

# The Moai Island Puzzle – Alice Arisugawa

Nick Kimber

Locked Room International 2016 pb and e-book. Translated by Ho-Ling Wong, introduction by Sōji Shimada.

Alice Arisugawa is the pen name of Masahide Uehara. It is also the name of the narrator of this book who, like his creator, is male.

Maria Arima, a second year student at Eito University is planning to spend a week at Panorama Villa, the home of her uncle Ryūichi Arima at his home on Kashikijima, an island 3 hours boat ride from the mainland. With her she is bringing Alice and Jirō Egami, a fourth year student who, because of his seniority, they both politely address as Mr Egami. All three are members of the Eito University Mystery Club and Maria has invited the other two to the island for the express purpose of solving a puzzle; they're going to hunt for treasure.

Maria's late grandfather, Tetsunosuke, buried a fortune in diamonds, the property of his late wife, somewhere on the island. Tetsunosuke was a puzzle fiend and he devised what he called 'an evolving puzzle' that would lead to the treasure. All anyone knows is that it is something to do with the 25 moai statues (like the ones on Easter Island, but smaller) dotted around Kashikijima. Three years previously Maria's cousin Hideto announced that he'd solved the riddle, but he drowned before he could share his findings.

There are several guests at Panorama Villa, mostly family members and an old friend of Ryūichi, Dr Sonobe. The only other building on the island is Happy Fish Villa, home of the artist Itaru Hirakawa. After the boat leaves them there it won't return for five days.

This book is well titled for the whole set up is much like a formal puzzle: Kashikijima is in the shape of a horseshoe, the two villas are at the opposite extremities, Panorama Villa has three bicycles; Happy Fish Villa has one. From one to the other it takes 30 minutes to cycle, 90 minutes to walk, or 15 minutes to row. The boat can carry a maximum of two people at any one time.

On the second day on the island a storm hits and everyone spends the night at Panorama Villa getting drunk to a greater or lesser degree. During this time two of the party are murdered in a locked room, shot to death with a rifle, and a radio transceiver, the only means of communication with the outside world, has been smashed. There are more murders to follow, one of which involves a dying message.

As Shimada notes in his introduction the detective here, Jirō Egami, is not a showy creation full of dramatic flourishes, simply someone who puts the pieces together to come to a solution. And this he does in a style that should delight the heart and mind of any Ellery Queen fan. No one has a real alibi for any of the crimes, so anyone could have done it. The only clue is a single piece of paper from which Egami is able to work out the location where the diamonds were hidden and also, in a splendid piece of extended reasoning, who the murderer is. Identifying the murderer doesn't rely on what's on the paper, but what's *on* the paper.

Maria, Alice and Egami make an engaging trio of detectives, each contributing ideas; Maria even delivers a short Dying Message Lecture. Egami takes the trouble to criticize locked room mysteries, stating that there have been too many, "some with fantastic solutions, some with bad solutions". He says "What got us excited in the first place is the locked room itself, not some simple magic tricks. They [the authors] should stop treating a loved one like some simple dress-up doll. I want to come across a simple, honest locked room again." And the locked room here is exactly that, simple and honest.

Arisugawa gently reminds his readers that this is all a story with such remarks as (referring to the murderer) "Having finished the job, they could have returned wearing an innocent expression – just as in the novels." And "It was a simple model where a bar

dropped into a receiving catch, just like the ones you often read about in old mystery novels.” There are numerous references to detective novels and authors throughout, as you might expect from members of a mystery club, but other characters also refer to them; Itaru believes that Philo Vance had the ideal life style. Dr Sonobe on the other hand regards the reading of crime stories as “exotic” and says “The act of reading books is itself an utterly unproductive one, of course. Particularly if you’re only reading mystery novels, well, that’s just plain debauchery and dissipation.” (Not in my experience, but I remain optimistic).

This is the first of Alice Arisugawa’s many crime stories to be published in English; I hope it won’t be the last.