



## Filming History

Michael Sullivan explores a Kurosawa controversy

## The Cultural Cross

Fumiko Halloran follows a falling star



In this issue we focus on various aspects of the Japanese movie industry with some stimulating reviews of recent books. Michael Sullivan examines *All the Emperor's Men* which charts the legendary director Akira Kurosawa's incursion into Hollywood. In an in-depth book Hiroshi Tasogawa details Kurosawa's traumatic involvement in a fractious partnership with 20th Century Fox. Kurosawa was slated to direct *Tora Tora Tora*, which was supposed to tell the story of Pearl Harbor from both a Japanese and American perspective. However, miscommunication, cultural misunderstandings and completely different working practices crippled the production. Next Roger Macy casts a critical eye on Jasper Sharp's encyclopedic work *Historical Dictionary of Japanese Cinema*. Sharp produces a comprehensive study of Japanese cinema, with some 320 pages devoted to selected main entries, and the remainder to the fact-packed appendices. We next look at the fascinating *World Film Locations: Tokyo* edited by Chris MaGee with contributions from 18 writers including MaGee himself. This book takes us on an eighty-year historical journey of movie making in the capital. The wonderful thing about film is its power to preserve a world that no longer exists and this volume allows the reader to glimpse the ghosts of Tokyo past. Along with several articles the work covers 45 scenes from different movies that have featured Tokyo along with photos, maps and a short description. The first section covers the period 1929-1960, which I found particularly enlightening, taking the reader back to prewar Tokyo. For example, one surviving movie fragment from 1929 shows lively vistas of the capital that vanished long ago. In the section covering 1961 to 1978

the reader witnesses the metamorphosis to mega-metropolis and there are also vivid reminders of major events in Tokyo's history such as the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. Fumiko Halloran looks at a thought-provoking book on the international Japanese movie star Yoshiko Yamaguchi who was popular not only in Hollywood but also in both Japan and China from the 1930s to 1950s. Fluent in Mandarin and trained by a Russian opera singer, Yamaguchi lived a complicated life with several identities. In a gripping memoir *My Life as Li Xianglan*, Yamaguchi tells of the terrible conflicts she faced with a career spanning both China and Japan at a time of conflict. Susan Meehan gives us her take on *Bonsai*, the award-winning Chilean movie directed by Cristián Jiménez. The narrative flips back and forth over an eight year period; initially centering on the university romance between Julio and Emilia. *Bonsai* is a youthful and whimsical production inspired by literature with Proust especially looming large. The movie has what the director calls a 'Japanese sensibility.' We next glide into the increasingly popular movie/book realm with a look at Keigo Higashino's novel *The Devotion of Suspect X* which was also a highly successful 2008 movie directed by Hiroshi Nishitani, starring Shinichi Tsutsumi and Yasuko Matsuyuki. The prize-winning author Keigo Higashino perfectly illustrates the current trend of successful novels being transformed into hit movies and the blurring of the boundary between the movie and book worlds.

Sean Curtin, August 2012

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## All the Emperor's Men

by Hiroshi Tasogawa

Applause Books, November 2012

336 pages, \$29.99 / ¥ 2,770

ISBN: 155783850

Review by Michael Sullivan



In a career spanning over 50 years Akira Kurosawa (黒澤明) directed over 30 movies, in all likelihood everyone has seen at least one of his movies, whether it is the epic *Ran* (乱) or the classic *Seven Samurai* (七人の侍). He was a huge influence on the history of cinema and in 1990 he was awarded the Academy Award for Lifetime Achievement. In this book Hiroshi Tasogawa details a period of Kurosawa's life during which he was involved in the 20th Century Fox production of *Tora Tora Tora* (トラ・トラ・トラ). It was envisioned that this movie would tell the story of Pearl Harbor from a Japanese perspective and from an American perspective. However, when it came to shooting the movie Kurosawa was dismissed within weeks and the movie subsequently completed by different directors. In the months that followed it became apparent that there was no clear answer to what had happened as different sources claimed that Kurosawa had been sick, hadn't been sick, betrayed or even ousted by a Hollywood conspiracy.

Hiroshi Tasogawa graduated from Waseda University in 1958, he has been a reporter for NHK and the Associated Press, and was a professor of media at Tokai University. During the two years of Kurosawa's involvement in *Tora Tora Tora* Tasogawa worked as an interpreter for Kurosawa as well as a translator of the screenplay. In this book he details the events of those years and attempts to shed light on why this partnership ultimately failed and why all those involved ended up with a different idea of what went wrong.

The book describes all the facts in vivid detail and serves as bit of a window into the mind of a great director like Kurosawa, it also considers the inherent miscommunication that can occur between two very different cultures such as the East and the West as well as how different methods of working can lead to great misunderstandings. A lot of the book details the build-up to the shooting of the movie and the amount of work put in by Kurosawa, as we follow events along two important facts become clear: Kurosawa saw this as a chance not only to present the Japanese version of events but also to present the tragedy of admiral Yamamoto (Commander-in-chief of the Japanese Navy), and that while Hollywood appreciated the films that Kurosawa had directed, they hadn't actually done a lot of research on his work methods. This would prove to be a fatal flaw, especially when the producers and 20th Century Fox representatives were faced with

behaviour and shooting delays which seemed crazy. Further flaws in the partnership become clear when Tasogawa looks at the contract and reveals how what Kurosawa thought was his role and what 20th Century Fox were actually expecting him to do were quite different on some very key points including overall direction, editing and even whether this was a co-production or a purely 20th Century Fox production.

This book describes in great detail the huge amount of work that had to be done before a movie could even reach the stage of shooting, it is a real revelation on aspects such as the screenplay, casting, budget and especially the heart and soul that Kurosawa put into it. It is a real page turner, and in particular the insight into Kurosawa's character has left me wanting to watch his movies again in order to better understand the man behind the movie, and to watch *Tora Tora Tora* again in order to consider for myself what the movie might have been like with some of the cut scenes described in Tasogawa's book, which within a Japanese perspective of the events that led up to Pearl Harbor would have presented Kurosawa's depiction of the tragedy of admiral Yamamoto.

It seems that many problems can arise not only between two very different cultures using different languages, but also from a basic level between a director who was an artist and a film company that was a business. In the end the film *Tora Tora Tora* which was completed didn't include scenes that Kurosawa felt were key to the story and we can only wonder what could have been if he had managed to stay in the director's chair. Tasogawa makes it clear that he can see the irony that a movie about the many misunderstandings that took place before and during Pearl Harbor would itself suffer a similar series of misunderstandings.

### Note

Also see our earlier review of Hiroshi Tasogawa's Japanese version of this book in Issue 17 (December 2008) "Kurosawa Akira vs. Hollywood." The Japanese book was very popular and won several awards. *Kurosawa Akira vs. Hollywood*, by Hiroshi Tasogawa, Bungei Shunju, 2006, 486 pages, hardback ¥ 2476, ISBN-13: 978-4163677903, review by Fumiko Halloran

# TORA!TORA!TORA!

The incredible attack on Pearl Harbor as told from both the American and Japanese sides.



From 20th Century-Fox. The most spectacular film ever made.

A film poster for *Tora Tora Tora*



## Historical Dictionary of Japanese Cinema by Jasper Sharp

Scarecrow Press, 2011

564 pages, £59.95

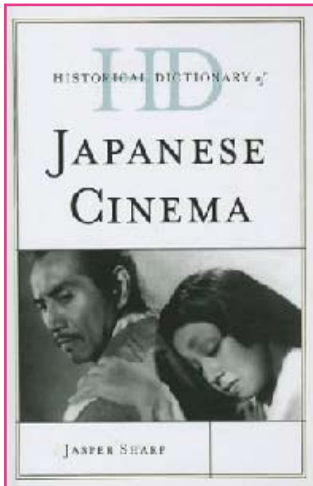
ISBN-10: 0810857952

Review by Roger Macy

Let me introduce you to a cultural curiosity: the book. It has no links, it can't be updated, it's bulky and heavy, and is pretty much all the work of one person. Scarecrow Press have published scores of imprints in their 'Historical Dictionary' series, many of which are on the subject of a national cinema or other art-form. In the internet era, with many specialist databases thriving alongside general encyclopedias such as Wikipedia, it shows considerable courage to invest in a single-shot print publication of a dictionary or encyclopedia, which needs to be authoritative, but which presents itself with thousands of opportunities to get things wrong or out of date. 'Thousands' is a considerable understatement of the risk of error. Of the 520 pages in Sharp's volume on Japanese cinema, some 320 are devoted to selected main entries, and the remainder to the appendices. The appendices include over a hundred pages of listings of organizations, individuals, films and terms— each first in English rendering with Japanese script and romaji [Japanese expressed in the Latin alphabet] alongside. Finally, there is a 98-page bibliography. My back-of-envelope calculation suggests the opportunities for error-in-detail are of the order of 100,000, nearly all of which have been avoided.

But for all the nobility of such a pains-taking cause, a reviewer has to ask, in the third millennium, as to whether a Historical Dictionary in print-form can ever again serve a scholar. For printed listings, they can only serve in the way the editors choose to sort and display them. No listing here is indexed back to the main text. Companies and organisations are listed in alphabetical order of their romaji renderings (and the wall-to-wall capitalisations do not help readability). Films are listed alphabetically by their translated titles. If the referenced director has a main entry, all well and good but otherwise it's just an orphaned listing. Actually, they work better as an index to another Stonebridge publication, Alexander Jacoby's *A Critical Handbook of Japanese Directors* which, as a sister old-fangled book, has excellent filmographies for 150 directors, but no way in, if you don't know the film's director.

The listings of individuals have their own peculiarity. Whilst none are indexed to the main text, someone has gone to the trouble of excluding those individuals with a main entry without explaining this. It would



also have been helpful for the pages to be headed 'Directors,' 'Performers' or 'Other figures,' so that one doesn't conclude a false negative. Each of these points can be rectified, by another piece of old-technology – writing annotations on the book. I would suggest that an owner will need to overcome that taboo, to get full value from this publication. That is particularly true for the bibliography. Whilst it is organised into some twenty categories, the bulk of the references relate 'Particular Films / Filmmakers,' etc, but these entries are listed alphabetically by author of the commentaries. That makes eminent sense in a monograph where names and subjects are indexed, but leaves these pieces virtually unfindable unless the work is already known. That seems to me to be a lost opportunity. Indexing commentaries by film would have filled a real gap.

Many of these quibbles clearly relate to common organisational themes of the series and cannot be ascribed to the author. Areas where Sharp has clearly deployed his considerable knowledge to effect is the listing of 'Other figures.' For instance MORI Iwao (森岩雄) is 'Toho production head,' MORI Masayuki (森昌行) is 'Producer' but MORI Katsuyuki (森且行) is 'Former SMAP member.' That last meant nothing to me, but 'SMAP' duly gets its own entry. I learnt which talent agency developed this aidoru group, who the members are, and how their careers were developed. That's the kind of detail that doesn't appear in other English-language books.

It is probably in the show-business history that Sharp's contribution is most valuable. He has devoted entries to some of the more famous 'classic' directors but the format doesn't allow him to say anything new, and doesn't point towards any key works by others. Actors and other personnel, on the other hand are much better served here than by other English language publications, particularly for the current generation. But, alas, it seems Japanese media companies are still charging too much for simple still photos for reference books to be appropriately illustrated.

Another strength of Sharp's Dictionary is censorship. Not only is there a main entry of some length, numerous figures who have run up against Japanese film censorship have entries. These figures do not only relate to Sharp's previous volume on 'pink' films, *Beyond the Pink Curtain*, but also to various political disputes of the twentieth century. So I was disappointed that Sharp could not find space to address the most controversial topic, the routine portrayal of rape as entertainment in a large sector of the Japanese film industry. That seems to me to be a much more relevant subject than the arid business of the non-portrayal of pudenda. For 'pink' film subjects in general, I would refer the reader to Sharp's 'Pink' book, where a larger budget allowed filmographies to be better organised. Too often, in the Historical Dictionary, an entry reads like a list in prose-form,

which would be far more readable, and usable, as a list.

It certainly can't be easy to freeze content into a book that has to serve a range of readers, some who might come to it with a surface interest in film but little knowledge of Japanese history, and others who might be historians with little experience of film. So, how to mention the war? A twelve-page entry certainly doesn't shirk the subject. Since there's also a specific 4-page bibliography on the same subject of 'War and Film,' my previous quibble about lack of referencing doesn't apply here, although it would have been more friendly for one to refer to the other. It's a lot of facts at varying levels to follow one another without subdivision or indexing, and I would recommend a student to go to original essays on the subject, many of which are listed. Specifically, if there were such a complete absence of anti-Soviet battles or war films, it would have been notable, but there are examples of both; and 'umiwashi' needs to be rendered in English as 'Sea Eagle.' There is also no mention of the theatrical antecedents for many war-time films mentioned. A neglect of writers can be seen elsewhere, for example on Atomic Bomb cinema—the 'dramatic reconstruction' in 1995 of decision-making on the Japanese side before Hiroshima was the work of scriptwriter Ishidō Toshiro. The important entry for the 'Manei' company provides further war-time details but, as for the statement, 'much of its local output was destroyed during the Soviet invasion, with what remains in China's Film Archives or at Changchun Studio, thereby essentially lost to Japanese researchers' – that needs qualification in respect of the recoveries from Gosfilm, listed in the NFC newsletter number 61 of 2005.

The policy on rendering Japanese into romaji is explained and consistent. I soon got used to seeing all names with macrons, and all places without. The accuracy is generally far beyond my level of detection, although I believe Ishihara Yūjirō should have two macrons.

Jasper Sharp has worked assiduously in an unyielding format and you would have to be very well-read not to mine new information from this resource.

## World Film Locations: Tokyo, edited by Chris MaGee

Intellect Ltd, October 2012

128 pages, £11.50

ISBN 1841504831

Review by Micahel Sullivan

For any fan of Japanese cinema, and with time to spare in Tokyo, this book is a must as it charts a journey of eighty years of movies being filmed in the



great capital city of Japan. The editor Chris MaGee, who is the editor of the Toronto J-Film Pow-Wow Japanese film blog in Canada, includes contributions from 17 other writers in his book. The work covers 45 scenes from different movies that have featured Tokyo along with photos, maps and a short description. There are also seven articles which focus on different aspects of Japanese cinema.

The first section covers the period 1929-1960, in the description of each example scene we are also taken on a journey through cinema history, for example there is a description of how much footage is lost from before 1945 due to the highly flammable nitrate used for film stock, the damage Tokyo suffered in World War II and the film prints that were burned in the post war period by American censors. One surviving fragment of a movie from 1929 shows scenes of a Tokyo that has long since disappeared. It is only in the 1950s that more films exist which show buildings of the city that can still be seen today, one amusing example is the clock of the Wako Department Store in Ginza which features in the 1954 movie *Gozilla* (Gorija) and which doesn't escape destruction.

From 1961 to 1978 we are given vivid reminders of major events in Tokyo's history starting with the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and the route taken by the marathon runners which can be seen in *Tokyo Olympiad*. In conjunction with the Olympics the New Otani hotel in Chiyoda was built and opened in 1964, at this time this was the tallest building in Tokyo and three years later it would feature in the James Bond movie *You Only Live Twice* as the headquarters of an evil organisation. From personal experience from the restaurants at the top of this building there is still a lovely view of Tokyo as well as the nearby Akasaka Palace. Another moment from history is shown in the 1971 movie *Throw Away Your Books and Rally In The Streets*, in the 1960s protests by the nation's youths were common and this movie shows the chaos in the streets.

The third section starts to bring this overview of Tokyo movie scenes up to date as the period 1979-1999 includes scenes from Tokyo Tower in the 1985 film *Tokyo-Ga* and also the animated movie *Pom Poko*. This Studio Ghibli movie was based on a real life area of Tokyo called Tama Hills which was redeveloped for human habitation and tells the fiction tale of the fight the raccoons (tanuki) fought to protect the shrinking forest. There is also another scene from Takeshi Kitano's *Kikujiro*, as a young man he lived in the area of Asakusa and at the beginning of this film we are taken on a quick tour of this same place seen through the eyes of a boy.

As can be expected the final journey of Tokyo's cinematic history brings us to the most recent, as well as iconic, movies such as *Lost In Translation*, *Kill Bill*, and *The Taste of Fish* (Tsukiji Uogashi Sandaime). Scenes



from Pachinko parlours, bridges, bookshops and fish markets are shown, and of course all can be still seen today. For anyone interested in Japanese cinema and with an opportunity to visit Tokyo this book is a must buy. Not only does cinema bring a city to life, but it is a pleasure to see the same places with your own eyes.

## My Life as Li Xianglan (「李香蘭」を生きて)

by Yamaguchi Yoshiko

Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 2004

241 pages, ¥1600

Review by Fumiko Halloran

Yamaguchi Yoshiko was a prominent movie star and singer from the late 1930's to 1958 when she married a Japanese diplomat and retired from a successful but controversial career. She was popular not only in Japan but in China, Hong Kong, and Hollywood.

The dramatic life she describes in this memoir illustrates the fate of a beautiful and talented girl who grew up in Manchuria when Japan established a puppet state there in 1932. Fluent in Mandarin and trained by a Russian opera singer, Yamaguchi lived a complicated life with several identities. This memoir illustrates the difficulties of living in a cross cultural environment that is exacerbated by civil turmoil and international conflict.

Born in 1920 to Japanese parents who lived in Fushun, Manchuria, her name was Yamaguchi Yoshiko according to her family's registry in Saga Prefecture, Japan. Then, in accord with a Chinese tradition, she had two Chinese adoptive fathers, both of whom were close friends of her father, Yamaguchi Fumio. From them, she was given two Chinese names, Li Xianglan as the adopted daughter of General Li Jichun, and Pan Shuhua as politician Pan Yugui's adopted daughter.

When she appeared in movies, she played the roles of Chinese girls or women and spoke only Mandarin. Millions of Chinese fans believed her to be Chinese until after World War II. She was put on trial by Chinese military authorities who accused her of betraying China to spy for Japan. She was found not guilty, however, after she proved that she was in fact Japanese. She escaped execution and was expelled from China.

Returning to Japan in 1946, she resumed her film career and married an internationally known artist Noguchi Isamu. Five years later they were divorced. She went to New York in 1956 to star in the Broadway musical *Shangri La* under the stage name of Shirley Yamaguchi.



There she met Otaka Hiroshi, a young diplomat eight years younger, while she was performing in that musical. After they married two years later, Yamaguchi chose the name Otaka Yoshiko and retired from films and stage. Her husband later served as ambassador to Sri Lanka and Myanmar. She used her Otaka name when she ran for and was elected to the House of Councilors in 1974. She served in the parliament for eighteen years as a member of the Liberal Democratic Party.

Over the years in China, Japan, and America, she had five names with different identities. She suffered from emotional conflicts, according to this memoir, particularly as Li Xianglan, the Chinese star, which hid her true identity as a Japanese. As she rose toward stardom, Yamaguchi seemed unaware of the complicated political situation around her. She was keenly aware, however, of the Japanese military's attitude toward the Chinese and was hurt by both Japanese mistreatment of Chinese and the hostility of the Chinese toward Japanese. When she went to Japan for the first time when she was eighteen years old, she was shocked by Japanese contempt and condescension toward Chinese even though her singing of Chinese songs was popular.

During the year Yamaguchi was born, Mao Zedong was a young man organizing a socialist youth group, the League of Nations was established, and California passed legislation that was seen as an 'anti-Japan law' intended to limit Japanese immigration. In Europe, Mussolini grabbed political power in Italy and Hitler launched the first uprising in Munich, which failed.

As she grew to be a teenager in Manchuria and later Beijing, the Chinese fight against the Japanese was complicated by the civil war between the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party. The Yamaguchi family's Chinese friends were pro-Japan leaders who cooperated with the Japanese government and military while fighting the Chinese communists. Yet her best friend, a Russian girl with whom she maintained a lifelong friendship, turned out to have a father who was a Soviet Communist Party member working for Pravda and Tass, the Soviet publications.

Yamaguchi as Li Xianlang was named Japan's Manchurian Goodwill Ambassador as she was propelled to stardom with movies including *Leaving a Good Name for Posterity* about the Opium War. It was produced in Shanghai by a joint venture between Japanese and Chinese as Japanese propaganda. The head of the production company, Kawakita Nagamasa, was a veteran in the film industry and chose themes that passed Japanese military censorship but appealed to Chinese audiences. In this movie, the Chinese understood that British colonial ambitions in China had been parallel to modern Japanese ambitions. General Lin Zexu who fought against British was a national hero. Li Xianglan appeared as a girl selling

candy in the opium dens.

Yamaguchi recalls a painful press conference in Beijing shortly after the movie was released. A Chinese journalist accused her of appearing in movies like *Song of the White Orchid*, *China Nights* and *Vow in the Desert* in which Chinese women were mistreated by Japanese men but then they fell in love with them. A journalist asked: 'Where is your pride as a Chinese?' Yamaguchi writes that she almost confessed that she was Japanese. But the pressure on her not to disclose her true identity had been applied by different interest groups who had used her for political purposes. She apologized to the journalists and pledged not to be involved in such movies again.

She writes movingly about her visits to war zones in 1942. At that time she was working on an epic movie, *The Yellow River*, which took place near the frontline in Henan Province. Financed by the Manchurian Film Association, it was almost all a Chinese production. During the filming, the cast was in danger of being caught in the cross fire between the Japanese army and the Kuomintang or Communist Chinese forces. The theme was village life near the river in a place about to become a battlefield. When the production completed its work and left, Yamaguchi recalls that two extra train cars connected to theirs were filled with wounded Japanese soldiers covered with blood. Yamaguchi and another actress helped the medics attend to the wounded throughout the night. When the train stopped, even the dying soldiers wanted her to sing, so she jumped off the train and stood in a wheat field under the moonlight and sang old Japanese songs for the soldiers.

Having gone through pain of conflict between the Chinese and Japanese, and carrying a sense of guilt that her work as actress and singer had supported Japan's behavior toward China, Yamaguchi watched from Tokyo the signing ceremony in Beijing establishing diplomatic relations between Japan and the Peoples Republic of China in the fall of 1972-and cried. Today she calls China her fatherland and Japan as motherland and has a simple message: 'Stop war.'

## Bonsái directed by Cristian Jimenez

2011, (Spanish with English subtitles), 95minutes

Review by Susan Meehan

*Bonsái* is a youthful and whimsical film inspired by literature – Proust looms large. The film flits back and forth spanning a period of eight years; the earlier time centres on the



university romance between Julio and Emilia. They live in Valdivia, a city in southern Chile. She is a bright rock chick while he is mild and tender. The film is weighty with melancholic ennui and searching. It won the *Films in Progress 19 Award* in Toulouse in 2011 and was part of the *Official Selection, 2011 Cannes Film Festival*.

Though not a Japanese film, the title, of course, is. The director himself, on a tour of Japan, remarked on his film's 'Japanese sensibility.' I went to see it curious about the Japanese dimension. It is not as dark as *Norwegian Wood*, though from the start we know that, 'Emilia dies and Julio does not die, the rest is fiction,' but shares this Japanese film's grace and freshness.

*Bonsái* would suit anyone hoping to see something different and fresh and to witness the emergence of young Chilean talent in the form of the director, Cristian Jimenez, and the four main telegenic protagonists. Diego Noguera as Julio and Natalia Galgani as Emilia are fabulous.

For all its profundity, there are delightful moments of humour, especially when the students socialise. Some of the choice phrases at a home-party include, 'I learn Latin better with beer in my corpus.' A girl, perhaps Emilia, laments that for all the beer she's downed she's still stone sober, only to discover that it's non-alcoholic. Another scene has Julio reading *Swann's Way* on the beach. He falls asleep with the book open on his chest, which results in an odd book-stencilled sun-tan.

Eight years on, in the film's present, Emilia has all but disappeared and Julio is a struggling writer. He accepts a job typing up a novel by the well-known author Gazmuri. He's not yet started before he's replaced by a cheaper secretary and is too embarrassed to admit this turn of events to his neighbour, Blanca. Blanca is a translator, whom he beds with far less passion than he had for Emilia.

Julio begins to write a novel in long-hand, adding the occasional coffee stain for authenticity, as he passes it off as Gazmuri's. Through the book which Blanca helps transcribe, it would seem that the 'author' is still heart-broken. The viewer realises it is an outpouring of memories of Emilia, many of which revolve around bed and books such as *Madame Bovary* and *A Remembrance of Things Past*.

Blanca, meanwhile, perhaps inspired to find her true love and realising that she's not Julio's, decides to move on and does – to Spain.

Having now managed to lose his life's second-most meaningful relationship, Julio turns to looking after a bonsai almost as therapy, and compares this painstaking activity to writing a novel. The bonsai itself also seems to mirror his love life in its slow and uneven growth. If only he'd applied the same care to making his relationships succeed or maybe he had and stunted the one he had with Emilia. Does this experience

account for his indifference towards Blanca? Will his bonsai survive?

Jimenez has said that the film pays tribute to lies, fiction and the artificial and that it is full of jokes and music. Did Blanca realise Julio was lying about working for Gazmuri at any point and did Emilia lie when she said she'd read Proust?

Jimenez hadn't always counted on being a novelist, having toyed with the ambition of being a comedian. He certainly sounds as though he'd be convivial company.

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## The Devotion of Suspect X

by Keigo Higashino  
(translated by  
Alexander O. Smith  
with Elye J. Alexander)

Abacus, 2011

440 pages, £7.99

ISBN: 0349123748

Review by Michael Sullivan

Keigo Higashino [東野 圭吾] was born in Osaka in 1958. In 2006 he won the 134th Naoki Prize and the 6th Honkaku Mystery Grand Prize for his novel, *The Devotion of Suspect X*, which had been published the previous year. He has been writing since 1985 and has had numerous books, essays and children's stories published, many of which have been adapted for TV dramas and movies. In 2008 the movie of *The Devotion of Suspect X* was released, it was directed by Hiroshi Nishitani [西谷弘] and starred Shinichi Tsutsumi [堤真一] and Yasuko Matsuyuki [松雪 泰子]. This was the third highest grossing film of 2008 and featured the continuation of the same characters (and actors) from the 2007 TV drama *Galileo* [ガリレオ], which was also based on another book by Keigo Higashino.

Tetsuya Ishigami is a teacher, regarded as a mathematical genius in his school years he now teaches unmotivated school kids while living a very simple life. He has an unrequited infatuation with his neighbour, but as no one seems to notice, and he isn't willing to pursue it, it remains relatively innocent. His neighbour Yasuko Hanaoka is a single mother living with her teenage daughter Misato, after having moved several times to escape from an abusive ex-husband. Having previously worked as a hostess, she now works at a local bento shop. However, her ex husband, Shinji Togashi, isn't finished with her and he manages to track her down, demanding money he forces his way

into her flat and, fearing for her daughter, Yasuko does the unthinkable. In the aftermath she and her daughter are left staring down at the dead body of Shinji when suddenly someone knocks on the door. Her neighbour, Tetsuya, has guessed what has happened and ignoring Yasuko's denials he proposes an audacious plan to cover up the murder. Little does she know that in his head he can calculate the most likely odds of how the detectives will investigate and the probable outcome.

Shunpei Kusanagi is assigned to a new case, a mutilated dead body has been found by the river, the man's clothes have been partially burnt and a bicycle abandoned nearby. Enough clues are found to allow them to find the man's hotel room and figure out that they have discovered the body of Shinji Togashi. They soon learn that Shinji was looking for his wife and consequently check into her alibi, it turns out that on the evening when Shinji died Yasuko and Misato had been to the cinema and to karaoke, furthermore they state that they haven't seen Shinji for a long time. The alibis seem rock solid, they are even backed up by solid evidence at the cinema and karaoke shop, but something bothers Shunpei and he soon winds up speaking to his friend Manabu Yukawa, a physics professor, about this latest case. The story is given a further twist when it turns out that Manabu and Tetsuya were at university together, driven by his own curiosity and a wish for a reunion they meet for the first time in years. However, Manabu is prompted by his own suspicions to investigate further the connection between Tetsuya and Yasuko.

Meanwhile, Yasuko meets up with an old friend who is now a widower, and with whom a romantic spark flares up. Ever watchful Tetsuya notices this and his actions become decidedly sinister. At this point the tempo of the story quickens as Shunpei's and Manabu's separate investigations exert pressure on Yasuko and Tetsuya. However, it starts to become unclear whether they are following the clues that they find or that they are purposely being fed them. The second half of the story is very thought provoking and the reader is forced to become engrossed in the story. The author has a persuasive voice making the audience feel they know what has happened and who is lying while through the actions of Shunpei and Manabu making the reader slowly doubt they know how the crime was covered up, and more importantly know which crime was actually committed. Although the author could have focused a little more on the dilemma faced by women with abusive ex-partners, he still portrays Yasuko and her daughter compassionately while a clever twist in the story reveals that they aren't lying about their alibi.

