

Translated work foresees current concerns

We've all been living through tough times. If you sometimes feel like society is at the end of its rope, take comfort in knowing you're not alone. Nonetheless, it was disconcerting to pick up a copy of a newly translated work by Masatsugu Ono, "At the Edge of the Woods," and realize that the author almost presciently captured this very recognizable zeitgeist of alienation and paranoia more than 15 years ago.

This slim novel of four chapters, a couple of which had been published previously as stand-alone pieces, was translated by Juliet Winters Carpenter, a professor emerita of Doshisha University in Kyoto, Japan, who now lives on Whidbey Island, Washington.

These stories are centered on a couple and their young son, who recently have moved to a foreign country and live in a house at the edge of the woods.

The experiences of this family are told from the man's point of view. His wife has become pregnant and, having suffered a miscarriage before, she travels back to her original homeland so that her parents can look after her for the duration of the pregnancy.

In her absence, the father and little boy make do. Their remote location and foreigner status mean that their interactions with others are limited. They keep the television on to fill the house with chatter.

Only the mailman stops by regularly, but he is a sinister character who only ever seems to deliver unsavory news. Missing his wife, our narrator often conjures up memories of the things they did when they were together. He can hear her voice and the way she teases their son. Some-

times his dreams of her take a dark turn.

In his waking hours, he begins to hear noises coming from the woods — rustling leaves, a coughing sound and the intimation of laughter. It doesn't help when the mailman suggests that there may be malign imps afoot.

The father warns his son not to venture into the thicket of trees alone, but the child doesn't always listen, and one day he emerges from the woods, hand in hand with a scarcely clothed crone.

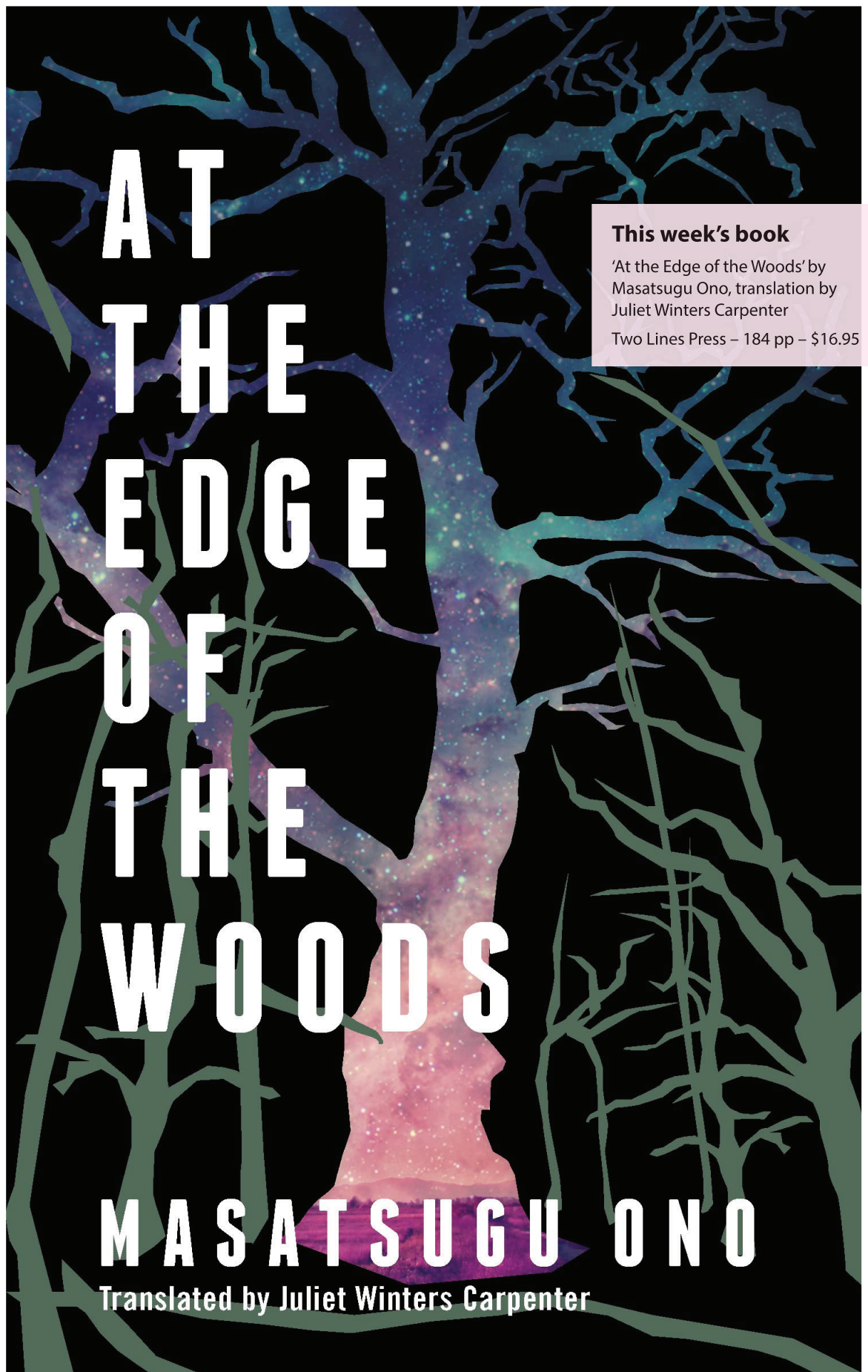
Sometimes the boy cries for no apparent reason. The perplexed father reasons that "perhaps he had already figured out that the day was coming when he would not have tears enough for the multitude of sorrows and pains that lay ahead..."

And indeed on television there does seem to be an unsettling surge of floods and fires, and an endless parade of refugees. "At the Edge of the Woods" is a psychological tale, the plodding rhythm of mundane tasks frequently interrupted by a swirl of superstition and nightmare.

The increasingly unreliable narration cedes to discrepancies, uncertainty and chaos, and the bewildered reader will totally feel the father's consternation when he says, "I felt as if I were living in a peculiar abyss of time and place."

This work, masterfully executed, is both intriguing and unsettling, an interesting choice for translation.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at barbaralmcm@gmail.com.



This week's book

'At the Edge of the Woods' by Masatsugu Ono, translation by Juliet Winters Carpenter

Two Lines Press – 184 pp – \$16.95