

Japanese Literature in Translation, the 1990s and Beyond

[Compiled by Brian Bergstrom, University of Chicago]

There has been a small boom in the publication of contemporary Japanese literature due to the rise in interest in Japanese comics and animation. Consequently, the literature to be found in translation has tended to be what is referred to as “J-literature” – similar to American “pop” literature, one finds an emphasis on young protagonists, experiments with genre, and a plain-spoken, deadpan tone. While these works are sometimes viewed as relatively disposable, enough authors with substantive pedigrees and ambitious goals have contributed to this trend that perhaps it would be best not to view it as a passing fad or the “death of literature” (as literary critic KARATANI Kojin has termed it), but rather as a reconfiguration of the cultural role literature can fulfill.

Below are some of the most provocative and interesting examples of J-Lit from Heisei Japan (1989-present) [*Publication dates match the latest edition available for the English translation, not the work’s original publication in Japanese*]:

EKUNI Kaori. *Twinkle, Twinkle*. New York: Vertical, 2003

This book was published in Japanese in the early 1990s and became a bestseller, spawning a movie adaptation and the continued prominence of its author. It tells the story of an alcoholic woman and a gay doctor who enter into a marriage of convenience that becomes complicated by the woman realizing that she is falling in love with the doctor. Comic and airy in tone, the novel nonetheless draws power from the undercurrent of sadness that acts as a subtle critique of the normative sexual mores that have cornered the main characters into the situation they’ve gotten themselves into.

KANEHARA Hitomi. *Snakes and Earrings*. New York: Dutton Books, 2005.

The Akutagawa Prize, the highest literary honor given to practitioners of so-called “pure” literature, struck another blow for the inclusion of J-Lit into the purview of this “purity” when it awarded prizes to two young women, aged 19 and 20, in 2003, making for two of the youngest recipients in the award’s history. Kanehara is the older of the two, and her prize-winning book is now available in English. Chronicling the travails of a teenage runaway entranced by body piercing, specifically the making of a snakelike “split-tongue” like her boyfriend’s, the book parallels body modification with psychological transformation, cataloguing the wounds inflicted on both her flesh and her mind with visceral panache.

KIRINO Natsuo. *OUT*. New York: Vintage, 2005.

Hard-boiled, uncompromising, and vicious, Kirino is the darker, more explicit counterpart to her only real peer among female mystery novelists currently working in Japan: the comparatively staid Miyabe Miyuki. *OUT*, the first of Kirino’s novels to be translated, tells the story of four women who work the night shift at a bento-box factory and get wrapped up in a body-disposal scheme when one of their group kills her abusive

husband. The storytelling is meticulously detailed, making for a rather slow beginning, but once it gets going, it becomes impossible to put down. It also touches on several hot-button issues along the way, including women's rights, immigrant labor, and alienation within the domestic sphere.

MIYABE Miyuki. *Shadow Family*. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2005.

Miyabe's earlier translated novel, *All She Was Worth* (Mariner Books, 1999), dealt with the issue of overspending and consumerism, and she continues to graft social concerns onto the generic framework of the mystery novel in her latest novel to be translated, *Shadow Family*. This time, Miyabe is making a point about the breakdown of the family and the infiltration of technology into everyday life by focusing on a murder caused in part by participation in computerized role-playing games (the Japanese title is *RPG*).

MURAKAMI Haruki. *Kafka on the Shore*. New York: Knopf, 2005.

Undoubtedly the most famous current Japanese novelist outside of Japan, nearly all of Murakami's prodigious output is available in English, his latest short stories appearing regularly in venues like the *New Yorker* with only a few months delay after their Japanese publication. His latest full-length novel is in many ways "vintage" Murakami, filled with deadpan surrealism, absurdist humor, and a peculiar atmosphere of free-floating unease. *Kafka* is unusual in that its protagonist is a rather virile young man who stands in marked contrast to the diffident middle-aged heroes of most of his books, and this leads Murakami to make the specifically Oedipal rhythms of the coming-of-age narrative drive this book along as it wanders through an otherwise familiar Murakami landscape filled with memories of World War II, portals to parallel worlds, winsomely beguiling love interests, and wise, talking cats.

MURAKAMI Ryu. *In the Miso Soup* (Penguin, 2006)

Though less famous outside of Japan than the other Murakami, this Murakami is an extremely prominent figure domestically, spending most of the 90s parlaying the literary reputation he derived from earlier works like *Almost Transparent Blue* (Kodansha America, 2003), *69* (Kodansha, 2006), and *Coin-Locker Babies* (Kodansha, 2004), into a secondary career as a cultural critic and talking head. *In the Miso Soup* is a good example of his fiction during this later period, fusing a sensationalistic, violent story about the relationship between an American serial killer and his Japanese translator/tour guide with a thoroughgoing critique of contemporary Japanese society.

SAKURAI Ami. *Innocent World*. New York: Vertical, 2004

Probably the most paradigmatically "J-Lit"-ish author represented on this list, Sakurai's slim, candy-colored novels take up whole shelves in Japanese bookstores, and a new one seems always just around the corner. *Innocent World* is her debut, establishing its author's persona with her now-trademark juxtaposition of sensationalistic plot elements (incest, teenage prostitution, etc.) and an aggressively "naïve" narrative voice that seems

to polarize readers who find her literary vision either revelatory or a symptom of everything that is wrong with young people today.

TAGUCHI, Randy. *Outlet*. New York: Vertical, 2003.

Taguchi rose to prominence as a popular internet columnist, and her first novel is based on the death of her brother, who was a *hikikomori* (shut-in), which was the subject matter for many of the columns that made her reputation. Funny, dark, and filled with unexpected moments, *Outlet* is the first in a trilogy Taguchi wrote exploring the linkage between the technological world of the internet, the spiritually connected world of shamanism, and the therapeutically mediated world of psychoanalysis.

TAKAMI Koshun. *Battle Royale*. San Francisco: VIZ Media LCC, 2003

The novel that the 2000 FUKASAKU Kinji movie of the same name was based on, this long but fast-paced book tells of a near-future Japanese government that has devised a game in which a class of junior-high school children are chosen each year to be spirited away to an island and forced to battle each other until only one remains alive. Extremely violent, laughably melodramatic, and fiendishly addictive, this book provoked a cultural phenomenon that is still echoing throughout the world six years later as the comic book version (which is being translated almost simultaneously with its Japanese publication) is concluding its serialization.

TAKEMOTO Novala. *Kamikaze Girls*. San Francisco: VIZ Media LCC, 2006.

Another novel that has been recently made into a movie distributed internationally, *Kamikaze Girls* tells of the unlikely friendship between two girls who exemplify two oppositional female subcultures: the tough “Yankee” girl and the “Lolita-goth” girl covered in lace and pink gingham. This seriocomic novel follows these two as they go on a road trip, focusing on their realization of all they have in common along the way.