



**Thanh, Yasuko. (2019). Mistakes to Run With. Toronto: Hamish Hamilton.**

Reviewed by: Madisen James, MacEwan University

"Mistakes to Run With," written by Yasuko Thanh, is a moving memoir that talks about Yasuko's raw experiences that happened during her life. The author experiences different traumas throughout her life, and these are usually not discussed openly because they are considered taboo in society. Still, this memoir makes them more mainstream and acceptable. Yasuko's life story shows how culture influences each person and how each person's experience influences who they become. This memoir takes the reader through different stages of Yasuko's life, showing her self-exploration, acceptance, resilience and perseverance. These are themes in the book that are illustrated through situations that greet Yasuko and how she is affected.

At the beginning of the book, we learn about Yasuko's background; her parents were immigrants to Canada. They lived in the low-income bracket, and they were a religious family. Her relationship with her dad was distant, and he taught her that many aspects of life including, "voicing unpleasant emotions, made you unloveable" (p. 15). Her relationship with her parents was never strong, which influenced her to leave home at a young age. She had no supports or role models to guide her. Through the years, she was sexually, verbally and physically abused. Although she knew this was wrong, she had no norms to compare to, and she accepted what

happened to her. Her social connections were not healthy and influenced her to work as a prostitute, thus connecting her to a transient lifestyle.

It can be challenging to find oneself in a world with many expectations, values, and beliefs. People can get lost in what they think society wants instead of being true to who they are. Throughout this memoir, Yasuko in-captions the theme of finding self-acceptance and the struggles of figuring out who she is through different expectations people have for her. Many people in her life created expectations for her, which she struggled to obtain because she did not know who she was. Her dad told her that “perfection was as expected, not praised” (p. 16). This set a president that anything less of what he thinks is perfect will not be acceptable. Perfection is defined individually depending on each person's views and values. Being perfect to someone else's standard is a lot of pressure Yasuko had to carry and high expectations to fulfill.

After Yasuko left home, she had different relationships throughout the memoir that created different expectations. When Yasuko was in grade seven, she thought she had to act a specific way as a female; she did stripteases for the boys (p. 73). Her striptease was the beginning of how she tried to meet society's expectations. When she met Yvonne, a friend who introduced her to becoming a prostitute, she acted like Yvonne's daughter. “My need for love made me exploitable; I wore my weakness like an open wound. She took me under her wing. I'd watch her put on lipstick in the afternoons, chin in my hands, gazing with the love of a child who hopes to one day be as beautiful as her mother” (p. 126). Yasuko saw Yvonne as a mother figure and her as a daughter,

setting the dynamic between them. Additionally, when she was with her John Does while prostituting, she would be whatever they would want. "Each man was different wanting to play games" (p. 159). Acting differently for different people could blur the lines of figuring out who Yasuko was while always being someone else.

Another expectation Yasuko always lived up to was by her romantic partners and her pimps. The expectation was to please them in any way she could. Yasuko would try her best and change who she was for them, trying to be whatever they needed. Yasuko showed this through her relationship with her pimp Jay. "I'd try to change: I'd run him baths, light his cigarettes, pick up food for him at four a.m. when he woke me from a sound sleep to say he was hungry...I could do better. Become more pliable. More obedient. More down" (p. 190). Throughout the book, there were many men she was with that she changed for, trying to reach their expectations of who they thought she was or should be. The expectations in her life affected her self-esteem, making her feel not good enough. "Nobody cared enough about me to wonder why I cried myself to sleep at night. Why I tried to make myself sick by ingesting mould I'd cultivated on a three-month-old bread crust. No one asked if I was happy. Or if I was sad. I could do brilliant things or horrible things. No one noticed either way. . . . tried to make myself loveable" (p. 32). This memoir exemplifies how society affects each individual and what norms influence each person to who they are.

Perseverance is a strong theme conveyed in this memoir and was shown through her continuous actions to move forward with her life. Yasuko's parents did not pay much attention to

her and did not put effort into improving their relationship. Yasuko read her Child Service's file once she was twenty, and it said, "Suko's parents are unwilling to have her home" (p. 78). In some circumstances, abuse or neglect can become a cycle, and although individuals may not want to pass on their trauma, it can happen unintentionally. Yasuko persevered through this and changed her parenting techniques from her own parents, and she never passed on the trauma she experienced. "I wanted my children to know—it was imperative they know—that they didn't have to be anything but themselves for me to love them" (p. 459-460). Yasuko had many struggles in her life, but she grew as a person and exemplified this when she became a mother and how she showed her love for her children.

Another notable theme was the resilience that Yasuko had throughout her journey. Resilient people are known for adapting to adversity that greets them, and Yasuko shows this time and time again throughout the memoir. Yasuko was outcasted by many people in her life, being treated poorly and taken advantage of. Through Yasuko's transient lifestyle, having the necessities of life was always uncertain, but she found a way to supply them for herself even though she was still a child trying to find herself. Yasuko left Pat's house after he sexually assaulted her and had nowhere to go; she stayed at bandstands, bus stops, and stairwells for weeks (p. 110). This encounter was one instance of a sexual assault against her, and her resilience helped her survive.

In the first few pages of the memoir, Yasuko Thanh wrote, "For my children" (p. 7). It seems that the author wrote this memoir to show her children what she went through but also to teach them. Each person's life leads them down different paths, and Yasuko shared hers with her

children's intention to learn from her experiences and show her children the fluidity of the norms she created through this memoir. "Mistakes to Run With" was well written with solid themes throughout it; it made the reader look at the world through a different lens, through Yasuko's life lens.

This memoir would be a worthwhile read to the Social Work and Sociology Disciplines. Part of the social work profession is working with different communities and individuals that face various hardships. This academic audience would benefit from reading this book because Yasuko goes through trauma and life experiences that social workers may get involved in through their career. The theoretical part of social work looks at working with children, families, transiency and much more; these are all involved within the memoir, which social workers could brainstorm and see what their involvement could be. In general, sociology looks at human behaviour through different disciplines. This memoir involves different actions and results due to Yasuko and the behaviours of the people around her. It would be interesting to examine this novel through sociological and social work lenses and see the difference and similarities.

The raw and openness of this book made her experiences real and relatable. Yasuko made herself very vulnerable throughout the chapters by talking about aspects in her life that are usually not. Yasuko creates a message through her memoir of breaking down societal norms of what people experience. "Mistakes to Run With" is compelling in how the themes of expectations, acceptance of oneself, and perseverance connect throughout the chapters. This book has a strong message throughout it and can create a conversation for individuals experiences and the influences around them.