

The background of the cover is a vibrant green, overlaid with several large, expressive black brushstrokes that resemble traditional Japanese ink wash painting. These strokes are scattered across the left and bottom portions of the cover, adding a sense of movement and artistic depth. The text is contained within a dark green rectangular box in the upper right quadrant.

CONTEMPORARY
JAPANESE
LITERATURE

AN ANTHOLOGY
OF FICTION, FILM, AND
OTHER WRITING
SINCE **1945**

Edited and with a New Preface by **HOWARD HIBBETT**

CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE LITERATURE

An Anthology of Fiction, Film, and Other Writing Since 1945

Edited and with a New Preface
by Howard Hibbett



CHENG & TSUI COMPANY
Boston

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The cover art shows the kanji *I*, which can be translated as: meaning, mind, thought, idea, intention, will, heart, emotion, or feeling.

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Preface to the Cheng & Tsui Edition

Revisiting Japanese literature collected from the end of World War II until the 1970s can have its nostalgic moments. Some of these writers provide a glimpse of the serene beauty, real or imagined, of traditional Japan. A few—Tanizaki, Kawabata, Mishima, Ōe—have been securely placed within the canon of modern classics. Most, however, reflect the grimly comic or quotidian realities of a time when long-stifled creative powers were released in stories, poems, plays, and film scripts that remain fresh, capable of giving pleasure to new readers.

Those three decades saw the exhilarating rise from *Embracing Defeat* to *Japan as Number One*, before the recession hinted that *The Sun Also Sets*. During the lean postwar years literature prospered, ranging from the bawdy new comedy of Nosaka Akiyuki to the elegiac fiction of Kawabata Yasunari. Tanizaki Junichirō, another “old master” returning to dominate the literary world, pursued his vision of fatal attractions with undiminished vigor. Ozu and Kurosawa, twin stars of a golden age of film, did some of their finest work, while Mishima Yukio and Abe Kōbō not only wrote dazzling novels but devoted much of their energy to the theater. Others have remained active in the forefront of literary invention. The bold experiments of Kurahashi Yumiko and vivid fantasies of Kōno Taeko and Kanai Mieko are still unfolding despite the commercial demands of Japan today.

Now, even after the economic roller coaster ride of the 1980s and 1990s, readers in Japan spend more per person on books than those in any other country. Of course, graphic novels and manga of every sort are a major form of publication, but movies, manga, TV, and video games have not drawn 18- to 24-year-olds away from reading as far as they have in America. New fashions, influenced by American popular culture, are on conspicuous display. A cool new brand of storytelling draws on the experience of ever-younger writers and their youthful fans. Yet the writer as celebrity often aspires to serious—which may well be comic—literature.

Shimada Masahiko, for example, has not been widely translated, but his post-modern playfulness includes both a delirious sci-fi vision of Tokyo and a witty, salacious parody (set in New York City) of the great Meiji era novelist Natsume Sōseki. Already, the spectacularly popular Yoshimoto Banana and Murakami Haruki have found an international audience. Murakami in particular has had scenes from his oddly refracted world become a new “*New Yorker* story,” very much at home abroad, along with his more ambitious novels. He began his career as a translator of Raymond Carver and other American writers, and has gone on translating them as well as writing brilliant fiction that would be inconceivable without this source of stimulation.

Perhaps the most striking phenomenon in modern Japanese literature has been the emergence of many more women writers. Yoshimoto Banana was 23 when her novel *Kitchen* became a best seller, and she writes about young women whose subtly told lives are not without the sexual and psychological traumas explored in American and European literature. Even younger women regularly win the important Akutagawa Prize, while delving into such lurid themes as murder and sadomasochism. They are also at home in the wider world, often through travel and residence abroad in addition to the books and films of other cultures.

Meanwhile Ōe Kenzaburō, Japan’s second Nobel laureate, continues to create richly complex fiction and to criticize “Japan the Ambiguous” (in contrast to Kawabata’s “Japan the Beautiful”), long after Tanizaki, who had been expected to win Japan’s first Nobel prize for literature, published his daring late novels. These writers are known around the world—there are more translations of Tanizaki in Italian than in English—but much else has yet to be discovered. What is lost in translation is a minuscule part of what is lost without it.

Howard Hibbett
December 30, 2004

INTRODUCTION

Japanese literature flourishes today in many forms. Far from withering in the electronic glare of a postliterate society, it has grown vigorously both as part of a luxuriant popular culture and as a protean art which deserves to be better known throughout the world. Some of the novels of Tanizaki and Mishima have been widely translated; the rich poetry and drama of Japan is at least familiar abroad through haiku, No, and Kabuki; the films of Kurosawa, if not Ozu, have won large international audiences. Yet the fact remains that only a very small fraction of the literary art of Japan is available outside of its formidably difficult language. It was not until 1968, the centennial year of the Meiji Restoration, that the Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to a Japanese author, Kawabata Yasunari. Among critics in Japan, the surge of national pride over this belated cultural recognition was somewhat restrained by the suspicion that Kawabata's few translated novels—subtle tales set against the background of the tea ceremony, a geisha-attended hot-spring resort, or Kyoto, the ancient capital—were admired abroad chiefly for the exotic surface attractions so colorfully illustrated in tourist brochures.

The not-unjustified Japanese fear of being misunderstood by foreigners, in spite of the intense scrutiny that began after World War II, leads naturally to the view that only cultural products exhibiting the beauties of the “old Japan” can be profitably exported: traditional arts of all kinds; historical films with sword-fighting in picturesque locations; among contemporary writings, the nostalgic lyricism of Kawabata and Tanizaki or the flamboyant imagery of Mishima Yukio, whose tragic, anachronistic suicide baffled foreigners and Japanese alike. To be sure, there are writers such as Nagai Tatsuo whose delicate stories, like the archetypal Ozu film *The Flavor of Green Tea Over Rice* (*Ochazuke no aji*), are considered “too Japanese”—too colorless and pure—for jaded foreign tastes. Then there are the younger novelists who are thought to be too international, perhaps indistinguishable from Camus, Sartre, Moravia, Mailer, Salinger, and the many other modern authors enshrined in their imposing Japanese collected editions.

The Japanese continue translating Western literature as energetically as if they had not long since caught up with what they missed in the dark years of the War. Occupation censorship was mild by comparison with that of their own military rulers, and the heady atmosphere of freedom of thought encouraged writers and publishers of all persuasions to make a fresh beginning in the burnt-out ruins of Tokyo, as they had after the great earthquake of 1923. Though entirely dependent on domestic consumption, the publishing industry has grown as rapidly as the expanding Japanese economy, giving an ironic ring to the old hyperbole of a literary success that "drove up the price of paper in the Capital." In 1975 almost 30,000 books were published, on a par with the number published in the United States; and the proportion that could be generously classified as "literature" was about twice as large. While Japanese industry as a whole was shrinking in that recession year, book publishing increased its earnings by 16 percent, to \$1.4-billion; the 2,700 magazines published by the same companies earned even more. The sheer volume of books and magazines would seem to require a nation of compulsive speed readers, indiscriminately devouring comic books and classics, immune to literary art. Actually, there is a huge, diversified audience crowding bookstores even in the age of television. Among the hundreds of periodicals devoted to literature of one kind or another, from popular weeklies to slender coterie journals, there are half a dozen first-rate literary magazines—each published monthly, in issues of about 300 closely packed pages of solid print. It is no wonder that editors are as hospitable to the short novel as they are to the short story, both forms in which Japanese writers have done much of their finest work. Serialized novels, too, are not only standard magazine fare but appear (morning and evening) in all the great daily newspapers, with their immense circulation.

The roster of best sellers reveals no very startling tastes: the major novelists—most recently Abe Kōbō—have appeared only infrequently; such spellbinding storytellers as Matsumoto Seichō and Shiba Ryōtarō (among the highest-paid individuals in Japan) are regularly represented by detective thrillers or daydreams of samurai conflict in simpler times; there are the usual practical how-to-do-it books (a 1971–72 best seller, issued by the enterprising firm Besuto Serāzu, Inc., was discreetly given an English title: *How to Sex*). More curiously, writers often find a mass market for essays, humorous or otherwise, published in volume after volume. The "nonfiction novel," whether fictionally garnished biography, memoir, or journalistic report, has a long history in Japan, and has become a favorite mode for exploring contemporary issues: the best-selling woman author Ariyoshi Sawako, after a novel on the problems of old age, has produced the daunting *Compound Pollution* (*Fukugō osen*, 1975), a minimally fictional work complete with statistical tables and charts. Inspirational writing, a field nearly monopolized by Ikeda Daisaku, the leader of the Sōka Gakkai movement, has been balanced in recent years by a doomsday trend vividly seen in *Japan Sinks!* (*Nippon chimbotsu*, 1973) and its obligatory film version.

Few Japanese novelists have disdained to turn out potboilers, since their reputations remain secure on the strength of their best work. Thus, at least half of Mishima's thirty-five novels were so obviously dashed off to earn money that one might have expected him to use another pseudonym, if not to deny their authorship altogether. Kawabata seems to have enjoyed writing novels that would appeal to the readers of conservative women's magazines. Gifted writers like Yoshiyuki Junnosuke and Nosaka Akiyuki often indulge in writing pornographic fiction for the more scandalous weeklies. Journalism, whether newspaper and magazine assignments or the innumerable symposia equally popular on television, occupies much of the time of all successful writers. Opinion-mongering on subjects ranging from the little decisions (Should hemlines be lower?) to the big ones (Shall we sign the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty?) is a lucrative sideline for all but the most seclusive purists, although social and political commentary tends to follow the standard homogeneous antiestablishment view of the proper Japanese intellectual. Within this prevailing harmony, however, there is a complex, ever-shifting dissonance of attitudes and emotions among the many small groups that together make up the *bundan*—the "literary world."

The compulsions of a lively commerce, and of the elaborate Japanese system of personal obligations, keep the *bundan* globe spinning too rapidly to allow a working author to step off into splendid isolation. Yet the expression of subjective feelings is such a dominant urge that Japanese critics have often complained that confessional writing refuses to give way to the long-desired panoramic social novel. The narrowly personal "I-novel" (*shi-shōsetsu*), developed from an imported Naturalism early in the twentieth century, is still the most tenacious form of contemporary Japanese fiction. Even such an imaginative writer as Abe Akira or Yasuoka Shōtarō seems reluctant to leave the spotlight, or to share it with anyone but members of the little stock company drawn from his immediate family.

The role of art as memory is conceived in highly personal terms, especially in attempts to master the appalling experiences of the War, the bad dream from which Japan awakened in August of 1945 to an unprecedented awareness of defeat and loss of its proudest values. The atomic devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki remains an obsessive theme for fiction. In general, the shadow of the War hangs over most of the stories, novels, and poetry of writers who were growing up during those traumatic years. The swift resurgence of proletarian literature, in theory optimistic, was somewhat checked by the "Red purge" of 1950, and then all but overwhelmed by the massive forces of an increasingly affluent society. Meanwhile, the American Occupation itself, once it could be treated critically in literature, provided chiefly a source of ironic amusement at its spectacle of cultural confusion. Hardships and humiliations were often seen in a humorous light. But the accompanying sense of emptiness and purposelessness seems to be a pervasive malaise even in the hardworking, prosperous Japan of today.

A few writers of the generations born after Tanizaki and Kawabata continue to cultivate the traditional beauties of Japanese literature, often nostalgically evoking the past. Others envision some of the nightmarish possibilities of the future—Abe Kōbō, for example, in his meticulously scientific allegories, or Ōe Kenzaburō, whose apocalyptic imagination seeks to cope with terrors yet to come. But they too, like Furui Yoshikichi and other significant contemporary writers, are concerned with the complex realities of present-day urban life: the way people actually live, and how they feel about it, about themselves and each other, within the vast, overcrowded, orderly but vulnerable megalopolis. The mythic element discernible in these works is part of the poetic truth of their vision. That truth, combining the deep insights and pleasures of art, belongs to the world as well as to the Japanese themselves and their ancient, now dangerously and exhilaratingly enriched island culture.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Japanese names are given in the normal Japanese order—that is, family name preceding the personal name.

In the introductory commentaries preceding each selection, references to Japanese works will be in the following form, whether the given work has appeared in English translation or not: English title, followed in parentheses by the Japanese title and the original date of publication. Thus: *Fiery Comb* (*Kushi no hi*, 1974). Where a published translation existed as of this book's first edition, the English publication date will be added, as in the following example: *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* (*Kinkakuji*, 1956, tr. 1958).

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CONTEMPORARY
JAPANESE
LITERATURE

■ ■ FURUI YOSHIKICHI

Furui Yoshikichi was born in Tokyo in 1937. He graduated from Tokyo University in 1960 with a degree in German literature and went on to advanced study, translating (Broch and Musil), and teaching. In 1970 he resigned from Rikkyo University to devote himself to the writing of fiction. The next year he won the Akutagawa Prize—the major Japanese literary award to identify gifted new writers—for his short novel *Yōko* about a psychotic young girl found huddled in a ravine, cringing with fear of the enormous weight of the surrounding boulders. Furui is recognized as the leading figure of the “introverted generation” of the 1970s, the most promising novelist to appear since Ōe Kenzaburō. Critics have compared the texture of his beautiful, fine-grained prose to the density of an oil painting, as in his recent long novel *Fiery Comb* (*Kushi no hi*, 1974), a complex, mythic tale of a modern Izanagi / Orpheus in Hades. Like many Japanese writers, however, Furui is at his best in medium-length fiction. His short novels admirably fulfil Cyril Connolly’s criterion of excellence in the genre: “an imaginary experience which enriches our understanding of existence and which involves two or three people, not a whole society,” but which is heightened by means of “pressure and elimination—in fact intensity.”

Such a work, one so constructed that “the reader who begins the book on the surface is led inward by a subterranean passage,” is *Wedlock*. The Japanese title *Tsumagomi* is an archaic word—“wife-keeping,” “secluding oneself with a wife”—found in a poem said to be the very first of the classic thirty-one-syllable *waka*:

<i>Yakumo tatsu</i>	Where eight clouds rise
<i>Izumo yaegaki</i>	In Izumo an eightfold fence—
<i>Tsumagomi ni</i>	To keep a wife
<i>Yaegaki tsukuru</i>	I’ll build an eightfold fence.
<i>Sono yaegaki wo</i>	Ah, that eightfold fence!

This understandably primitive verse is attributed to the Storm God Susanoo, who, according to the *Kojiki*, the most ancient Japanese chronicle, was about to

retire into seclusion with his bride after having slain an eight-headed dragon. Heroism on this order is hardly to be sought in the proliferating wooden- and concrete-box apartments that dot the fringes of Tokyo like so many ant colonies. Still, Furui's setting for the intimate confrontation of modern married life reveals elements of the past as well: the vanishing remnants of field and forest and traditional rural life, the rather savage crudity of the workers next door, the sexual rites presided over by the old woman who goes about her hobby of matchmaking with the air of a shamanistic sorceress. But even nature seems powerless to relieve the anxieties of present-day life, least of all in the apparently secure cocoons within which male and female share their fragile existence. Everyday routine has its own mysteries, whether the compulsive behavior of the insectlike commuter, the incantatory murmur of innumerable television sets, or the faint stirring of other lives beyond all-too-thin walls.

❖ Wedlock

(*Tsumagomi*, 1970)

Picking her way through dense summer undergrowth, a woman came out of the grove of trees behind the small apartment house. A dozen or so oaks had been left standing there on a vacant lot of about two hundred square yards. In autumn after the leaves were down, you could see through to a narrow unpaved street a stone's throw away where shoddy little two-storied houses huddled together, each as cramped and boxlike as its neighbor but straining to display a dignified privacy. The vacant lot seemed hemmed in, awaiting its doom, as if any day now it would be filled up by more of these jerry-built houses. But in the heat of summer, beleaguered nature once again asserted itself: the undergrowth thickened with a rank vigor, an almost obscene luxuriance, soon screening off completely the view of that new development so near at hand. From the apartments it looked like a grove with a decent depth.

The pale figure of the woman had emerged from these pathless summer thickets. Perhaps because the tall grass caught the skirt of her kimono, she paused and glanced down: as she twisted slightly to look at the back hem there was a glimpse of delicate flesh at the nape of her neck. She bent forward a little, gathering the skirt up with one hand and parting the grass with the other, and came out. Now he could see that she was an old woman—not wizened and decrepit, but plump, fair-skinned, extremely healthy-looking. Nevertheless her faltering steps indicated her age.

Hisao was standing beside his apartment building near the communal pump in an open space where a swirl of dust glittered in the noon sunlight. He had been

peering deep into the grove with eyes dimmed and swollen by a week's illness. His first shock at seeing the woman in kimono appear out of the summer undergrowth was not so much from mistaking her age as from sheer giddiness—the feeling of a man who has just left his sickbed and is standing alone under the burning sun harboring a kind of fantasy, an illusion partly his own creation. Frowning, he watched the old woman as if something precious had been spoiled, possibly by himself. She was walking toward him with intoed steps; a certain womanliness still detectable around her hips stirred a faintly unpleasant feeling in him.

When she saw Hisao looking at her she halted, somewhat alarmed. Suddenly stooping, now seemingly bowed with age, she smiled a fawning, coquettish smile at him as he stood there blocking her way. He moved a step to the right to let her pass. He was still frowning. Then she gazed up into his face intently and came straight toward him as if to envelop an obstinate young man with her benevolence. Still facing him, this time very close, she beamed once again and asked in a startlingly youthful voice: “Say, is Hiroshi around the house today?”

Old as she was, she had somehow picked up the familiar ways of young people.

“Well, you know, I don't live there myself, so . . .”

Hisao meant to be brusque, but his tone had taken on the same familiarity. He could have said politely: “Sorry, I'm from the apartment next door.”

“Oh, is that so? Really.” For some reason the old woman seemed to be pretending not to understand. Nodding vigorously, she kept stealing sidelong glances at the one-story house next to his apartment.

She was inquiring about one of the half-dozen young laborers who lived there. They were working for a small construction firm that subcontracted on building projects; evidently they all came from the country, and their boss, who had trouble finding employees, was paying a high rent to provide this little house as their dormitory. Staying at home in bed this week, Hisao had for the first time begun to listen to the way the young men next door lived. Every morning before the couples in the apartment house got up there would be a commotion outside—noisy gargling at the communal pump at the edge of the field, loud voices talking a northern dialect, cheerful snatches of popular songs, and so on, followed at last by the clang of tools tossed into the back of a light truck, then the sound of the engine starting and, without fail, an odd, shrill whistle as the truck carrying the laborers drove away. After that, the day began for the office workers in the apartments. In the evening the morning's noisiness came home by the same truck: water was splashed at the outdoor basin, loud abusive voices shattered the smug silence of the neighborhood, the voice of the woman who cooked for them joined in, and an hour later the sounds of their voracious appetites penetrated even the second-floor apartments. Hisao winced when they turned the television on full blast after dinner, but fortunately it was not for long. Perhaps to young bodies tired and coarsened by heavy outdoor labor even TV entertainment seemed talky