

The March issue of *The Japan Society Review* presents a diverse selection of reviews that explore Japan's civil society, urban history, postwar literature, and contemporary cinema, offering new insights into both past and present.

We begin with the *Handbook of Civil Society in Japan*, edited by Simon Avenell and Ogawa Akihiro. This volume brings together leading scholarship on civic engagement, exploring how civil society in Japan has evolved and responded to changing political and social conditions.

Timon Screech's *Tokyo Before Tokyo* traces the early development of Edo, highlighting how urban planning, aesthetics, and political authority shaped the foundations of Japan's modern capital.

Japan's tradition of mystery fiction has produced some of its most iconic postwar literature. In *The Coincidental Murders*, Sakaguchi Ango delivers a darkly ironic crime story that reflects postwar disillusionment and the ambiguity of justice. *Point Zero* by Matsumoto Seicho offers a more procedural narrative,

using the detective genre to expose systemic corruption and the moral complexity of modern society.

Kubo Misumi's *So We Look to the Sky* offers a quiet yet profound exploration of adolescent disillusionment and resilience. Through delicate prose and introspective characterisation, Kubo captures the emotional turbulence of youth as her protagonists navigate family, identity, and the pressures of a rapidly changing society.

Concluding this issue is the review of *Black Box Diaries*, a powerful documentary directed by Ito Shiori. Blending personal testimony with investigative journalism, Ito recounts her pursuit of justice in the aftermath of sexual assault. The film confronts societal silence and institutional barriers, offering a courageous and unflinching portrayal of gender, power, and resistance in contemporary Japan.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

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Roger Buckley, Mayumi Donovan, Laurence Green, Alex Russell and Trevor Skingle.

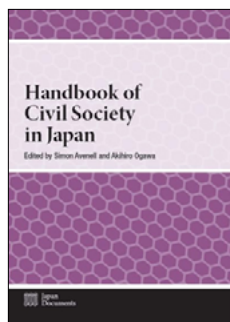
Image: Detail from the cover of *Tokyo Before Tokyo* by Timon Screech

Handbook of Civil Society in Japan

edited by Simon Avenell and Akihiro Ogawa

Japan Documents (2025)
ISBN-13: 978-4909286604

Review by Roger Buckley



The phrase is everywhere. International organizations, governments, think tanks, pressure groups and local communities use the term “civil society” all the time. It is invoked at one level by both Japan’s International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) as part of their good governance policies. At the other end of the spectrum, it can be linked to the volunteer fire stations, the sponsored welfare centres and the annual festivals held throughout Tokyo’s Minato-ku neighbourhoods.

Simon Avenell and Akihiro Ogawa as the co-editors of the latest Handbook put out by the Tokyo-based Japan Documents stable have had the challenging task of organizing fresh perspectives on important, vibrant but hard to define aspects of contemporary Japan. They have encouraged researchers drawn from within Japan and overseas to examine civil society (*shimin shakai*) as seen in the activities of NPOs (Nonprofit Organizations), anti-nuclear groups, the media, gender critics, territorial disputes and influential right-wing advocates.

The Handbook is divided into three segments: the first, and probably the one that readers will find particularly of interest, is labelled ‘Institutions’, the second is termed ‘Justice’ and the last and briefest ‘Transnationalisms’.

Part one has the most chapters and includes views on NPOs, Conservative Civil Society and one that invites comparisons with the British experience by Tobias Weiss on ‘Civil Society and Newspaper Journalism: The Nuclear Power Debate in Japan’. The twists and turns of the nuclear industry and those within the media happy to be their mouthpiece and willing to take their shilling makes for disturbing reading. Advocates for nuclear power who had fallen near silent after the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake may now be back in the saddle as the Japanese government has recently announced plans to raise once again the contribution of nuclear power in the nation’s overall energy strategy.

Many contributors share approximate agreement on the post-1945 evolution of the broad concept of civil society both as phenomenon and history. Perhaps more space might have been devoted to the efforts of the American Occupation’s commitment to encouraging citizen participation, as opposed to well established top

down state-directed community arrangements, but what links most case studies is an examination of the position in the early 21st century.

Given the myriad forms that civil society continues to take, it is near impossible both to provide more than a sample of the Japanese volunteer organizations claiming to stand, however loosely, between the state and the market or to reach any firm verdict on the success or failure of their efforts.

Definitions of civil society obviously vary; the co-editors, for example, have adopted the view that it should be a collective effort by participants undertaken ‘for normative and substantive purposes, relatively independent of government and the market’ (p.xix). Herein lies the rub. It would, if applied too zealously, have surely required the scrubbing out of Yoojin Koo’s illuminating piece on what in English is the Japan Conference, better known everywhere as Nippon kaigi. Given the immensely tight links today between Liberal Democratic Party Diet members and what began as a modest, pro-right, lobby effort in the 1990s, it is hard to see how Nippon kaigi can fit into the standard scheme of things. The late prime minister Abe Shinzo was far from alone in working with the organization to further what appears to be very much a shared agenda that wants, for example, the revision of school textbooks to eliminate masochistic interpretations of history, solution to the sad abduction of Japanese nationals by North Korea and maintenance of the Imperial succession only through the male line. If Nippon kaigi does indeed have close and undocumented links to many in the Japanese establishment then it can be said to have become a willing, co-opted actor with access to the mutual benefits embedded within the political-bureaucratic-industrial iron triangle. In the process it would seem to have shifted from being a neo-liberal part of civil society to semi-governmental agent.

Other groups may well prefer to keep their distance, though the sensitive issue of how to finance what are frequently small, one-issue groups is a perennial reality. Many international NPOs, for example, would find it hard to function without state support, since fund raising for those eager to despatch volunteers to Southeast Asia and beyond often depend on finance from the likes of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), subventions from sympathetic local governments and individual philanthropists.

Yet some of the Handbook’s authors are more optimistic and make arresting, if somewhat qualified, claims for the health and importance of Japan’s civil society. To give two examples. Daniel P. Aldrich and Yoshida Toshiaki begin their chapter on ‘Rethinking Civil Society-State Relations in Japan 13 Years after the Fukushima Accident’ with the

statement: 'It is no exaggeration to say that the events of March 11, 2011 changed the world' (p.188) They counter the once generally-held view of Japanese passivity in the face of the State but admit that the mass domestic and overseas protests after the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disasters have since faded, leaving, however, a welcome suspicion that officialdom no longer always knows best even when it does not.

Likewise, Scott Musgrave-Takeda in examining 'Contemporary Okinawan Civil Society and Exploring Environmental Justice' bluntly states in his opening paragraph that 'Okinawa is a marginalized space on the Japanese national periphery and its people, recognized

by the United Nations but not the central government are also one of the largest ethnic minorities in Japan' (p.174). Given, however, the nation's present economic problems it may well be that environmental issues involving Okinawan forestry and wider sustainable development both in Japan and across the G-7 countries may become of lesser importance as green issues risk losing out to more immediate growth priorities.

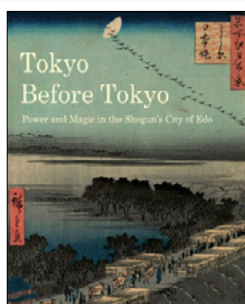
The challenges are evident yet the editors and their authors have combined to provide an immediate and highly informative analysis of current civil society Japanese style. Democratic activism lives. §

Tokyo Before Tokyo

by Timon Screech

Reaktion Books (2024)
ISBN-13: 978-1789149555

Review by Trevor Skingle



An almost academic but eminently readable introduction sets out the antecedents of Edo, the former name of the city known today as Tokyo. Then the book moves on to six chapters covering, firstly, how Edo was conceived; secondly, its layout and the central main bridge; thirdly, Edo in its abstract forms and its magical protection; fourthly, Edo Castle; fifthly, its culture; and sixthly, its 'floating worlds' or pleasure districts. Closing the book there is a brief final chapter looking at the transition from Edo to Tokyo.

In the first chapter, there are several cross-fertilising explanations and illustrations with other sites in Japan and abroad, many of which are surprising and unexpected at first, but patience and tolerance with the author is rewarded as these make sense in the author's explanations. Although not mentioned, there are some modern geomantic adaptations, such as the replacement of Kyoto's ancient southern exit/entrance, the Rajo-mon (see page 28), with the modern large rectangular space in Kyoto's main station structure, supposedly a geomantic exit/entrance for Kyoto's patron dragon.

Although the affluent Yamanote section of Edo is mentioned (page 43), there is no mention of the Shitamachi area, those parts of the city where the plebeian, merchant and artistic classes resided. Those familiar with this part of Tokyo's urban conceptual nomenclature might seem puzzled by this omission taking into consideration that, although it was not synonymous with Edo, its inhabitants were considered the real Edokko, the true children of Edo.

Chapter two deals with Nihonbashi, Tokyo's preeminent bridge, and mentions the bridge as a place from which to measure distance, and as the start/end point of one of the most important ancient travel routes, the Tokaido, as well as another to Nikko, the Nikkokaido - though, puzzlingly, the other three routes of the Gokaido (the Five Routes), the Koshukaido Road, the Oshukaido Road and the Nakasendo Road, are not mentioned. Perhaps the Nakasendo was omitted because the book emphasised the underlying spiritual significance of the stations of the Tokaido, even though, alongside the Tokaido, it was the other major route between Edo and Kyoto. Also covered is the main bell of Edo, although this time the other eight bells scattered around the city are mentioned. Another topic covered is the existence of the Nagasaki-ya (aka the Dejima of Edo) established in 1609, which was the hostel of the Dutch East India Company (VOC - Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie) the designated lodgings for foreigners visiting Edo (which was located near Exit 4 of Shin Nihonbashi Station). This might explain why, with his strong connections with the VOC, the Japanese townhouse of William Adams (Anjin Miura) was conveniently located nearby in what was formerly called Anjin-cho (Anjin Town) in Nihonbashi (where a marker can be found on Anjin-dori) in the heart of what was the main mercantile distribution district supplying Edo Castle.

Chapter three is a wonderfully "enlightening" treatment of the major religious sites in Edo. It details the origins of these sites as well as their connection with other religious sites as precursors to those developed in other cities based on the Edo sites; some are particularly unknown, except to Edo/Tokyo connoisseurs, such as Eko-in in Ryogoku, the spiritual home of Sumo, and Kan'ei-ji in Ueno, which also served as a redoubt for Tokugawa Yoshinobu, the last shogun, before he left Edo into relative obscurity. One observation though; there is no mention of the Fujizaka,

small scale replicas of Mt. Fuji, such as the very popular one at Shinagawa Shrine. Built in the 16th century, as religious sites associated with the Fujiko religious movement, these would undoubtedly have contributed to the perception of Edo as a sacred space. However, Mt. Fuji is treated in chapter five as an integral part of the poetic metamorphosis of Edo beyond that of the then capital through the *Tales of Ise*, which describes the aesthetically impressionistic journey or “descent” of a man travelling from the capital to the plains of Musashi.

In three fairly distinct sections, chapter four explores the origins of Japanese castle layouts and the changes made as a result of contact with the West and the impact of devastating fires on the regular rebuilding of Edo Castle (also known as Chiyoda Castle). It also explores the layout and aesthetic interpretations of the coded decoration of Nijo Castle, accompanied by some wonderful illustrations as a way of suggesting similarities with what might have existed in the Edo castle. Finally it also includes a brief section on Edo Castle as it actually was from the disaster-stricken resources available. Illustrations of the castle that could have been used, but have been overlooked, include the Edo-Tokyo Museum’s scale replicas of Honmaru and Ninomaru, the Ohiroma (Great Audience Hall), Matsu-no-Oroka (the Pine Tree Corridor) and Shiro shoin (the Inner Hall) of the castle, based on plans from the mid-18th century, and a life-size reconstruction of part of Matsu-no-Oroka.

In conclusion, the theme of the dynamic development of the seemingly ever-changing face of Edo into the vibrant, dynamic city of Tokyo that is covered in the final brief chapter is exemplified by the often-sad replacement of some of the older, more traditional elements with the new. From the disappearance of buildings, such as the wonderful old 1819 Edo flagship shop Habutae Dango which was located near Nippori Station, and popular with Shiki Masaoka, Okakura Tenshin and Natsume Soseki, in

whose novel *I am a Cat* it is mentioned; to traditions, such as Bunkyo-ku’s “chrysanthemum dolls” During the Meiji period (1868-1912), every autumn the area of Sendagi Dangozaka in Bunkyo-ku was full of ‘chrysanthemum dolls’. These dolls had realistic limbs and heads, while the rest of the body was made of and covered with chrysanthemums. They were made to represent traditions such as Kabuki and folk tales. About twenty garden houses competed with these dolls, which lined the streets around Dangozaka. They are mentioned in Natsume Soseki’s novel *Sanshiro* and in Mori Ogai’s *Youth*. The last time they were shown was in 1911. And the disappearance of areas such as in the charming Kuramae district (lit. “in front of the rice granaries” - see my document [Edo no Kuramae](#)) with its delightful travel connections, including the How-Did-You-Fare pine tree, to the pleasure district of the Yoshiwara (information markers for which can still be found north-east of Sensoji temple today), the journey to which is covered in chapter six, and an enchanting legend about Tokugawa Ieyasu and the Abegawa River. These sorts of things and places seem to exemplify the city’s transitional states between what was, what is, and what remains in this, as the book points out, seemingly ever-changing city.

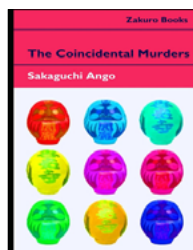
The sophistication of the city as a result of the dynamic cycles of deconstruction and reconstruction known in modern times as “transitional culture” is not only rooted in the Japanese concept of impermanence but also provides practical solutions and adaptations to natural disasters. Fortunately, some of the older sites still remain and await the avid reader and city explorer. This is a must-read before exploring Tokyo, especially if you are trying to find those Edo-era relics or places associated with Edo that still exist in the modern city. And rest assured, many are still there. They just need some effort to find them. Happy reading and happy hunting! §

The Coincidental Murders

by Sakaguchi Ango
translated by Alexis J Brown

Zakura Books (2024)
ISBN-13: 978-8333284129

Review by Laurence Greenl



It’s the summer of 1947 and a group of bohemians gather at a friend’s mountain retreat to escape the city heat. Then things get messy. Tempers flare, motives proliferate, and the bodies begin to stack up. An unassuming amateur detective is tasked with identifying the killer among an eccentric cast of characters that includes blackmailers, poets and sexual

perverts. But are the murders related, or is everything pure coincidence?

Sakaguchi Ango’s whodunnit mystery won the Mystery Writers of Japan Award in 1949, the year after Yokomizo Seishi took the prize for *The Honjin Murders* - and it is very much in the same vein of old-school crime hijinks that this book occupies. Aiming at an audience for classic Japanese mystery fiction that seems to grow and grow with every new release, *The Coincidental Murders* feels tailor made for a very specific niche of readers who will no doubt lap up its heady mix of quirky characters and mind-boggling intrigue.

Like so many classic examples of Japanese murder mysteries, *The Coincidental Murders* really doesn't let you off the hook easily - as the reader, you're forced to work overtime if you're to remember both all the key players, and the varying plot machinations that unfurl between them. For many, the joy comes in the difficulties of piecing these elements together - but be warned, it's not an easy ride. The character dynamics are deeply intertwined, and the literary style in this instance verges on the archaic to say the least. At times, this is the novel's chief joy - in its best moments it resembles the kind of erotic-grotesque creepiness of Tanizaki Jun'ichiro at his most verbose, but at others, it can feel positively Victorian in its musty, plodding delivery of dialogue.

Desire ultimately lies at the heart of the novel's motivations, and it is this that lends the novel its most memorable flavour. Some will take issue at the way female characters are described and utilised as quasi sexual-puppets by the inclinations of their male counterparts, but ultimately this all adds to the sense of deep unease and scene-setting that builds into a characterisation of time and place as involving as the plot itself. While many of Ango's crime counterparts excelled in creating a portrait of a Japan at a time of change, on the cusp of modernity,

The Coincidental Murders feels like it looks backward - not only to literary heroes like Tanizaki, but to pulp novelists like Edogawa Ranpo, or to give a western counterpart, Edgar Allen Poe.

There's a wonderful sense of self-awareness to proceedings at times too - the book name checks not only to the likes of Agatha Christie, but also Ango himself. With its tightly confined dialogues, there's a staginess at times too, a theatricality that can feel unreal - characters go by odd nicknames; for example a detective named for his hunchback. The claustrophobia builds piece by piece through these devices, a thickly cloying sense of unease building as one by one, characters are killed off.

Not all will find favour with the book's style - compared to the clinical, easy-reading liveliness of some of Ango's contemporaries like the aforementioned Yokomizo, the pedestrian pacing of *The Coincidental Murders* will feel like an insurmountable hurdle. This is a murder mystery for sure, but a high-octane, page-turning thriller it is not. But for the reader prepared to take their time with it, to bathe deeply in the distinctly odd world it constructs, there's an undoubtable charm that will find its way under your skin, whether you want it to or not. S

Point Zero

by Matsumoto Seicho

translated by Louise Heal Kawai

Bitter Lemon Press (2024)

ISBN-13: 978-1913394936

Review by Laurence Green



1950s Japan - all at once both modern, familiar to the Japan of now, but also... only a short decade on from the horrors of World War 2. A time of change, of flux, of hidden histories and dark secrets rapidly buried beneath the ceaseless change that enveloped the nation at that time. It is into this heady world of new hopes and dreams that Teiko marries Uhara Kenichi, a promising ad-man. All seems well - but after a four day honeymoon, Kenichi suddenly disappears. Teiko is left to pick up the pieces - searching somehow for what happened to her husband - is he dead? Or worse - as she begins to piece together the past - could his disappearance be linked to his involvement with the notorious "pan-pan girls"; women who worked as prostitutes for American soldiers in the period immediately following the war?

It has to be said that for all its intriguing premise, while *Point Zero* lacks the utter compulsive drive of Matsumoto's masterpieces *Tokyo Express* and *Inspector Imanishi Investigates* - recently re-issued by Penguin Classics - it

resolutely exists in the same meticulously detailed "real-world" Japan of commuter towns and ordinary citizens. Matsumoto's gift as a writer is an uncanny eye for detail that wrings out the very essence of everyday life in the smallest of observations. Contemporary Western crime writers like Ian Rankin have made whole careers out of this laser-like precision and fidelity to the urban environs of their characters, but Matsumoto's work must have felt truly revolutionary back in the Japan of the 1950s/60s when readers would have been more familiar with old-school 'locked room' mysteries and the Victorian whiff of Sherlock Holmes.

All the ingredients of a classic thriller are here - a litany of locations traversed by train, mysterious family members, small-town cops, the whiff of the erotic. Matsumoto teases each of these elements but invariably plays his cards close to his chest - at every step the reader is put to work. While *Point Zero* can absolutely be enjoyed in the typical lean-back experience of an easy-reading thriller, to truly understand it and the mystery at its heart, you'll need to put your brain into overtime, playing the detective that is conspicuously absent from the book.

Indeed, if there's something truly fascinating at the heart of *Point Zero*, it is that the protagonist is not a cop, sleuth or legal practitioner - they are simply a wronged wife,

looking for the truth. There is a barely suppressed hysteria to her actions, a ceaseless that in the context of her situation, seems entirely understandable and relatable - what would we do if the person we loved most in the world suddenly disappeared?

What's more, *Point Zero's* willingness to engage with a theme as potentially controversial as that of the pan-pan girls - a symbol of all that must have been most taboo in the frenetic climate of the immediate Post-War era in Japan - marks it out as having a keen edge that while not overtly political, is certainly unafraid to venture into the darkness that exists beyond the warm comforts of the mainstream. Again and again, Matsumoto paints a Japan that feels like it's almost within touching distance, mere centimetres beyond the lens-like window of the novel's pages.

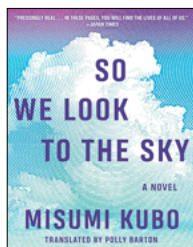
The true test of any mystery novel must be the conclusion, and here *Point Zero* confounds and excels in equal measures. The final stretch of the book tumbles a little too easily into a kind of massive exposition dump that feels more like reading a dry, provincial crime report than a stunning denouement to hours of build up - a classic case of telling, rather than showing, the truth behind the crimes. But then, as a final gasp of genius, just as you think the novel has nothing left to say, it plays its winning card: an elegiac reveal that wraps everything up in a couple of pages and leaves the reader with an irresistibly wistful vista that somehow contains in it guilt, pathos, life, death and sorrow. It feels a little strange to call a mystery novel 'beautiful', but in its own darkly seductive way, *Point Zero* wholeheartedly is. §

So We Look to the Sky

by Kubo Misumi
translated by Polly Barton

Arcade (2021)
ISBN-13: 978-1951627713

Review by Alex Russell



Kubo Misumi's *So We Look to the Sky* is a compelling collection of interconnected short stories that delve into the complexities of human relationships, societal dislocation, and personal struggles within contemporary Japanese society. Originally published in Japan in 2010, as *Fugainai boku wa soru wo mita*, the collection won the Shugoro Yamamoto Prize, launching Kubo's literary career. The English translation by Polly Barton, released in 2021, brings Kubo's narratives to a broader audience, and remains her only complete work available in English. The collection comprises five stories, each narrated from the perspective of a different character whose lives are revealed to be intricately intertwined. The central thread catalysing these narratives is the scandalous affair between Takumi, a high school student, and Anzu, a married woman many years his senior.

In the opening story, we are placed *in media res* into Takumi and Anzu's affair. Their relationship is unconventional, with Anzu having Takumi indulge her fantasies from her favourite anime, the two dressing in cosplay while having sex. Kubo portrays their encounters with an unromantic honesty, with explicit language emphasising the purely sexual nature of their relationship. This narrative sets the stage for the subsequent stories, each exploring the consequences of this illicit relationship.

The second story shifts focus to Anzu, who we find out is grappling with infertility and the overbearing pressure

from her mother-in-law, Machiko, to conceive, despite her own hesitations about becoming a parent. Her internal turmoil is palpable as she navigates societal expectations of womanhood and motherhood. Her struggle highlights the oppressive potential of familial and cultural demands placed on women, an issue that has come to the fore amidst Japan's fertility crisis. Machiko's voice is deftly tuned by Kubo, superficially concerned and caring, but laced with her own selfish motivations to become a grandmother. Later in the story, as this façade of friendliness crumbles, her hostility is stinging and cruel, and we understand why Anzu sought solace in cosplay and her relationship with Takumi.

The third story is told from the perspective of Nana, a high school girl with a crush on Takumi. Her narrative delves into the troubles of adolescent love, self-esteem, the harsh realities of teenage relationships, and the difficulties of growing up. Nana's experiences illuminate the vulnerability of youth and the formative impact of early romantic encounters.

The fourth story takes us into the life of Ryota, Takumi's best friend, who resides in a public housing building and bears the responsibility beyond his age of caring for his senile grandmother. Ryota's life is marked by his disadvantaged background and the challenges of balancing his own aspirations with the familial duties he has had to take on. His interactions with Taoka, his manager at a convenience store, provide touching moments of levity, as well as a positive relationship and the importance of having someone to look up to, though this too is ultimately revealed to be too good to be true.

In the final story, we are shown the perspective of Takumi's mother, a dedicated midwife who operates a birthing clinic. Kubo uses her perspective to transform the microcosm of her work into a more profound exploration

of questions of pregnancy and life. As she supports women bringing new life into the world, she confronts her own challenges as a single parent striving to guide her son through the aftermath of a public humiliation. As in the first story, this relationship is ably realised and brought to life, avoiding the veneer of fantasy that can often be difficult to dispel in fiction.

So We Look to the Sky shines brightest in how it weaves these individual stories into a cohesive tapestry that reflects the interconnectedness of human experiences. Each character's journey is rendered with depth and authenticity, allowing readers to empathise with their struggles. Characters who we had previously judged or made assumptions about in an earlier story are given voice with the same clarity, adding depth to the overall picture, and encouraging us to reconsider their actions earlier in the work. The author's unflinching depiction of topics such as sexuality, infertility, bullying, and societal pressure invites readers to confront uncomfortable realities and question ingrained cultural norms.

The explicit nature of some scenes serves not as gratuitous content but as a vehicle for exploring deeper themes related to human intimacy, desire, and the complexities of relationships. Kubo challenges the often

conservative perceptions of female sexuality in Japanese society, presenting her female characters as multifaceted individuals with their own desires and agency. The almost pornographic language used provides an acidic contrast to the emotional core of the stories.

Polly Barton's translation expertly captures the nuances of Kubo's prose, preserving the emotional depth of the original text, as well as naturally rendering the challengingly explicit language. The stories flow together seamlessly, yet each narrator feels distinct, and we get a real sense of them as independent characters with their own voices. I would be interested to understand why the title was rendered into English as *So We Look to the Sky*, omitting the *fugainai boku* or "pathetic self" element of the original title, as this notion of self-loathing permeates the collection and unites the narratives beyond the story.

Overall, *So We Look to the Sky* is a thought-provoking collection that offers a window into the complexities of human relationships and societal expectations in modern Japan. Kubo Misumi's masterful storytelling, combined with Polly Barton's adept translation, makes this work one of surprising emotional significance, especially considering it makes for very easy reading. §

Black Box Diaries

directed by Ito Shiori

Available to watch for a limited time on [BBC iplayer - Storyville](#)

Review by Mayumi Donovan

Black Box Diaries is a documentary film in which journalist and filmmaker Ito Shiori seeks to expose the truth about the sexual assault she suffered in 2015 at the hands of Yamaguchi Noriyuki, a former Washington Bureau Chief for the Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS) with close ties to then-Prime Minister Abe Shinzo. The film chronicles her struggle for justice, as the police initially refused to investigate her claim, due to a supposed lack of evidence—despite shocking CCTV footage showing Ito being dragged from a taxi and carried into a hotel. This personal and remarkable work highlights a young woman's fight against authority and power in Japan, where sexual assault remains a taboo subject.

The film opens at the moment she decides to go public with her story. Her fear and uncertainty about the future are palpable, knowing that everything will change. Yet she has no choice but to seek a reinvestigation into Yamaguchi and tell the truth to the world. Her family strongly opposes her decision, as captured in a deeply emotional voice recording

of her sister pleading with Ito not to speak out, fearing she will lose the chance to lead a normal life and have a successful career. A long, dark tunnel visually represents the challenging journey that lies ahead.

It is rare for rape victims in Japan to go public—only 4% of sexual assault survivors report the crime, with some studies suggesting the figure is as low as 1%. Despite her family's pleas, Ito spoke out about her experience at a press conference in 2017, two years after the incident, publicly accusing Yamaguchi of sexually assaulting her. According to Ito, she had initially met him to discuss career opportunities in Washington but was drugged at a restaurant. She later woke up in a hotel room, with clear evidence that she had been raped.

The press conference shocked many and sparked mixed reactions. Ito endured vicious online abuse, with some accusing her of being a prostitute—simply because the top button of her shirt was undone. Despite the gravity of her allegations, only one television channel reported on the case, and Japanese media largely ignored it.

For UK audiences, this case may already be familiar, as it was previously featured in the 2019 BBC documentary *Japan's Secret Shame*. *Black Box Diaries* blends footage secretly filmed by Ito on her iPhone with material from media outlets, including the BBC and NHK. Initially, Ito

recorded videos and audio as evidence, suspecting that not everyone was telling the truth. As a journalist, she felt a deep responsibility to expose the facts—not just for herself, but for other victims and future generations.

Her mobile footage captures intimate, raw emotions, revealing rare moments of vulnerability and fear. The way she addresses the camera directly enhances the film's emotional impact. Over the course of the film, the changes in her face and eyes make her exhaustion visibly apparent. The subtle yet powerful sound design, combined with abstract visuals interwoven with real footage, creates a seamless and immersive storytelling experience.

As a Japanese woman, this film was heartbreaking to watch and left me filled with anger. I have experienced firsthand how women are marginalised in Japan, where certain issues are simply not discussed. Women are expected to behave in a particular way, and those with strong opinions often face backlash. There is a Japanese proverb: *"The nail that sticks out gets hammered down."* Society expects victims to behave as victims—to feel ashamed, to remain silent. It is not considered typical for a Japanese woman to stand up the way Ito did.

One scene that struck me particularly hard was of a woman shouting at Ito, blaming her for what had happened. I cannot imagine the weight Ito had to bear—not only facing attacks from men but also from other women, those whom one might expect to be on her side. Throughout the film, Ito maintains a brave face, but her most vulnerable moment comes when she attends a women's media meeting. It is a brief yet deeply comforting moment in an otherwise difficult and painful film.

I deeply admire her courage and resilience in choosing to go public, revealing both her face and real name. When asked why she made this decision, she responded with clarity: *"I have nothing to hide."* Her bravery and strength serve as an inspiration to other survivors.

I watched this film in 2024 at BFI Southbank, followed by a Q&A session with Ito Shiori. She appeared stronger, more hopeful for Japan's future, but I do not believe this is the end of her fight. In the film, Ito references the #MeToo movement, which was gaining momentum in the US while she was seeking justice, giving her a sense of optimism. I was also moved by a group of elderly women demonstrating in the streets in support of Ito. Watching the film again recently, I couldn't help but think about the recent case in France involving Gisèle Pelicot, a survivor of mass rape orchestrated



by her husband. Her courage resonated with many women worldwide.

While there are positive movements happening globally, they are still not enough. There are still cases where power and corruption continue to silence victims of violence.

Sadly, *Black Box Diaries* has yet to be released in Japan, despite its nomination for the Oscar for Best Documentary Feature at the 2025 Academy Awards. Reportedly, legal issues and censorship have prevented its release, with claims that certain video and audio clips—including CCTV footage of Yamaguchi dragging Ito from a taxi, audio from a taxi driver and police investigator, and conversations with her lawyer—were used without permission. The film sheds light on critical social issues, and all Ito has ever wanted is to tell the truth and achieve justice. She has stated that the audience she most wants to reach is the Japanese public. I can only hope that the film is eventually released in Japan, igniting the crucial discussions needed to challenge societal norms and drive real change. This issue is too important to be ignored. §

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