



**SURVIVING SAMSARA: A MEMOIR OF BREAKDOWNS, BREAKTHROUGHS, AND MENTAL ILLNESS**

by Kagan Goh

Caitlin Press, 2021; 158 pages; \$22.95

**Reviewed by Jodi Lundgren**

In his memoir *Surviving Samsara*, documentary filmmaker and mental health advocate Kagan Goh offers an absorbing, well-crafted account of his thirty-year journey with bipolar condition. True to the book's focus on mental wellness, its structure — a chronological series of relatively brief, sharply realized narrative segments — allows readers to either immerse themselves or pause for breaks as needed. Without shying away from the trauma associated with mental illness, Goh both honours psychosis as a valuable state of being and emphasizes the healing powers of love, self-care, and community.

Using present tense and vivid images to build immediacy, Goh demonstrates that delusion and accurate intuition are, at times, barely distinguishable. For instance, when Kagan witnesses a fellow psychiatric patient "flailing in a manic panic, fists raining down upon her head," he sees both a "purple-green-black nebula veiling her head like a storm cloud" and "every black eye, purple swollen bruise, and bloodied, stitched-up cut she's ever had on her weather-beaten face." A vision this insightful suggests that altered states can be revelatory — perhaps even in a metaphysical sense. Realities compete and overlap once again when Kagan views an elderly woman as alternately "the Dark Angel of Death" spreading her arms "like a winged pterodactyl" and "a tiny senior in a too-big coat." In fact, the perceived fatal threat that this woman poses to Kagan's father hints at a central theme of the memoir: the painful necessity of individuating from a parent.

Of his loving father, Goh writes, "All my life the precious star of my father has dominated my night skies." The mutually supportive relationship between the two men is most poignantly illustrated in the section titled "Inukshuk," in which Kagan, recently released from the psychiatric ward, returns to the same hospital as a companion while his father receives electroconvulsive therapy for major depression:

Afterwards, Dad and I walk in silence down Davie Street toward English Bay. His body is weak and our minds are tired. The bay holds the mist tight. We approach the *Inukshuk* monument: granite slabs of rock arranged to form a mighty statue of a man, a beacon of hope to those who are lost on the vast, featureless tundra. It towers over us, arms reaching out to embrace the sea like a vast father.

The sky breaks and the wind and rain pelt the *Inukshuk*, my father, and me.

I wonder, *How much pain can a person endure?* "Dad," I say, "you are not alone."

These lyrically expressed, yet realistic, feelings of empathy and connectedness later intensify into a psychic drama involving not only Kagan and his father but also "the great Buddhist patriarchs of time immemorial." As Kagan stands

"up on tiptoes, arms outstretched like a human satellite dish channelling sacred messages from God," the sheer effort involved in what he intends as selfless service is palpable. After this cathartic episode, underlying dynamics in Kagan's life, including his dependency on his parents, begin to resolve. As Goh states in an author's note, "I came of age through mental illness [...] not despite" it. Having witnessed his experiences, many readers will stand with Kagan as he defies a psychiatrist, stating, "I refuse to have my spiritual beliefs desecrated, my illuminations belittled as hallucinations."

Despite some well-justified diatribes against the mental health system, *Surviving Samsara* does not reject psychiatry altogether; towards the end of the book, doctor's appointments and medication take their place as components of a much wider set of wellness strategies. Throughout ecstatic and lugubrious periods, Kagan's open-hearted resilience is constant. Ultimately, he achieves and shares with readers a state of grounded jubilation.



**OUR TIME IS NOW: SEX, RACE, CLASS, AND CARING FOR PEOPLE AND PLANET**

by Selma James

Introduction by Margaret Prescod

Editor: Nina López

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**Reviewed by Natasha Sanders-Kay**

Over three quarters of the world's unpaid care work is done by women and girls — a total of 12.5 billion hours a day. While the covid-19 pandemic has brought new awareness to the necessity and skill of care work, and to how much of this labour falls on women (especially women who are racialized, immigrant, and/or of the Global South), the work remains unwaged: so writes