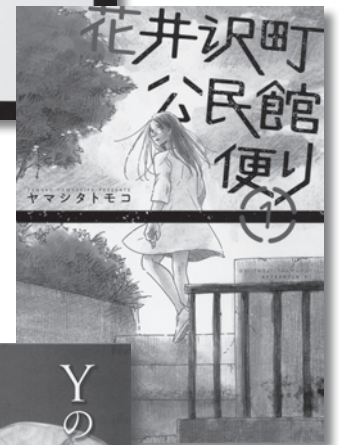
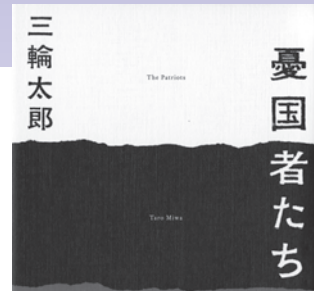


# JAPANESE BOOK NEWS

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# Japanese Literature: A Five-Year Retrospective

Nozaki Kan

No consideration of Japanese literature over the past five years can ignore the pivotal date of March 11, 2011. The Great East Japan Earthquake was a disaster that affected not only the Tōhoku region but the entire country, changing people's perspectives on the world and forming a clear divide in people's lives between "before" and "after" that fateful day. Every form of expression since then has had to incorporate the memory of March 11 in some way or other, and literature is no exception.

One author who exemplifies this awareness very clearly is Furukawa Hideo, himself a native of Fukushima prefecture. The works he has published since the disaster show how dramatically the shock affected him as a writer. By directly confronting the trauma, Furukawa has succeeded in finding a way forward to new creativity. Driven by an urge he was powerless to resist, Furukawa traveled to his home prefecture in the month following the disaster, despite the risk of radiation exposure from the tsunami-crippled Fukushima nuclear power plant. He wrote a hurried record of the things he saw and heard. This initial response evocatively captures the author's shock at seeing the devastating effects of the massive tsunami with his own eyes. But that is not all the work contains. The main character from *Seikazoku* [The Holy Family], the novel Furukawa published before the disaster, starts to appear in his narrative, blurring the divide between reality and fiction. "We cannot blame anyone," "The fact that we blame no one is what gives us hope," writes the author, expressing the mindset of the Japanese people as they roused themselves for the reconstruction effort. Here we also see Furukawa's determination to look squarely at the facts and write works with sufficient strength to register their impact.

This resolve has produced two major works: *Namu rokkun rōru 21-bu kyō* [Glory to the 21-Part Rock-and-Roll Sutra] (2013, JBN 79) and *Onna-tachi 300-nin no uragiri no sho* [The Book of 300 Treacherous Women] (2015, winner of the Nomura Literary Prize and the Yomiuri Literature Prize). The first of these is a powerful science-fiction style novel that imagines Tokyo transformed to a hellish wilderness, a major work of the imagination whose story spans the continents in time to the rhythms of rock and roll. The story centers on a young girl who is reincarnated seven times, marked by a strong desire and attachment to life that transcends death. The second returns to the world of the *Tale of Genji*, the greatest of the Japanese classics, and presents author Murasaki Shikibu as a vengeful spirit preparing to tell a new story. This ambitious conceit represents an attempt to invoke the magical power of narrative across time.

Furukawa Hideo writes in an avant-garde style that makes him stand out from his peers, but several other writers have shared the direction he hinted at in these two works. A number have set their stories on the dividing line between life and death, making use of an ancient Japanese trope in which the souls and spirits of the dead appeal to the living. In Itō Seikō's *Sōzō rajio* [Imagination Radio] (2013, JBN 78), the victims of the tsunami continue to transmit a message to the world of the living after their death. This painful story provided a degree of consolation to many readers who were struggling to accept the sudden deaths of so many people. Okuizumi Hikaru, the author of *Tōkyō jijoden* [Tokyo: The Autobiography] (2014, JBN 82), also makes use of the idea of reincarnation. In this book, the "genius loci" of Tokyo takes possession of a variety of living things in a series of reincarnations through time, offering a remarkable story that runs through modern history from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day. In Okuizumi's case, the idea of reincarnation is used to formulate an ironically told critique of Japanese society, which repeatedly falls into a state of crisis by failing to heed the lessons of the past.

A similar attitude of questioning the past has led to the creation of many works that have sought to unearth memories of World War II. A number of accessible entertainment novels have unflinchingly examined the war, as young writers seek to get to the bottom of what their parents' and grandparents' generation experienced. Prominent examples include Kakuta Mitsuyo's *Tsurī hausu* [Tree House] (2010, JBN 68), Nakajima Kyōko's *Chisai ouchi* [The Little House] (2010, JBN 66), to Higashiyama Akira's *Ryū* [Flow] (2015, JBN 86), and Nakawaki Hatsue's *Sekai no hate no kodomo-tachi* [Children at the End of the Earth] (2015, JBN 87). A similar interest in the recent past prompted an attempt to imagine the harsh reality of life at the front in Takahashi Hiroki's *Yubi no hone* [Finger Bones] (2015, JBN 85). Seventy years after the end of the war, as memories start to fade, these works point to the important mission that literature has to perform.

What kind of vision can literature offer with regard to the present and the future, as juxtaposed to the past? Several novels that were widely discussed were Hoshino Tomoyuki's *Ore ore* [It's Me, It's Me!] (2010, JBN 67), Yoshida Shūichi's *Ikari* [Rage] (2013, JBN 81), Nakamura Fuminori's *Kyōdan X* [Cult X] (2014), and Tanaka Shin'ya's *Saishō A* [Chancellor A] (2015). These works probe the contradictions and absurdities of contemporary Japanese society and are highlighted by a mood of pessimism and violence. In dynamic language, the authors

frame the paradoxes and injustices of contemporary society in a coherent narrative. These novelists present Japan as a place that is powerless to break out of its economic stagnation, as regional communities decline and the twin problems of an aging society and low birthrate progress at a frightening rate. Such incisive criticisms of the present are often tinged with a note of despair, and there is a sense of dystopianism tending to exaggeration in much of this kind of writing.

Works produced since the nuclear power plant accident in Fukushima, although many present a convincingly realistic dystopian vision of the near future, nevertheless offer a glimmer of hope. One example is *Kentōshi* [The Lantern Bearer] by Tawada Yōko (2014, JBN 84). The novel is set in Japan that has been forced to cut itself off from the rest of the world after a nuclear disaster. Although old people never seem to die, children are born enfeebled and rarely live long. Even while describing a grim society contaminated with radiation, Tawada nevertheless leaves readers with a sense of hope for the future. It is the children who hold the key. Severely handicapped and barely capable of walking, with hair that is prematurely white and voices that never develop beyond a childish treble, the children are neither men nor women. Although these children may seem deserving of pity, in fact they present a different point of view, having been freed from competition and knowing neither envy nor regret. They live in grateful appreciation of each new day. This attitude provides a hint of what the novel itself calls the “beauty of the time that is yet to come.”

The events of March 2011 have led many people to question the value system created by the older generation that provided the main framework for Japan’s economic growth. Perhaps it is the fact that Japan is at a critical turning point in rethinking its value system that has made young people or children a subject of special interest for authors. Tawada Yōko is not the only one. In *Nazuna* [Nazuna] (2012, JBN 71), Horie Toshiyuki subtly depicts the widening circle of love and goodwill that develops around a young baby. Kawakami Mieko’s *Akogare* (Longing, 2015) evokes in sparkling prose the minds of a group of elementary school children. *Tamamono* [Godsend] (2014, JBN 83), by Koike Masayo, describes a middle-aged woman who one day is asked to take care of a small boy who is not her own, and the growing feelings of dedication and love she feels for him. *Borādo-byō* [Bollard Disease] (2014, JBN 83) by Yoshimura Man’ichi shows the distortions and deformations of post-disaster Japanese society through the eyes of a young girl. Limited space means that only passing mention can be made here of some of the many other fine novels that have focused on the sensibilities of young people and children, including Ekuni Kaori’s family saga *Hōyō, arui wa raisu ni wa shio o* [The Embrace, Or Salt on Rice] (2010), which tells a compelling story of the bonds between a group of siblings, and Ogawa Yōko’s *Kohaku no matataki* [The Blink of an Amber Eye] (2015). These works capture the anguish of mainstream society in the present day, and look almost prayerfully toward the future.

Ōe Kenzaburō’s novel *Bannen yōshikishū* [In Late Style] (2013, JBN 80) opens with the main character in his study cleaning up the chaos left behind by the earth-

quake, and shows him in such agony that he “breaks down in tears, his voice racked with sobs.” But Ōe, for whom children have been an important subject for many years, does not shirk his self-appointed task to bring a message of hope to the young generation. The poem that adorns the end of the book concludes with these lines: “And to the little ones/the old man would reply/I cannot live my life over/But together we can live again.” Here, the idea of “living life over” means reconstructing society and rebuilding a new culture. This is a responsibility in which every Japanese person can be said to share as part of the collective “we.” According to *Fukkō bunkaron* [Cultural Reconstruction Theory] (2013, JBN 81) by the young critic Fukushima Ryōta, since ancient times Japanese culture has tended to show its greatest spurts of creativity in periods immediately after a war or major natural disaster. Will this spirit of reconstruction be strong enough to guide Japan forward into the future? Literary works will surely continue to serve as valuable indicators in the years to come.

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#### Nozaki Kan

Born in 1959. Professor of French literature at the University of Tokyo. In 2000, won the Literary Translation Prize of the French Community of Belgium for his translations of the author Jean-Philippe Toussaint, and the Suntory Prize in 2001 for his study of Jean Renoir. In 2011 he won the Yomiuri Literature Prize (criticism and translation) for Ihō no kaori: Neruvaru “Tōhō kikō” [The Scent of Foreign Lands: Nerval’s Voyage en Orient]. He also writes film criticism for the Nihon keizai shimbun and the monthly magazine Subaru. He is a member of the advisory board of Japanese Book News.

## FICTION



Motoya Yukiko

Born in 1979. In 2000, the author founded her own theater troupe. Her *Jibun o suki ni naru hōhō* [*How to Learn to Like Yourself*] won the Mishima Yukio Prize in 2014. Among her many other works is *Arashi no pikunikku* [*Picnic in the Storm*].

*A parable of discord in the roles of marriage*

## *Irui kon'in tan* [Tale of the Marriage of Different Sorts] By Motoya Yukiko

Kōdansha, 2016. 188 x 128 mm. 168 pp. ¥1,300. ISBN 978-4-06-219900-1.

A quite ordinary housewife realizes that she has come to closely resemble her husband. When they first married, they were quite different in both personality and looks, yet in the course of living together, they have come to look alike.

For a long time, the husband led a typical, regular life: he went to work, came home, had dinner, and would enjoy a drink and watch television. Then one day he refuses to go to work. He becomes very domestic, cooking meals and cleaning the house. Perplexed and exasperated, the narrator shouts at him that there's no need to force himself to become a "wife"; if he doesn't like being a husband, he should just become whatever he wants. Then suddenly, his body emits strange sounds and disintegrates into small clods of earth scattered around the floor. Among

the clods is a single rhododendron blossom.

The story has the quality of a parable, evoking the discord that can result when the autonomy of the individual grates against the cultural institution of marriage. The household has a distinct purpose as the basic unit of society, and in order for it to achieve its purpose, the individuals in it must give priority to the household. If the image of spouses' identical faces is a metaphor for keeping step with society, the perversion of the roles of husband and wife probably represents the collapse of the modern myths of conjugal relations. Accounts of the narrator's brother, who hesitates in marrying his sweetheart, and of her friends Kitae, her husband, and their cat form subplots that reflect the gap between the self and the other. (Chō)

## *Jumon* [The Spell] By Hoshino Tomoyuki

Kawade Shobō Shinsha, 2015. 189 x 128 mm. 248 pp. ¥1,500. ISBN 978-4-309-02397-7.

As the novel opens, another shop in the Matsuho Shopping Street goes out of business. Some of the shopkeepers disappeared in the middle of the night to escape debt collectors. One after another, once-proud shops along the street—the French bistro, the rice shop that had stood there since the old days, the cake shop—had been snuffed out by the winds of the recession. It would not be long before protagonist Kiryū's authentic Mexican torta sandwich stand is finished as well. In this setting, an *izakaya* drinking place was opened by young Zuryō in the middle of the mall. It had a good reputation and Zuryō began to play a leading role in the mall association; he quickly became influential in the community.

But then one evening a customer at the *izakaya* got angry at Zuryō, creating a

furor until the police had to be called. The customer proceeded to denounce and discredit Zuryō's place by publishing tirades on Internet sites—in the name of "General Disler"—that starts to damage the business of the whole Matsuho Shopping Street even more. Instead of giving up, Zuryō launches a bold online counter-attack. At the same time, Zuryō creates a vigilante group in order to protect the interests of the shopping street. Their rule turns violent, however, against anyone who doesn't fit in. Kiryū doesn't like their behavior, but finds himself unable to extricate himself and forced to go along with them. In this chilling fictional world, the author skillfully captures the suffocating atmosphere of an economic downturn, where people can turn on each other viciously. (Nozaki)



Hoshino Tomoyuki

Born in 1965. His *Saigo no toiki* [*The Last Sigh*] won the Bungei Prize in 1997. His *Ore Ore* [*It's Me, It's Me*] won the Ōe Kenzaburō Prize in 2011. Hoshino serves on the screening committee for the Shinchō Newcomer's Prize, the Bungei Prize, and other awards.

*In the ruins of the economy and humanity*



Ōoka Akira

Born in 1958, Ōoka is professor of Italian literature at Tokyo Keizai University. In 1989 his *Tasogare no sutōmu shīdingu* [*Storm Seeding at Dusk*] won the Mishima Yukio Prize, and in 1990 his *Hyōsō seikatsu* [*A Surface Life*] won the Akutagawa Prize, making him the first writer to take both these prizes.

*Twelve original short stories with links to classical works of literature*

## Tasukete, Otōsan [Father, Help Me!]

By Ōoka Akira

Heibonsha, 2015. 188 x 128 mm. 256 pp. ¥1,800. ISBN 978-4-582-83691-2.

Matsuki's father disappeared before he entered high school. His mother manages to support the family for a while, but she, too, goes off with another man, leaving Matsuki, as a university student, not only to fend for himself and his younger brother, but to pay off his father's debts as well.

Sometimes Matsuki sees strange dreams, though maybe they aren't just dreams. He is drowning, and sees a blurred image of his father at the water's edge, smiling and leaning against a rock. Matsuki calls out to him "Help me, Father!" but his voice goes unheard.

Then Matsuki's brother announces he is going abroad to work. Not long after, his mother calls to say that his father has turned up a skeleton in a suburb three hours away. The police say it was not a homicide, and Matsuki goes off on a chilly

day to collect his father's remains.

The book consists of twelve stories, all modeled after a literary classic. Among them, *Otōsan tasukete* is inspired by *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, but the plot is almost without connection to the original work. The Pinocchio story is discussed in a seminar Matsuki takes at university and the teacher's unique interpretation is vaguely linked to Matsuki's life.

Literary classics are often the basis of new works, from modern translations, adaptations, and parodies, to sequels. The stories in this work may be the first of yet another kind in which the author creates his own storyline and entwines it with that of a classical work—sometimes juxtaposing the two, sometimes adding footnote-like commentary, and so on—to create a rich lyrical world unlike that in the model work. (Chō)

## Nazo no dokuoya [My Toxic Parents Problem]

By Himeno Kaoruko

Shinchōsha, 2015. 191 x 131 mm. 326 pp. ¥1,600. ISBN 978-4-10-427703-2.

The term "toxic parents" has been much in the Japanese media in the last two or three years—the parents who completely dominate their children from a young age and whose controlling influence has a continuing negative impact on them even after they reach adulthood.

Mitsuyo, the protagonist of this novel, had been raised by just that kind of parents. She was an only child in a house surrounded by thick walls that seemed to cut the three off from contact with the people around them. Subject to strict discipline and living in that closed environment, Mitsuyo was not even allowed to express her own feelings clearly. As far as these matters go, there must be many cases of such toxic parents, but Mitsuyo's situation was peculiar in that the adults' attacks on their child were likely to be sudden and

difficult to understand. The author has apparently modeled the language and behavior of her characters after those of her own parents.

After Mitsuyo eventually grows to adulthood and her parents pass away, she begins writing to friends as she tries to grasp what made her parents the way they were. The gradual process as she slowly begins to understand the difficulties she suffered forms the content of the novel. People who experience grave troubles in relations with their parents must be everywhere, not just Japan, but this is a novel that opens up a small window, letting some fresh air into the mentally closed-off world in which such people sometimes live. (Karube)



Himeno Kaoruko

Born in 1958. The author's first work was *Hito yonde Mitsuko* [*Everybody Calls Her Mitsuko*]. In 2014 Himeno won the Naoki Prize for *Shōwa no inu* [*Perspective Kid*]. She is also the author of works including *Haruka eiti* [*Haruka at Eighty*] and *Seikei bijo* [*The Plastic Surgery Beauty*].

*Opening windows on the world of over-controlled childhood*



Nagano Mayumi

Born 1959. Won the Bungei Prize for Shōnen Arisu [*Young Man Alice*] in 1988. She is also author of Terebijon shiti [*Television City*], Tentai gikai [*Parliament of the Planets*], and Neko dōraku [*Cat Mania*]. *Meido ari* is the winner of the Izumi Kyōka Prize and the Noma Literary Prize.

*A family-saga puzzle against the backdrop of history*

## **Meido ari** **[Thank You, Netherworld]**

By Nagano Mayumi

Kōdansha, 2015. 188 x 128 mm. 192 pp. ¥1,500. ISBN 978-4-06-219572-0.

The death of her father makes the protagonist wonder about her family's history. Where did her ancestors come from? How did her parents get together? Using what few clues remain from childhood memories and fragmentary stories from various people, the protagonist completes the jigsaw puzzle of the family's history.

If told in simple, chronological fashion, the story might have been quite banal. Instead the author launches the protagonist's fragments of memory kite-like into the sky of urban history, shifting the perspective between past and present, and tracing the path of her great-grandfather and her mysteriously silent father. In this process, the story brings back to life the beauty of the natural landscape before modernization, the passions and sentiments that empowered life in an earlier

time, and the sad fate of modern history and a family caught up in war. In a desperate attempt to keep his sons from being sent off to war, the great-grandfather travels from one end of the country to the other over and over. The father, evacuated to Hiroshima only to barely survive the atomic bombing, attempts to keep secret his exposure to radiation.

The story covers weighty topics, and it is told with a lyrical lightness of style that serves to accentuate all the more the plight of the characters portrayed. The author's dexterity with description is also impressive. At first we seem to have no more than a mass of unconnected details, but with the last piece of the troubled family history puzzle inserted at the end, a vast panorama opens out. It is a masterful work such as rarely seen in recent years. (Chō)

## **Yūkokusha-tachi** **[The Patriots]**

By Miwa Tarō

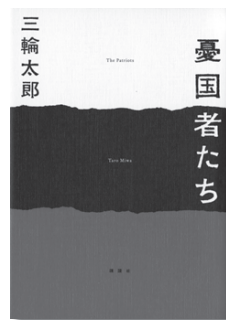
Kōdansha, 2015. 188 x 131 mm. 224 pp. ¥1,800. ISBN 978-4-06-219804-2.

The protagonist is a teacher of modern Japanese literature at a private university. A female student in his senior seminar chooses to write about Mishima Yukio for her graduation thesis. She became interested in former Bosnian Serb politician, Radovan Karadžić, on trial for genocide during the war in Yugoslavia, when she learned he was an avid reader of Mishima's works. In her attempt to uncover a new context for understanding Mishima's literature, she even flies to Bosnia to pursue her research, only to be shocked by the far deeper scars of the civil war she finds there than she ever imagined.

A male student in the seminar, meanwhile, starts out declaring his distaste for Mishima, but his thinking changes under the influence of an elderly man who heads a rightist society. The old man has the stu-

dent listen to a tape of Mishima's speech given from the terrace of the Self-Defense Forces headquarters, and introduces other aspects of Mishima's legacy. Under his guidance the young man realizes the depth of Mishima's disillusionment with what Japan had become in his time.

The two students had once been a couple, but now they cross swords on theories about Mishima. The protagonist, their teacher, watches anxiously over their sparring and monitors the progress of their thesis writing, sent by email, with alternating hope and misgivings. Such was the shock of Mishima's suicide that its impact continues to reverberate forty-five years later. While employing the "college campus novel" format, the work is sprinkled with stimulating interpretations of Mishima's life and literature today. (Nozaki)



Miwa Tarō

Born in 1962, Miwa is associate professor at Tokai University. He received the Gunzō New Writer's Literary Prize in 1990 for "The Sea of Fertility as [Mishima's] Point of Return from the Dream" and the Nikkei Fiction Award Honorable Mention for "Poru Poto no te" (*The Hands of Pol Pot*) in 2006.

*The young generation debates the meaning of Mishima*



Tsujihara Noboru

Born in 1945, Tsujihara is director of the Kanagawa Museum of Modern Literature. He is author of *Mura no namae* [The Name of the Village; 1990 Akutagawa Prize] and *Kareha no naka no aoi hono-o* [Blue Flame among Withered Leaves; 2005 Kawabata Yasunari Prize].

Four stories  
by a versatile  
storyteller

## Y no ki [The Y Tree]

By Tsujihara Noboru

Bungei Shunjū, 2015. 188 x 129 mm. 192 pp. ¥1,300. ISBN 978-4-16-390320-0.

The four stories in this volume are all so diverse in theme and style that they could have been written by different authors. Yet all display a masterful skill at description and storytelling, riveting the reader's attention. The top story, "Tasogare" [Dusk] describes the shifting emotions of a junior high school boy in tandem with the movements of the train carrying him from his hometown in Wakayama on a trip to Universal Studios Japan in Osaka. The next, "Kubikazari" [Necklace] portraying a couple touring Venice, adroitly depicts the husband's flirtatious tendencies and the wife's jealousy revealed in the course of souvenir shopping. "Shinbin" [Sin Bin] portrays something serious unfolding around a woman as she sits in the bleachers at a university rugby game.

The longest and probably the heaviest

in content is the book's title story. The protagonist is a writer who publishes his first work after reaching middle age. Amid the pop, post-modernist literary trend led by Murakami Haruki, however, his style is out of sync with the times and he finds himself unable to make a living by writing. Then his wife dies, leaving him even more alone and isolated. His attention is drawn to a forked tree that stands along the path of his daily walks, and following the example of his former novelist mentor, he decides to hang himself from that tree.

One can feel the author's sympathy with unsuccessful writers. Reading these four stories, carried onward by the author's supple and free-wheeling style, is an opportunity to enjoy to the full the varied pleasures of fiction. (Nozaki)

## ESSAY

### Sakka to iu yamai [The Writer's Affliction]

By Menjō Tsuyoshi

Kōdansha, 2015. 173 x 106 mm. 328 pp. ¥880. ISBN 978-4-06-288323-8.

Introducing twenty-one fiction writers the author met in the course of his long career as an editor at a major Tokyo publishing company, this book describes their personalities and ways of working, forming a kind of behind-the-scenes documentary. All of the novelists featured are deceased and some are no longer much remembered, but all were big-selling writers of their times.

Novelists are known for their idiosyncratic personalities. They differ even on points such as how they turned in manuscripts. In the era before faxes and email, editors would go to a writer's home to pick up copy. The book recounts, for example, how when the author would call at Mizukami Tsutomu's summer house on such an errand, he would be invited to enjoy a hot bath, a drink, and dinner before Mizukami would finally appear with the waited-for

pages. For Fujisawa Shūhei, known for his historical fiction, Menjō would be shown to the reception room, where he would be seated to wait. Only after a kind of domestic protocol would Fujisawa meet him and hand over the manuscript. One writer who loved airplanes was wont to fly off to some distant destination, taking the editor with him, with the excuse of "gathering material for writing." Then there were writers who never could meet their deadlines. Indeed, every one was different.

Not only a source of numerous episodes that are not included in the writers' works or biographies, this volume includes accounts of their upbringing and daily lives as well as of influences on their writing, such as war-time experiences. It is also very useful for understanding the role of editors in the production of fiction. (Chō)



Menjō Tsuyoshi

Born in 1950. Worked with the journal *Shōsetsu shinchō* for twenty-nine years and served as editor-in-chief of the journal for nine years. He is author of *Nuke-remasu ka: Shimangaka Takita Yū* [Can You Get Out of It? The Life of Manga Artist Takita Yū]. He is now professor at Kyoto University of Art and Design.

An editor's-eye  
view of twenty-one  
popular fiction  
writers



Takashina Shūji

Born in 1932, Takashina is director of the Ōhara Museum of Art (Kurashiki) and professor emeritus of the University of Tokyo. He is author of numerous works including *Nijusseiki bijutsu [The Art of the Twentieth-century]*. In 2012 he received the prestigious Order of Culture.

*Authority on art defines the qualities of Japanese beauty*

## ***Nihonjin ni totte utsukushisa to wa nanika*** **[What Is Beauty to Japanese?]**

**By Takashina Shūji**

Chikuma Shobō, 2015. 188 x 130 mm. 256 pp. ¥1,900. ISBN 978-4-480-87384-2.

When observing Japan's traditional architecture, temples, pagodas, or castles, the reader is invited to note their rooflines. The line of the eaves invariably sweeps down, rising ever-so-slightly at the ends. When Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry first viewed the city of Edo from his ships in the mid-nineteenth century, he is said to have declared it a city of nothing but "rooftops." Indeed, while Western architecture is oriented to the wall, Japan's architecture is most notable for its roofs, which are proportionately quite large. Their shape, says the author, is not simply to protect the building against rain and wind but reflects an aesthetic preference. The sweep of the roofs can also be seen in the arc of a Japanese sword. "Curve," says Takashina, is problematic in describing such a line. In the West, he

says, "curve" is juxtaposed with "straight," and a clear distinction is made between the two. For Japanese, on the other hand, straight lines and curves are part of a continuum out of which a distinctive concept of beauty arises. Deeply conversant with Japan's art and culture, the author draws intriguing comparisons with Western and Chinese art to explain the ideas behind Japanese beauty. With its fascinating examples from ancient waka poetry and screen paintings to today's manga art and cell phone emoji, he identifies the core spirit of the Japanese sensibility that he believes is a constant since the Heian period, and this book offers an excellent opportunity for rediscovery of Japanese culture. (Nozaki)

## **CULTURE**

### ***Chizu kara yomu Edo jidai*** **[The Edo Period as Read in Its Maps]**

**By Uesugi Kazuhiro**

Chikuma Shobō, 2015. 173 x 106 mm. 240 pp. ¥940. ISBN 978-4-480-06850-7.

The outstanding works of ukiyo-e that were created with the development of arts and crafts during Japan's Tokugawa period (1603–1867) are well known around the world. Less well known, however, is the wealth of maps documenting Japan's territories that were produced and circulated in large numbers. This book introduces many examples of such maps, tracing the ways they changed from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries.

Map-making was one of the projects the Tokugawa shogunate embarked on in the seventeenth century after its unification of the entire country had become well established. The newly designed maps were very different from those that had previously circulated in that they presented the entire country of Japan in bird's-eye perspective. People who saw these maps

realized that the center of power in Japan was in Edo, and they could identify the islands that lay within the realm, and this paved the way for a common understanding of the country's territory.

In the nineteenth century as ships from Russia and Britain began to appear off the coast of Japan, a sense of crisis in Japan heightened. The new maps made by the shogunate in this period do not show the boundary lines dividing the domains the daimyo governed throughout the country but portrayed Japan as a united entity. It was such maps of the country that cultivated people's awareness of being part of a modern nation-state. This book has much to tell us about the relationship between map making and the formation of nationalism. (Karube)



Uesugi Kazuhiro

Born in 1975, Uesugi is associate professor at Kyoto Prefectural University. Among his other works are *Edo chishikijin to chizu [Edo Intelligentsia and Maps]* and *Nihon chizu-shi [The History of Japanese Maps; co-authored with Kinda Akihiro]*.

*An appreciation of the wealth of Edo-period maps*





Muguruma Yumi

*Born 1970, Muguruma manages a day service facility for the elderly in Shizuoka prefecture. In 2003, she won the Suntory Prize for Social Sciences and Humanities for “Kami, hito o kuu” [Gods Consume Humans].*

*Learning from seniors along the pathways of life*

***Kaigo minzokugaku e yōkoso!***  
**[Welcome to “Nursing Care Folklore”]**

**By Muguruma Yumi**

Shinchōsha, 2015. 191 x 130 mm. 314 pp. ¥1,500. ISBN 978-4-10-339511-9.

When the author resigned from her post teaching folklore studies in a university and started to work at a nursing home for the elderly, she discovered that her workplace was a treasure trove of folklore of an era that tended to be overlooked in scholarly studies. People there, born in the 1920s and 1930s, told her in vivid and expressive detail the memories of their childhood and their stories in a rapidly changing society.

The author first began to take down the stories out of her inveterate curiosity as a folklorist; she then realized that such stories could make the nursing care scene more open to the outside. By listening to and recording stories, she found that the fixed relationship between caregivers and the recipients of caregiving was reversed. The caregiver became the recipient of

knowledge and the seniors became givers who passed down the wisdom of life.

The words and behavior of dementia patients, often dismissed as “problems,” the author found, are sometimes rooted in the individual’s life histories. Understanding such words and actions calls for curiosity and a questioning mind on the part of the caregiver. As she probes for details about the stories the elders repeat, or they prepare a favorite dish together, buried memories come alive once more. This book has much to suggest for ways that scholarly research can be put to use in various dimensions of life in society by describing the daily life of a nursing home facility where “caregiving folklore studies” is in practice as well as the author’s thoughts on her observations. (Yonahara)

**CRITICAL BIOGRAPHY**

***Rondon Nihonjinmura o tsukutta otoko***  
**[The Man Who Made the “Japanese Native Village” in London]**

**By Koyama Noboru**

Fujiwara Shoten, 2015. 188 x 128 mm. 368 pp. ¥3,600. ISBN 978-4-86578-038-3.

The first Japanese to be issued passports to travel abroad were acrobatic performers taken to the West by foreigners quick to recognize the potential of their arts. One among them was a man named Frederik Blekman, the protagonist of the story. Tracing the checkered life of this individual, this book portrays the little-known world of popular cultural interchange between East and West in the shadow of the rapid changes taking place around the end of the Edo period.

Born in Amsterdam in 1839, Blekman traveled to Batavia in the East Indies (Indonesia) and arrived in Japan at the age of 20. He served as an interpreter for the British consulate and also worked at the French consulate. He appears to have been quite

active, but also seems to have gotten into some trouble, in one case defaulting on debts after entering the import business. In 1867, just before the establishment of the Meiji government, Blekman left Japan to accompany a troupe of acrobats and entertainers on an overseas tour and later arranged their tour in Britain. He married twice, had 14 children, and used the Japanese-sounding name of Tannaker Buhicrosan. In 1885, on the tide of the Japonisme boom, he built a theme park called the “Japanese Native Village” which played a major role in forming images of Japan overseas. Blekman ended up knowing the country only before the Meiji Restoration and died without seeing Japan after its rapid modernization. (Yonahara)



Koyama Noboru

*Born 1948. Head of the Japanese Department at Cambridge University Library, and author of Japanese Students at Cambridge University in the Meiji Era, 1868–1912, and other works.*

*A pioneer in the Japan-as-curiosity business*

## HISTORY



Hoshino Hiromi

Born in 1966. Photographer and non-fiction writer. Winner of the *Ōya Sōichi Non-fiction Prize in 2001* for *Korogaru Honkon ni koke wa haenai [A Rolling Hong Kong Gathers No Moss]*. Her 2011 work *Konnyaku-ya hyōryūki [Tale of a "Konnyaku-ya" Fisherman]* won the *Yomiuri Literary Prize*.

*The short history of Christianity in sixteenth-century Japan*

## *Minna suisei o mite ita* [All Saw the Comet]

By Hoshino Hiromi

Bungei Shunjū, 2015. 188 x 130 mm. 464 pp. ¥1,950. ISBN 978-4-16-390346-0.

After Jesuit priest Francis Xavier introduced Christianity to Japan in 1549, missionaries of numerous other orders followed. Their rapidly increasing following is believed to have risen to 300,000 or even 400,000. In 1582 (Tenshō 10), four young Japanese Christians traveled from Nagasaki to Europe and they were even granted an audience with the pope in Rome. By the time they returned home eight years later, however, conditions for Christianity in Japan had changed completely. In 1587, preeminent warlord of the time Toyotomi Hideyoshi issued a decree expelling all the Christian missionaries (called *bateren*), and after 1614, when Tokugawa Ieyasu issued the order prohibiting Christianity, believers were suppressed by the most extreme methods.

To the tune of the European lute that

Japanese heard for the first time in the sixteenth-century, non-fiction writer Hoshino Hiromi takes us on a long journey from Nagasaki to Spain based on her careful reading of documents chronicling Japan's "Christian" era. We learn that the reason Japan's leaders suppressed Christianity stemmed from their fear that it might allow people of the country to establish connections outside the control of the state. But why did missionaries continue to come to Japan knowing full well how political conditions had changed, and then submit to martyrdom? The author spins the tale with a light, but thrilling touch.

Christianity in sixteenth-century Japan was like a comet: To some it was beautiful; to others it was ominous. The story vividly reconstructs the interlude when East first met with the West. (Yonahara)

## *Edo Nihon no tenkanten* [Edo Japan's Turning Point]

By Takei Kōichi

NHK Shuppan, 2015. 182 x 128 mm. 280pp. ¥1,400. ISBN 978-4-14-091230-0.

In recent years, Japan in the Tokugawa period has been hailed as a model of the ecological and sustainable society that people living in the twenty-first century ought to emulate. It is true that from the seventeenth century, paddy-field development was advanced all over Japan and farming centered on rice growing proliferated. This development in fact did increase Japan's population and provided the basis for economic growth that continued into modern times; there is much to learn, too, from the way resources were recycled, such as by using the straw remaining after harvesting grain for fertilizer and feed for livestock. That agrarian model, the argument goes, made possible the kind of environmentally friendly economy we should aim for today as well.

The author of this work, historian Takei

Kōichi, however, cites historical documents to demonstrate how the widespread development of paddy fields actually had a negative impact on the environment. Expansion of paddy fields often impinged on natural grasslands and water-holding areas. To feed the farm animals used for agriculture work, farmers began to cut grass in hill and mountain areas, and in due course this development of rice fields ended up changing the ecology and topography, leading to increasing troubles from flooding and landslides.

Taking lessons from history is certainly important, but sometimes people overly romanticize the history; their hopes of seeing what they want to see sometimes obscures reality. This book reminds us to learn from history by paying attention to both the ideals and the perils that the people of the past have experienced. (Karube)



Takei Kōichi

Born in 1971, Takei is associate professor at Ryukyu University, Okinawa. His specialty is early modern history. He is also author of *Teppō o tebanasanakatta hyakushō-tachi [The Farmers Who Did Not Give Up Their Guns]*.

*More lessons to learn from Edo-period agriculture*



## *Nihon tetsudō kayōshi* (2 vols.) [The History of Japanese Railway Songs]

By Matsumura Hiroshi

Vol. I: Misuzu Shobō, 2015. 188 x 128 mm. 288 pp. ¥3,800. ISBN 978-4-622-07934-7.  
Vol. II: Misuzu Shobō, 2015. 188 x 128 mm. 336 pp. ¥4,200. ISBN 978-4-622-07935-4.

Matsumura Hiroshi

*Born 1952. Music critic and specialist in popular music in general and the history of Japanese popular songs. He is author of Wārudo myūjikkū sengen [A Declaration for World Music], Ajia uta kaidō [Pathways of Asian Music], and Uta ni kiku Okinawa [Okinawa As Depicted in Songs].*

*Chronicle of a  
vanishing song  
tradition*

Railways were driving forces in the building of a modern Japan and the modernization of people's ways of life. As the country's railway network grew, popular songs and ballads about railways proliferated, and this book delves into the modernization experienced by Japanese with these songs as its guide. The author is a music critic whose hobby since he was a boy has been railways.

The *Tetsudō shōka* [Railway Song] produced in the early days of railways is a song that wove into its lyrics the names of 66 stations on the Tokaido trunk line between Tokyo and Osaka. The author credits this popular song not only with helping people learn the geography but also with shaping their awareness of Tokyo as the capital of the Japanese

empire. But railway songs were not always tied to nationalism; there were songs to send soldiers off to war—expressing the feelings of mothers and ordinary people who did not want to send their loved ones into battle. In rapid economic growth after World War II, railways were often the scene of parting and separation, and at a time when many young people left the countryside to work in Tokyo, songs portrayed homesickness and the separation of lovers. Today, when all that is expected of trains is their speed and punctuality, new songs that treat the stories people associate with trains and stations are far and few between. The rich culture that flourished with the growth of the railways is starting to fade. (Yonahara)

## MANGA

### *Hanaizawa-chō Kōminkan-dayori* [The Hanaizawa Civic Hall News], 2 vols.

By Yamashita Tomoko

Vol. I: Kōdansha, 2015. 182 x 129 mm. 190 pp. ¥590. ISBN 978-4-06-388041-0.  
Vol. II: Kōdansha, 2016. 182 x 129 mm. 190 pp. ¥590. ISBN 978-4-06-388111-0.

A small town was suddenly enveloped in an invisible membrane that cuts it off from the outside, apparently an accident that occurred in developing technology for some kind of shelter or enclave. Static inorganic things can pass through the membrane, but people and living things are trapped inside and the years pass by.

The setting of a town cut off from the outside is a common motif in science fiction and film, but in most such works, the story focuses on how the people of the town break through the barrier and escape. The characters of this manga, by contrast, face conditions in which such efforts are known to be futile from the outset. They communicate with people outside via the Internet and speak through the membrane, but their bodies cannot pass from inside to outside. As the years

go by the people inside grow old; the generations change and the town's population gradually decreases.

The world depicted in this manga may be seen as condensing the issues faced by developed nations experiencing population decline with the aging of society. The strong sense of superficiality in the sympathies shown by people outside toward those inside may remind us of the way assistance activities for people in war or disaster zones are conducted as part of our society today. This is a fine work, which develops quietly, with deep insight into the realities of our time. (Karube)



Yamashita Tomoko

*Born in 1981, the manga artist author won the Afternoon Shiki Award sponsored by Kōdansha for Nekoze no yoakemae [Humpback before Dawn] and in 2011 she monopolized first and second places for the Kono Manga ga Sugoi! Award (Women's Division) for Her and Don't Cry, Girl.*

*The dramas and  
dynamics of  
inside vs. outside*

## No. 3: A Selection of Bestselling Practical Books

As the final installment of this series, we look at another genre that falls outside the categories of fiction and academic interest that are normally featured in our New Titles section. “How-to” titles and other types of practical books command a substantial readership across a wide range of fields in Japan, as this selection of recent bestsellers shows.

Sales of “how-to” books have held up well within the Japanese publishing market as a whole. But “practical” books cover a wide range of subjects, and the genre is not easily categorized. In terms of books that claim to offer readers practical information and advice, we might divide the market into the following broad categories: 1. Lifestyle advice and tips on daily life; 2. Health, beauty, and food; and 3. Self-development and “philosophy of life” volumes. One characteristic shared by all these books is a very close relationship with prevailing trends in society, as we can see clearly if we look at them alongside newspaper and television advertising.

Newspaper advertising is marked by prominent ads for travel guides, food, health supplements, and cars. There are also numerous regular ads for weekly and monthly magazines and newly published books. Newspaper advertisements reflect the changing trends of the wider society.

Television also closely reflects social trends and people’s desires. One recent trend is for programs on the pleasures of travel and food. Ads for health supplements and medicines are prominent, along with those for life insurance, mobile phones, and cars. Saturation advertising for these products runs throughout the year. Looked at in this context, seeing what kinds of practical books are popular can help us understand contemporary society and the times we live in.

**Kondō Marie, *Jinsei ga tokimeku katazuke no mahō* [Trans., *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*]. Sanmāku Shuppan, 2010.**

Many practical books claim to impart lifestyle wisdom. The most numerous of all the types of practical books on the market may be those that offer advice on hobbies and other aspects of life in modern society. This book offers a revolutionary solution to clutter, one of the biggest headaches facing people in modern consumer societies. Translated into English in 2014, the book became a million-seller in the United States, and *Time* magazine included the author on its list of “The 100 Most Influential People” in 2015. The scale of the book’s success has revealed just how many people around the world struggle with the problem of clutter and tidying.

The author herself was apparently impressed by a book on the “art of throwing things away” that she read when she was young. That early influence would later form the basis of her own unique philosophy. Her method promises success in a rapid and transformative once-and-for-all tidy-up. The purge starts with clothes before moving onto books, documents, and miscellany, and culminates in

dealing with mementoes and other items of sentimental value. The premise behind her approach is that readers should ask themselves “What kind of life do I want to live?” as they consider what to keep and what to throw away. Kondō says the secret is to keep only those things that “spark joy.” Kondō’s “magic” method promises to bring extra spark to readers’ lives. What explains the phenomenal success of this book? I think perhaps it is simply the idea that by cultivating the decisiveness necessary to throw things away, the magic method can help to give people more confidence in other aspects of their lives. The author has apparently received feedback from readers who recount how the book has helped them to become calmer, to feel more in control at work, and to improve their business performance. The book offers a philosophy of life based on the idea of keeping unnecessary clutter to a minimum.

**Shimōjū Akiko, *Kazoku to iu yamai* [*The Malaise of Family*]. Gentōsha, 2015.**

Among the diverse range of works within the self-help and “philosophy of life” genres are discursions on the importance of hard work by successful athletes, books by successful business people offering to share their experiences, and books by business managers promising to give readers insights into the secrets of their success. All these books purport to offer tips and advice for how to get on in life. In this book, a former NHK announcer discusses the modern family, based on her own experiences. The author argues that Japanese tend to be excessively attached to an ideal of the family as a close-knit unit. Are families really so wonderful, she asks, or have people fallen for an illusion? The book looks at the realities of family life in contemporary Japan, drawing on examples from the author’s own life. The book sets out to unmask the deceit of the “wonderful family,” and sets out an array of familiar problems such as are likely to be found in any family. Essentially, that is all there is to it. Even so, the book sold more than a million copies after it was featured prominently on television. Perhaps some of the book’s readers were looking for confirmation of their view that close-knit families are no more and that the family values that prevailed in the “good old days” have collapsed. Others may have been looking for advice on how families should live today. This was a particularly successful example of a book that offered readers an analysis of the state of the family in modern Japanese society.

**Tanita, Taishibō-kei Tanita no shain shokudō [Healthy Recipes from the Tanita Company Cafeteria]. Daiwa Shobō, 2010.**

The health section of the book market can be divided into two broad categories. One focuses on the external aspects of physical health—introducing readers to health-giving breathing techniques, “pelvic adjustment” methods for healthier posture, and in one case, a book that promised readers a long and healthy life through calf-massaging. Others give readers advice on diet and cooking. This volume of nutritionally balanced recipes based on meals served to employees at Tanita, a manufacturer of health scales and other body measurement equipment, became a massive bestseller, selling more than 4.5 million copies. The book’s recipes feature healthy meals of around 500 calories each, built around vegetables and low in salt, and appealed to many people looking to maintain a healthy weight. A second volume has since been published. One thing that made these books distinctive is that they consist of recipes that first spread by word of mouth and were later compiled for publication in book form. The company’s reputation as a manufacturer of health and diet products, plus the fact that the recipes had been tried and tested in the company cafeteria, proved a winning combination. Following the book’s success, the company opened Tanita Shokudō, a popular and affordable cafeteria in the center of Tokyo, and has plans to open more cafeterias like it throughout the country. This relationship between a recipe book and physical cafes in the real world perhaps makes the Tanita case unique. What is behind the popularity of books on healthy eating? From worries about food safety to new food-based therapy treatments and energy-giving health supplements, people in contemporary society are constantly being pressed to consider the role of food and its relationship to health in their daily lives, and this has understandably made many people anxious about their diet and physical health.

**Agawa Sawako, Kiku chikara: Kokoro o hiraku 35 no hinto [Listening Power: 35 Hints for Getting People to Open Up]. Bungei Shunjū, 2012.**

Agawa Sawako is a popular television host who appears regularly on a large number of shows. Since 1993 she has published interviews with prominent figures in a weekly magazine column with the title “People I’d Like to Meet.” This book is a collection of new pieces on the experience of conducting these interviews. In Japan, there is a saying “A good listener makes a good conversationalist.” In the thirty-five themed sections of this book the author offers readers advice on how to develop “listening” skills based on her experiences as a TV host and interviewer. In a section on ways to encourage people to open up, the author stresses the importance of listening carefully to what people are actually saying, underlining the value of empathy, attentiveness, and patience. She suggests using common conversational fillers as question prompts. She gives advice on how to raise questions and address issues, suggesting how it may be useful sometimes to repeat back what the speaker has just said, and asserting that the questioner should not be afraid to ask what might seem like

naïve questions. The book was a major bestseller, with more than 2 million copies sold. The author’s reputation as a TV personality was obviously part of the reason for the book’s success, but the approachable essay format also helped. The author speaks straightforwardly about herself and her own experiences. Many readers presumably bought the book as a kind of “self-help” volume, hoping for advice on how to communicate. Some may have drawn more general insight from the attitude of the author toward life’s lessons. Following the success of this book, Bungei Shunjū published a second volume with the title, *Shikarareru chikara: Kiku chikara 2* [How to Take Criticism: Listening Power 2] also authored by Agawa.

**Watanabe Kazuko, Okareta basho de sakinasai [Bloom Where God Has Planted You]. Gentōsha, 2012.**

A number of the numerous self-help books published have a strongly religious tone. The author of this book is the president of a Christian university, an unobtrusive person who is respected as a Christian. As the title suggests, the book offers readers advice on how to find meaning and purpose in their lives whatever their individual circumstances may be. As the book’s advertising band claims: “You can shine wherever you are.” The book is a collection of aphorisms urging acceptance of life: “Where you are now is where you are meant to be: do not strain to bloom before the time is right. Instead use this time to put down deeper roots.” “How you use your time is how you use life itself.” “When things are not going according to plan in your marriage or with your children, work hard to find the strength to bloom.” “You have to cultivate encounters to meet the right person. It is important to hold on to hope.” “We cannot choose our circumstances, but we can choose how we deal with them.” In the context of the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami and the sense of stagnation brought on by the sluggish economy, these simple statements of optimism and encouragement resonated with many people. Appearances on television pushed the book to into the upper ranks of the bestseller lists, where it remained for three years.

(Kiyota Yoshiaki, President, Shuppan News Co., Ltd.)

## Akutagawa and Naoki Prizes Announced

The screening for the 154th Akutagawa and Naoki Prizes was held on January 19, 2016. The Akutagawa Prize went to Takiguchi Yūshō for *Shinde inai mono* [Those Who Are Not Dead] and also to Motoya Yukiko for *Iru kon'in tan* [Tale of the Marriage of Different Sorts] (see p. 4). The Naoki Prize was awarded to Aoyama Bunpei for *Tsuma o metoraba* [If I Take a Wife].

Takiguchi's *Shinde inai mono* describes a *tsuya* (vigil) gathering of about thirty relatives for a man who died peacefully due to old age. The participants' recollections of the deceased weave together a history of the family. "Having invented so many characters," remarked the author, "I tended to get mixed up myself, so I drew a family tree to keep track of them." Takiguchi enjoys unplanned wandering and he says that new ideas come to him while he walks. He says, "Gazing at the roadsides and at my feet, all kinds of scenes and images come to mind—they are what I want to write about."

Motoya's *Iru kon'in tan* revolves around the disconnect between a couple in the fourth year of their marriage. Motoya says, "I wrote this work asking myself whether I would be able to accept living in the same house with some "other." Through the theater she organized when she was twenty-eight and fiction writing she sought to express the twisted side of herself, but with the birth of her daughter, she says, discovered that her "obsessive self-consciousness had completely disappeared."

Aoyama's *Tsuma o metoraba* is set in the mid-Edo period when the culture of the samurai and townspeople were well developed. A fifty-six-year-old samurai who had remained single until then finally makes up his mind to find a wife. The author chose the period when the role of the samurai as warrior was long past and far away. "It was an era," says Aoyama, "when samurai were no longer needed as experts in martial arts. I attempted to portray people struggling in times when their roles are no longer clear and they are at loss what do to—times resembling today."

## Bestsellers of 2015

At the top of the 2015 bestseller list was *Hibana* [When Sparks Fly] by popular comedian Matayoshi Naoki (see JBN No. 86, p. 6). An overall review of bestselling works shows three distinctive trends: the focus on the aging society, emphasis on media attention, and market's attachment to best-selling authors.

Most notable in the top ten best-sellers are four works by women aged over 75. The author of *Kazoku to iu yamai* [The Malaise of Family] (see p.12), which sold 555,000 copies, is Shimōjū Akiko, a former NHK announcer, who is 79 years old. Her work critically reconsiders the mentality of those who tend to beautify family relations. Centarian artist Shinoda Tōkō's *Hyakusan-sai ni natte wakatta koto* [What I Have Realized at the Age of 103] has sold 500,000 copies. Eighty-eight-year-old Watanabe Kazuko, headmistress of Notre Dame Seishin Gakuen, is the writer of long-seller *Okareta basho de sakinasai* [Bloom Where God Has Planted You] (see p. 13). Sono Ayako, the author of *Ningen no bunzai* [The Caliber of a Human Being] is 84. The last three works deal with wisdom about life or essential attitudes toward life. A conspicuously large segment of the readership of the four books is middle-aged and older people, mirroring the reality of today's rapidly aging society.

Matayoshi's *Hibana* received continued media attention after its publication, and a total of 2.45 million paper copies and 130,000 digital copies have been sold. Jennifer L Scott's *Lessons from Madame Chic* (the title of the Japanese translation is *Furansujin wa jutchaku shika fuku o motanai* [The French Have Only Ten Sets of Clothes]), often referred in the media, is also a best-seller of 651,000 copies. Tsubota Nobutaka's *Gakunen biri no gyaru ga ichinen de hensachi o yonjū age* *Keiō Daigaku ni gen'eki gōkaku shita hanashi* is a real-life story of a high school girl with failing grades, who, after vigorous studying in her senior year, passes the entrance examination to the prestigious Keio University. The book was published in late 2013 and made into a film (titled *Biri Gyarū*; Flying Colors) in 2015.

Among the top ten best-sellers in the "bunko" format are works by popular mystery writers Higashino Keigo and Minato Kanae. The established best-seller writers, known for reliably good reading, have many steady fans.

## Mishima Yukio Anniversaries

November 25, 2015 marked the forty-fifth year since the death of writer Mishima Yukio (1925–70). Conversant in the classics of both East and West, he created a distinctive world of beauty. An international symposium focusing on Mishima Yukio was held at the University of Tokyo on November 14, 2015. Writer Hirano Keiichirō and other Mishima experts from Japan and overseas discussed the fascination of Mishima literature before an enthusiastic audience of 450.

Professor Irmela Hijiya-Kirschneit, of the Free University of Berlin, testified to Mishima's enduring popularity among young students in Germany and the unexpected and sophisticated qualities of his writing that make him compelling even today. Donald Keene recounted a number of heartwarming episodes relating to Mishima, such as his first encounter with the writer, and Mishima's excitement with his translation of Mishima's *Kindai nōgaku shū* (Eng. tr., *Five Modern Noh Plays*).

Publication of Mishima-related works is also lively. A collection of Mishima quotes entitled *Mishima Yukio no kotoba: Ningen no saga* [Mishima Yukio's Words: The Nature of Humankind] and *Bara kei*, a 1963 photography collection of Mishima showing off his fine physique, have been republished as "twenty-first century editions."

Miwa Tarō's *Yūkokusha-tachi* [The Patriots] (see p. 6) reveals many facets of Mishima often hidden behind his political rhetoric and actions.

## Yonezawa Honobu Captures Three Mystery Rankings

For the second year in a row, writer Yonezawa Honobu captured the top spot in three mystery fiction rankings announced at the end of 2015. His *Ō to sōkasu* [The King and the Circus] placed first in the Mystery We Want to Read!, the Shūkan Bunshun Best 10 Mysteries, and These Mysteries Are

Terrific rankings. The story centers on a journalist visiting Nepal in 2001, who comes across a case involving the murder of nine members of the royal family including the king and queen by the prince. While investigating the murders, the protagonist examines the essence of his profession, “for what purpose do I write?”

## “Our” Generation As Reflected in Girls’ Manga

Two girls’ monthly manga magazines, *Ribon* (Shūeisha) and *Nakayoshi* (Kōdansha), marked the sixtieth year since their inauguration in 2015. A look at a chronicle of *shōjo* (girls) manga offers insight into the social conditions of Japanese girls and women of their times.

Long lines formed for entrance to the Yayoi Museum (Tokyo) exhibit featuring the manga artist Mutsu Œko, pioneer of the *otomechikku* love comedy genre of *shōjo* manga that was at its height in the 1970s and 1980s. The girl protagonists of the 1960s were drawn with blond hair and blue eyes and were often set in Western countries, but Mutsu forged new territory by depicting the love stories of “just ordinary girls.”

The years around 1990 were a time of strong heroines. The catch phrase of the series *Waru* (written with the characters for “bad girl”)—launched in 1988—was “Girls want to get ahead in life, too.” *Hana yori dango* [*Boys Over Flowers*] has sold 61 million copies—the largest figure among manga for female readers—revolved around an irrepressible high school girl. These manga extolled strong women who got what they wanted, whether it is love, friendship, or work.

In 1997, households in Japan where both spouses work outnumbered households with fulltime housewives, and manga began to express the unconcealed sentiments of overworked women. *Kimi wa petto* [trans. *Tramps Like Us*] is a story of a hard-driving working woman who finds solace in her younger lover, who is a dancer. The issues dealt with in *shōjo* manga also spread beyond the romance genre, as in such manga as *Nana* and *Hataraki man* [Hard-working “Man”] also gained popularity.

Stories of pure love made a comeback around 2005. *Kimi ni todoke* [I Send My Love to You] portrayed a school girl’s love for a popular guy in her class. Young people remain realistic in their views of love and marriage, but perhaps in manga they crave pure love and the thrill of romance.

The gourmet manga *Kinō nani tabeta?* [What Did You Eat Yesterday?] describing the life of a gay couple is popular. Manga work to overcome biases in society and it can play an important role as a media through which new values permeate society.

## Two Words Win the Buzzwords Prize

“Bakugai” (splurge buying), associated with the shopping sprees of Chinese tourists in Japan, and “toripuru suru” (“triple threes”), encapsulating the achievements of baseball players who excelled by attaining a .300 or better batting average, 30 or more home runs, and 30 or more stolen bases in a year. The two words were chosen to receive the 2015 U-Can New Words and Buzzwords Awards, as announced on December 1, 2015.

## First Kawabata Yasunari Reprint in Sixty Years

Kawabata Yasunari’s *shōjo* novel (novels targeting young girls that disappeared with the popularization of manga) *Shin’yū* [Best Friends] was reprinted for the first time in sixty years by Shōgakukan. It was originally published in the monthly girls’ magazine *Jogakusei no tomo* [School Girl’s Friend], between January 1954 and March 1955 and later published in book form by a different publisher but has long been out of print.

The story revolves around two girls who enter junior high school after the end of World War II. The illustrations are by the then popular illustrator Tamai Tokutarō. Kawabata wrote several *shōjo* novels, but this was the last. *Shōjo* novels were considered a secondary genre, but when *Shin’yū* was being serialized, Kawabata had completed *Yukiguni* [Snow Country] and his reputation among the leading writers of his day was well established. The

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novel was discovered through careful research in the magazines of the day.

## Data on the Classics for Everyone

In order to make Japan’s classics widely available, the National Institute of Japanese Literature (Tokyo) launched a database that allows downloading of images of some 350 works of early Japanese literature, including the famous *Genji monogatari* (The Tale of Genji).

The works included are primarily hand-copies or printed works from the Edo period and before. Five items, including the *Genji monogatari* and the twenty-one imperial collections of waka poetry (*Nijūichidai-shū*), are accompanied by text data versions. The works provided range from the illustrated *kyōka* (a comic variant of waka poetry) book by Kitagawa Utamaro *Ehon Mushi erami* [Illustrated Insects Selected] to Japan’s oldest book of medicine, the *Ishinpō*. NIJL owns some 16,000 items and plans to gradually make them available online.

The works can be downloaded at the Information Science Research Repository website: <http://www.nii.ac.jp/dsc/idr/nijl/nijl.html>

## Literature for the Soul

Literature can soothe frayed nerves and offer oasis in stressful lives. The author who can produce such work is a master of the trade, among whom Hirano Keiichirō is a perfect example. The latest work of the Akutagawa Prize-winning author is a gripping romantic novel, *Matinée no owari ni* [At the end of the Matinée]. Before writing it, Hirano had interviewed journalist Gotō Kenji, who was later captured and killed by the ISIL. Hirano was appalled by the atrocity and concerned about its impact in Japanese society. In writing the novel, he has attempted to heal the souls of Japanese, many of whom were deeply affected by the horror of the incident.

The novel, which resonates with readers of all ages, is about a world-famous Japanese classical guitarist and a female journalist working in Iraq. They fall in love at first sight, but their paths are separated due to the twists of fate. They appreciate the same music, offer compassion to the weak, and share like moral values.

The story was first serialized in a newspaper before being made into a book, and the publisher was flooded with messages from eager readers, asking Hirano whether the couple's paths will cross again. When the story ended, fans who had savored Hirano's fictional world of words interwoven with mesmerizing music, such as J. S. Bach's cello suites, wrote in to the paper, lamenting that they would no longer be able to read the beautiful story. "I originally wrote this story for my own mental health," Hirano confesses, "so I was surprised to see how so many readers view the protagonists' destiny as their own."

Liberation is what Hirano has sought in his recent works. "I grapple seriously with the times, take in the intertwined lives of modern people, and create stories that set readers free from reality, immersing them in fiction, at least for a while," Hirano adds. "I hate slick fiction and novels that are just written beautifully but do not provide any kind of release."

*Matinée no owari ni* is not a simple love story, but highlights the question of life and death, civilization and culture, free will and fatalism, by introducing a diverse set of characters. These include the female protagonist's colleague, a refugee whose family was murdered in Bagdad; her fiancé, an American economist specializing in mathematical finance; and her father, a Croat filmmaker who met his Japanese wife in Europe. The journalist's mother is a survivor of the Nagasaki atomic bomb, and would have faced social discrimination, including finding a marriage partner, if she had stayed in Japan.

Implicit references to Rainer Maria Rilke's fifth *Duino Elegy*, which the Bohemian-Austrian poet wrote out of despair after World War I, enrich Hirano's novel. He also evokes Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, which examines the psychological makeup of an artist. "If you peel back the surface of my work," he says, "the history of world literature will loom forth, helping to expand the universe of my story."

Hirano made a sensational literary debut with *Nisshoku* [The Eclipse] in 1989. For that novella about a mystical

experience by a nineteenth-century French theologian, Hirano became the youngest recipient of the Akutagawa Prize at that time.

During the first decade of his writing career, the prodigy created intellectual novels completely disoriented from the reality of today's Japan, and various other stories written in an experimental style. He then switched his focus to ideas his Japanese audience could live by in tough times. "I couldn't ignore urgent social issues such as suicide and the identity crisis of youth," he explains.

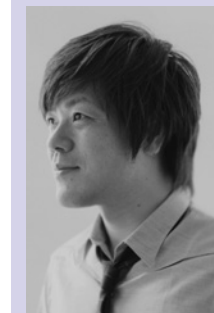
In *Kekkai* [Dam Break] (see JBN No. 58), a novel that served as a turning point for Hirano, he raises the issue of who we are by showing the agony of an elite civil servant wrongly accused of murdering his beloved brother. Around the same time, he also published a theoretical essay, *Watashi to wa nani ka: "kojin" kara "bunjin" e* [What Am I: From "Individual" to "Dividual"] to introduce his philosophy of what he terms the "dividual" or split self, in which a person has many faces that are selectively shown to different people in different situations. Impressed by this concept, psychiatrists and local governments now recommend this work as a measure to stave off suicide.

Since *Kekkai*, Hirano himself has employed this idea in all his writing. Portraying multiple persona in a single character, however, is technically difficult, because the writer has only words as a means to express it. Hirano, however, recognized the challenge. "Before introducing this idea to the novel format, I thought deeply about the concept of 'dividual,' or 'split self,' and promoted it in my writing, so that I could make the characters believable," he says confidently.

Hirano's next challenge is to consider whether people could really be happy if everything were automated, and whether people will actively choose what they want to do, or merely follow a pre-determined path. "The advent of the Internet seems to have brought about increased transparency, but has also adversely heightened the sense of uncertainty about the future," Hirano says. "I want to weave these issues into my stories, asking my readers whether we are in 'a transparent labyrinth,'" the term he uses for the title of his recent short story collection.

"Literature is not a pedants' hobby," Hirano asserts. "I want to keep raising questions and presenting solutions in my work."

(Kawakatsu Miki, freelance writer)



**Hirano Keiichirō**

Born in 1975. His major works include *Nisshoku*, which has been translated into many languages including Arabic and French; *Sōsō* [The Funeral], an epic novel tracing the agony and joy of the life of Frederic Chopin, George Sand, and Eugene Delacroix; and *Kūhaku o mitashinasai* [Fill in the Blanks] (see JBN No. 77), a novel questioning the meaning of life, death and happiness by bringing a dead character back to life.

(Photo by Takimoto Mikiya)