

Generator

Rinny Gremaud

Novel

French



When the narrator turns detective, it isn't just her unworthy father who comes under her scrutiny—and her scalpel—but an entire generation. Rinny Gremaud combines lucid analysis with biting irony to describe the trajectory of a 'generator genitor' who has built nuclear power plants all over the world.

"I was born forty years ago in a nuclear power plant in southern South Korea, the daughter of a resilient mother and a man of whom I know next to nothing.

I was born in the Kori 1 reactor to a proud, determined mother and a guy who may well have been a bastard.

I grew up on close terms with hypotheses; I metabolised shadows. Fifty per cent unknown, every strand of my DNA is threaded with questions to which I have never sought an answer. Deep in my makeup there is silence."

Title

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Rinny Gremaud was born in 1977 in Busan, South Korea and works as a journalist. She is editor-in-chief of T (Le Temps) magazine and lives in Lausanne. Her first book, *Un monde en toc* [A fake world], was published in 2018 by Seuil as part of the fiction & co. collection. It recounts a world tour with five stop-overs, each chosen on account of their massive commercial centres.

In spring 2023, her first novel entitled *Generator* was published by Sabine Wespieser éditeur.

Photo: Sophie Bassouls

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Excerpt translated by Imogen Taylor

I was born in 1977, in a nuclear power plant in southern South Korea.

I didn't ever think about it like that, though—not until that day in the summer of 2017, when I saw an announcement that President Moon Jae-in was planning to phase out nuclear power, starting by pulling the plug on South Korea's oldest reactor, Kori 1. My reactor.

It was, apparently, the end of an era. South Korea, which had entered the nuclear age—and its own modernity—forty years before, would now invest exclusively in renewable energy. End of story, curtains, new chapter.

Back in 2017, South Korea was neither the first nor the only country to rethink its relationship with nuclear energy. The 2011 meltdown in Fukushima had caused a groundswell in more ways than one. Besides, forty years is the average life expectancy of a nuclear power plant—the time, that is, that its owners give themselves to recoup the costs—and the bulk of the world's nuclear fleet had been constructed between the seventh and the ninth decade of the twentieth century. If they're well-maintained and regularly overhauled, atomic power stations have the potential to outlive this arbitrary expiry date—but that's presuming that the right investments were made at the right time. Since the 1980s, nuclear power had teetered between peril and promise, a plaything of the political cycles inherent in most industrialised democracies. At the time South Korea issued its statement, most nuclearized countries were faced with the decision of what to do with their pharaonic plants as they hurtled en masse towards their official best-before date. With the big 4-0 looming, the nuclear industry was going through a bit of a crisis.

There was, I said to myself back then, so much to think about concerning this dying era that was the first nuclear age. The loss of industrial optimism, the belief in progress that had once been the driving force of our societies, the power of the energy that governs our lives and wealth. So much to say, too—about the myth of the atom, the nuclear utopia and its turbine cathedrals, the promises of so and so many megawatts of heat and

light, and the people who thought they were doing the right thing in making humanity hostage to such comforts. Plenty to say, too, about the anti-nuclear religion, that new public and media consensus that went hand in hand with the now generalised and institutionalised suspicion of all areas of power: science, industry, politics. The world had changed so much between 1977 and 2017.

The more I thought about it, the more I realised that the shutdown of the Kori 1 reactor was deeply personal to me. In the secret depths of my consciousness, the South Korean announcement had stirred up a thick layer of mud, a sediment so old I had thought it long since petrified. The news of that dying power plant began to shift the lines in the grey areas of my history, just as the aftershock of a distant earthquake can imperceptibly shift the lid of a sarcophagus that's been sealed for centuries.

Having just turned forty myself, I was at a critical point in my own life, and the news, echoing in the hidden hollow in the bedrock of my identity, had peculiar resonance for me. Maybe it was time that I, too, declared the end of an era.

Forty years earlier Kori 1 was officially opened, but my mother—although one of thousands of workers of a dozen nationalities who had contributed to this industrial feat—was not at the launch party drinking toasts to the future. She was at home on the third floor of a small, hastily built tower block, on an estate comprising ten such blocks. Her flat was furnished in the Western style, meaning that it was both morally and intellectually progressive, and she was sitting in a rocking chair, cradling a few-week-old baby in her arms.

The calm of a baby can be infectious; perhaps the weight of my tiny sleeping body on her breast was enough to drown in oxytocin the worries she must have felt at that point in her life. Now that Kori was complete, her professional mission was coming to an end. Did she fear for her economic future? Not likely. South Korea was at the height of its Cold War development and heavily dependent on America; it needed women like her—fluent English speakers capable of acting as guides to the teams of Western engineers who passed through the country.

Her fears would have been of a different nature.

What would happen to her baby when the day came for the child's father to leave? What would happen to her, the single mother of a wide-eyed little girl whose father had no intention of acknowledging paternity? Now that Kori was complete, the baby's father, a British engineer, would leave South Korea for another continent and disappear from both their lives.

Perhaps, as she sat there rocking in the humidity of the approaching summer, she was more inclined to day-dream. What was the point of wallowing in sadness? When the future is uncertain, it's better to take comfort in illusions. Through the clouded glass of her dreams, she was not the disgraced mother of an illegitimate child but a proud example of love thwarted by convention.

I grew up without knowing why this man hadn't done more to protect us. He had loved my mother and held me in his arms; he was not unaware of our vulnerability.

Back then in South Korea, where a situation like ours was highly irregular, courage and tenacity were crucial to the next part of the story. Also important was a chance encounter with a man generous enough to open his heart not only to my mother but to me, another man's child.

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