for a possible film, which Kogito listens to obsessively after Goro's suicide. To rid himself of Goro's ghost, Kogito travels to Berlin, but even there he runs into pieces of Goro's past. Eventually, the reader is led back to the two men's youthful involvement with a right-wing paramilitary group founded by Kogito's late father. What begins as a weekend spent at the group's camp turns into something sinister from which Goro emerges fundamentally changed. Oe's deft mix of high intellectual reflection and absurd slapstick scenarios is polished to a high gloss, giving this book a tone that may remind American readers of Saul Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift*. (Mar.)

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From [Booklist](#)

\*Starred Review\* Japan's greatest living novelist has brought the autobiographical novel and the roman à clef to the highest artistic distinction by merging them. His and his family and friends' thoughts and doings are nearly always the stuff of his novels. This book opens with Kogito, a distinguished novelist, listening to audiocassettes just sent him by his oldest friend, Goro, a filmmaker. After his pal says he's going to head over to the Other Side now, there is a loud thud on the tape. Goro's voice returns, saying he won't stop communicating with Kogito. Then Kogito's wife interrupts to tell him that Goro has committed suicide by jumping off a roof. (Oe and Juzo Itami, whose *Tampopo* was an international hit, were longtime friends, and the latter's 1997 death was identical to Goro's.) Communication does continue, first as Kogito vocally responds to the tapes, then in memory while the novelist undertakes a guest lectureship in Berlin, where he meets Goro's chaste, last young lover. The ghostly colloquy gradually focuses on an incident the friends shared as late teenagers in the sticks where Kogito grew up. As in previous novels and with comparable mastery, Oe deeply ponders love, sex, art, friendship, family, and death in a rich, psychologically acute rhapsody of narration anchored in personal calamities. This one ends with a willfully upbeat line by Oe's fellow Nobelian, Wole Soyinka. --Ray Olson

About the Author

Kenzaburo Oe is also the author of *A Personal Matter*, *Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness*, and *A Quiet Life*, among others. He has been awarded many honors, including the Prix Europalia and the Nobel Prize for Literature.

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