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Book, Stage, Film, Arts and Events Review

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The summer season is always a promising time to enjoy reading in a relaxed atmosphere. Part of the ritual of preparing for the holidays, whether at home or travelling somewhere around the world, often includes preparing our "summer reading list" and choosing the books that will accompany us in our well-deserved free time. In the June issue of *The Japan Society Review* we would like to offer you five extra choices for your summer reading, a selection of books dealing with different topics and formats, from robotics to gardens, from fiction to historical essays.

Georges Bigot and Japan, 1882-1899 is the first comprehensive study in English of French artist and caricaturist, Georges Ferdinand Bigot (1860-1927). As our reviewer Peter Kornicki points out, this lavishly-illustrated and beautifully-produced book makes the output of this talented artist presenting high-quality reproductions of many of Bigot's sketches, watercolours and engravings. Following the transnational approach to Japan and Japanese culture, *Spaces in Translation – Japanese Gardens and the West* discusses how Japanese gardens in places such as New York, Berlin, London, are often considered representative of the essence of Japanese culture and how this idea has less do to with Japan's history and traditions, and more to do with its interactions with the West. Issues of sociocultural history are also at the heart of *Robo sapiens japanicus*, an ethnographic study of the relationship between robot visions and politics, society and culture in Japan. As it emerges from the book and our review, the discourse on robots is far more than just a high-tech vision of the future.

This issue also includes two reviews of fictional works by female writers Zelda Rhiando and Una Rose. Both of them deal with the trauma and dramatic consequences of the triple disaster which occurred in Japan on March 11, 2011 intertwined with the personal and family stories of the protagonists. *Fukushima Dreams* and *The Tokyo Express* offer another example of the global impact and influence of contemporary Japan in English language literature.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

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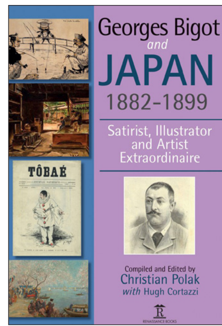
Georges Bigot and Japan, 1882-1899: satirist, illustrator and artist extraordinaire

by Christian Polak with Hugh Cortazzi

Renaissance Books (2018)
ISBN-13: 978-1898823759

Review by Peter Kornicki



The French artist Georges Bigot (1860-1927) is not a household name in France or in England, but he certainly is in Japan, for Japanese schoolchildren see some of his caricatures in their textbooks. No wonder, then, that I had never heard of him until I chanced upon an exhibition devoted to his works at the Suntory Museum in 1972 during my first year in Japan as a foreign student. Since then there have been many other exhibitions, but it is only since 1981, when his archive was discovered still in the possession of his descendants, that it has become possible to draw upon the full range of his work. This lavishly-illustrated and beautifully-produced book by Christian Polak with Hugh Cortazzi makes the output of this talented artist and engraver easily accessible for the first time.

How did it come about that Bigot travelled to Japan and then became famous there? His widowed mother gave him an artistic upbringing and his talents eventually took him to the School of Fine Arts in Paris. There he became acquainted with Félix Régamey, who had returned to France in 1877 after a lengthy stay in Japan, and with others who were intrigued by Japan like Edmond de Goncourt. He had his first chance to see Japanese arts and crafts in the Japanese pavilion at the Exposition Universelle held in Paris in 1878. Unlike many who were inspired by what was on display, Bigot decided to make the long voyage to Japan to see for himself, and this proved to be the beginning of a stay in Japan that was to last for nearly two decades.

He arrived in January 1882 and, to keep body and soul together, initially taught watercolour and drawing to officer cadets at the Army Academy in Ichigaya. Later he was to rely on his ability to teach French or Western art to provide an income. He seems from his delightfully illustrated letters to his mother, many of which are reproduced in this volume, to have thrown himself into his new Japanese life in a way that suggests a long-term commitment. He began to learn the language and took lessons in calligraphy and Japanese music; he lived in a Japanese house with Japanese furniture and went around in Japanese dress and geta.

His first artistic responses to Japan were embodied in his letters home to his mother, but he also began producing paintings and engravings that captured the lives of foreigners living in Yokohama or the lives of Japanese, and as early as 1883, the year of his arrival, he published two volumes of engravings. He was by no means the only artist working in Japan at the time. A much earlier arrival was the Englishman Charles Wirgman (1832-1891), who was a correspondent for the *Illustrated London News* and who was the founder and editor of the *Japan Punch* from 1862 to 1887; Hugh Cortazzi has provided a useful account of Wirgman's life and activities for this volume. Once Wirgman brought the *Japan Punch* to an end in 1887 Bigot launched his own satirical illustrated magazine, *Tôbaé*, which lasted for several years. His talents were also beginning to be appreciated in Europe, for he was engaged first by *Le monde illustré* and then by *The Graphic* to supply sketches of Japan. For *The Graphic* he travelled to the front in the Sino-Japanese War and provided a number of sketches which were published as engravings.

MONS. G. BIGOT
The *Graphic* Special Artist with the Japanese Forces
From a Photograph by Yamamolo, Tokio

In 1899, however, he abruptly divorced his Japanese wife and returned to France with their son. The reason for his departure was the end of extraterritoriality in that year: as a consequence, he would have become subject to Japanese law and therefore censorship. Given

that he had been unafraid of poking fun at figures of importance or of political commentary in his cartoons and that, under the influence of Nakae Chomin, he had become sympathetic to the liberal movement, he was probably right to suspect that his creativity would be stifled if he remained. Indeed, one of his sketches, titled 'The revised treaties have been signed and foreigners are under Japanese jurisdiction', shows a foreigner being led away under arrest, so the possibility of trouble was very much on his mind. Although he never returned to Japan, he did continue to depict Japan in his subsequent work, for example in a set of dinner plates showing scenes of Japanese life.

The bulk of this volume consists of high-quality reproductions of many of Bigot's sketches, watercolours, oil paintings and engravings, and no summary, however elegant, can do justice to them. Amongst them are engravings from his first two albums which capture scenes of everyday life, such as a family riding in a rickshaw, porters carrying night-soil out of the city and children at a singing lesson. His oil and gouache paintings of similar scenes are arresting for their sympathetic portraits of ordinary Japanese, such as that of a heavily wrapped woman crossing the palace square. But there are many with an edge to them: some of them poke fun at the antics of the elite of Japanese society in Western dress, but others satirise the behaviour of members of the expatriate communities, such as a lecherous foreigner with a prostitute or an over-paid advisor to the Meiji government. Some again are overtly political and doubtless offended the government, such as one that showed Prime Minister Ito Hirobumi and Foreign Minister Inoue Kaoru killing off an old man who was a personification of the Popular Rights Movement.

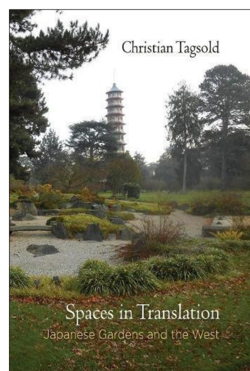
This splendid and very welcome book gives Bigot his due, and for that we are much in the debt of the authors for the conception and the contents. But we are also in the debt of Paul Norbury, the publisher, who saw the value and appeal of Bigot's output and in response has produced a volume that is worthy of Bigot's talents. §

Spaces in Translation – Japanese Gardens and the West

by Christian Tagsold

University of Pennsylvania Press (2017)
ISBN-13: 978-0812246742

Review by Ian Chrystie [1]



Professor Dr Christian Tagsold is an anthropologist who is currently an associate professor at the Institute for Modern Japanese Studies at the University of Dusseldorf. His research covers: Japanese gardens and Japanese communities outwith Japan, aging society and welfare in Japan, and sports "mega-events". *Spaces of Translation: Japanese Garden in the West* was the title of his habilitation thesis several years ago and this has now been developed into this new book.

In the Introduction, Tagsold notes that 'No other Asian type of garden is as ubiquitous as the Japanese...' but that the explanation for this is '...more mystifying than explainable'. And it is the science of anthropology that is, in effect, going some way to explaining the mystery.

The book comprises nine chapters with each chapter starting with a 'stroll through a garden' – a technique I find delightful. Chapter 1, 'From China to Japan', after rambling through the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, London, describes how the development of trade relationships with China fostered a fascination with all things Chinese: ceramics; art; philosophy; and, of course, gardens. That some designers of such gardens attempted to follow the then available knowledge of Chinese garden design whereas others merely added an occasional Chinese-style building I found intriguing. Equally fascinating (if, on reflection, unsurprising) is that '...visitors probably did not see much difference between the two ways...'. In this chapter we also learn of the importance of Nature and Religion (especially, I was intrigued to learn, the Jesuit School).

The interest in Chinese gardens waned towards the end of the eighteenth century with, as we all know, the allure of Japanese gardens becoming evident from the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This is discussed in Chapter 2, 'Discourses of Spaces', which first leads us through the lovely Japanese-style garden at Clingendael, near The Hague. We then examine the plethora of literature that Western authors generated on Japanese gardens. Such authors included: Edward Morse, Josiah Conder, and Lafcadio Hearn (latter part of the nineteenth century) and, later, Lorraine Kuck (1930s) – who many consider to have been a key figure in proposing the idea of the zen garden.

The third Chapter 'Spreading the Japanese Garden Worldwide' begins with a stroll around the

Morris Arboretum in Philadelphia. We then look in great depth at the Japanese gardens which became an almost required element of the World Fairs – with the first being at Vienna, in 1873 and subsequent ones including Philadelphia (1876), Paris (1878), and, of course, London in 1910. I found it amusing to read that, at the RHS Summer Fair in 1911 a comment was recorded that 'again there were Japanese gardens, which we admire, because we do not understand them. I do not think they will ever get popular with us'. Ah well! These fairs did, of course, encourage the building of Japanese gardens in the West – although these seem to have been based either on designs found in some of the books mentioned in the previous chapter or were designed and built by Japanese gardeners.

In Chapter 4 'Between Essence and Invention', and following our visit to the UNESCO Gardens in Paris, we now move into the more academic realm of this book with a discussion as to how one defines a Japanese garden – whether it has a fixed meaning, that is, built by a Japanese individual and, in essence, non-transferable to the West (essentialism) or whether such gardens in the West are, in fact, Western constructions and a sub-category of Western gardens in general (inventionism). One essentialist author cited in this chapter, the late Irmtraud Schaarschmidt-Richter, pointed out that we '...cannot understand Japanese gardens fully because [they] are unintelligible to most foreigners'. This lady also asserted that 'she [was] the rare being capable of bridging the gap between the illegible Japanese garden and her Western readers'. I must search out some of her writings!

A visit to the Japanese garden in Portland, Oregon is our lead-in to Chapter 5, 'Zen and the Art of Gardens' in which we examine the dramatic change in Japanese gardens built in the West after WW2: the move from gardens in which plants were the dominant feature to those comprising gravel and rocks (*kare-sansui*) together with the dramatic increase in the number of such gardens that were constructed. The importance of Lorraine Kuck's publication (*One Hundred Kyoto Gardens*) in 1935, together with Bruno Taut's veneration of such gardens at Katsura and, especially, Ryoanji, is well known, as is the Japanese governmental recognition of the diplomatic advantages of promoting the building of such gardens. What I had not considered, though, was the relevance of a growing worldwide interest in a more modern interpretation of Zen Buddhism itself. This is examined in great detail in this chapter and is one of many elements I found most interesting.

A stroll through the Japanese garden in Bonn, Germany, forms our introduction to Chapter 6 'Elements of Japanese Gardens' in which we learn what elements of a garden are essential for it to qualify as "Japanese". Mind you, one of the first things we read is Tagsold's thesis that '[t]here is no essential "Japanese Garden" only many versions and interpretations of the idea of a Japanese garden'. We first look, though, at garden designers and have our ideas that a Japanese Master is an essential element somewhat challenged with some examples of how all we are told is not what it seems (for example a Japanese garden designer whose main training was building over 700 golf courses!). The chapter then continues with sections on Plants, Stones, Lanterns and Bridges, and the increasing role of women (for example, nowadays rarely does a man officiate over a tea ceremony).

Our next trip takes us through the Botanic Garden in Brooklyn as we look at Chapter 7 'Authoritarian Gardens' and discuss the "rules" that seem to set Japanese gardens in the West somewhat apart from other public spaces. These edicts include enclosing the garden such that it can only be viewed from the outside, defining routes within the garden, not allowing unaccompanied children access, and insisting that visitors 'respect the area as one set aside for quiet and contemplation'.

In Chapter 8 'Connecting Spaces, Disconnecting Spaces' we divert a little from our normal garden stroll by visiting an imaginary Japanese garden in a novel by László Krasznahorkai, a Hungarian novelist. Sadly, this novel has not yet been translated into English and so we have to rely on Tagsold's interpretation of a German translation. The discussion starts with the concept of the "cultural container" – that is that we all live in such a "container" with our compatriots. In addition, as Japanese gardens represent Japan in miniature, they take on the same mantle. It therefore follows that these gardens must be authentically Japanese as 'only Japanese people have the correct cultural programming to build a Japanese garden'. We also discuss the anthropological idea of "places" and "non-places" – with Japanese gardens, it is suggested, being "places" only within Japan.

In the final chapter, Chapter 9 'Postmodernising Japanese Gardens' our initial visit is to a luxury condominium in the centre of Berlin, Marthashof, with a description of the apparent use of "zen-like" structures to persuade potential buyers that the area had been '... created for wholesome living'. This use, it is suggested, demonstrates that Japanese gardens have managed

to "escape" – as is evident from their appearance as miniature Zen gardens sold for interior design, the potential to rake virtual gardens on the Internet, a computer game requiring one to rake a garden without touching areas already raked, et cetera. In a way, we in the West are no longer confined to walking through such gardens but may now '...acquire them whole, for [our] homes, workplaces, or computer screens'. Following some additional discussions along these lines we end up at a garden that will be familiar to many of us – the Japanese garden at the Albert Kahn Museum on the outskirts of Paris. Those who visit cannot fail to notice that it is undoubtedly very traditional but with a few unconventional additions that makes visitors wonder whether it is truly Japanese. The conclusion, it seems, is that this garden '...brings the meta-narrations that have so long undergirded the idea of Japanese gardens to an end'.

Following a short conclusion, there are several pages of supplementary notes, an extensive bibliography, and an excellent index. So what are MY conclusions? Well, firstly, I probably need to apologise to those reading this, and perhaps more so to Professor Tagsold, for what I'm certain is a most inadequate review by someone who is not a suitably qualified academic. That said, perhaps a review by someone who is wholly ignorant of the science of Anthropology may have some merit simply because most readers will be similarly new to the subject.

I have found this book to be almost unbelievably fascinating, enthralling, and (most importantly for an academic text) relatively easy to read. It is also, as far as I am aware, the only book currently available that examines this subject and so is of great significance.

I do have one warning, though. I found it impossible not to look deeper into the subject – to search terms I didn't understand and to delve into the excellent bibliography. What reading some of the "academic" articles that I could access, though, emphasised how much work Tagsold must have put into the text to make it so readable and comprehensible.

To my mind, an essential acquisition for anyone remotely interested in Japanese gardens.

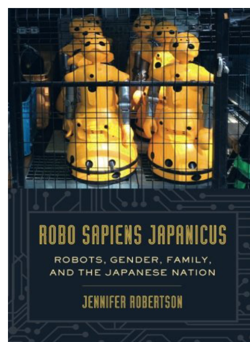
[1] This review was originally published in the journal *Shakkei* Vol. 24 No. 3. Winter 2017-2018. We thank the Japanese Garden Society for allowing us to publish this review. §

Robo Sapiens Japanicus. Robots, Gender, Family, and the Japanese Nation

by Jennifer Robertson

University of California Press (2018)
ISBN-13: 978-0520283206

Review by Riyoko Shibe and Paul Tebble



In the mid-1920s, the word "robot" (*robotto*) was coined as Japan began to embrace the possibilities and potential of human-robot coexistence. *Robo Sapiens Japanicus* by Jennifer Robertson is an ethnography and sociohistorical analysis that discusses these possibilities and their implications, exploring the intertwined relationship between robot visions and politics, society and culture.

Robot technologies, dependent on state support because of their complexity, tend to 'mirror and embody state and corporate ideologies and priorities' (p.82). This idea forms the crux of Robertson's argument, which focuses especially on Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's extensive support of the robotics industry. By using robotics as a sociocultural prism, Robertson uncovers Abe's conservative ideologies – as well as Japan's attitude more broadly – towards national membership, race, gender, and disability.

Robertson begins by examining Innovation 25, Abe's 2007 proposal envisioning Japan in 2025, where humanoid robots, integrated into families, are key to the stability of the nation. In Abe's blueprint, Japan's social issues – the ageing population, low birth-rates and labour shortages – have been solved through the provision of caregiving and companionship robots. By analysing historical and current government documents, Robertson uncovers similarities between the proposal and wartime right-wing propaganda. She concludes that rather than "innovating", Abe's proposal uses a rhetoric of advanced and sophisticated technologies to couch and reinforce traditional, patriarchal and conservative values. This proposal, as we see throughout the book, represents the Japanese robotics industry more broadly, and exemplifies 'advanced technology in the service of traditionalism'(p.79) – an imagined future constructed to legitimise socio-political ideologies, ultimately advancing Abe's nationalistic agenda.

Innovation 25 centres around visions of the future where robots are integrated into families, undertaking domestic and caregiving chores. Robertson is quick

to point to the 'sexist logic' (p.25) embedded in the proposal: the administration, while supporting the production of humanoid robots as the solution to low marriage and birth-rates, overlooks the provision and upkeep of day-care centres, which would be a proactive solution enabling women to work outside of the home. By drawing attention to some of the incisive Japanese voices raised in opposition to the government rhetoric, Robertson, non-Japanese, is careful not to speak in place of Japanese women, and brings balance to her discussion.

Robertson moves on to explore what constitutes a "normal" body within Japan, shedding fascinating – and disturbing – light onto the narrow and hostile conceptions of normalcy reproduced by the robotics industry. She firstly analyses the development of service robots gendered to suit the role they are designed to perform, essentialising the gendering of both labour and bodies. She then extends normalcy to nationality, and we see the exclusion of the "other" through perverse rules of national membership that grant robots more civil rights than actual humans.

From robots like Paro, Astro Boy and Doraemon being given their own family registry and special residency permits, to being adopted into actual families, Robertson paints a lucid picture of how robots are constructed as integral to the stability of the family – and by extension, the Japanese nation, serving to reify cultural norms regarding gender, race and nationhood. Non-Japanese people, by contrast threated this stability and these norms; foreigners, ethnic minorities and Korean zainichi born and raised in Japan, whose family have lived there for generations, are refused these privileges. Robertson shows how the rhetoric of robotics and technology diverts our attention from the conservative and xenophobic ideologies embedded within this deeply problematic system of national membership.

Finally, Robertson explores disability, an underrepresented but vitally important area of discussion, to which this chapter is a fantastic addition. Analysing the development of mobile technologies designed to make people walk upright on two legs, she uncovers their incompatibility with the nuanced needs and diverse bodies of disabled people. Robertson argues that such technologies, promoting the fully limbed body as a vision of normalcy, exclude those who cannot and do not fit into this ideal, and so reproduce discriminatory, hostile attitudes towards disability. She heavily critiques the government's perverse, ableist logic that supports this technology while overlooking the development of accessible spaces, eliding from view disability as a social and cultural phenomenon.

While an excellent, rigorous and articulate ethnography, Robertson, although stridently contesting the essentialisation of identity, at times herself essentialises Japanese society by making broad generalisations of "the Japanese" and how "they" perceive the world. In this sense, it would have been apt to include more actors in her discussion, and Robertson's focus on the government in leading the dominant discourses on gender, race and disability was in this sense limited. The political, social and economic position of countries is defined be a plethora of actors, and in the case of Robertson's book, I was left wondering which other voices were involved in contesting or echoing these discourses, internal and external to Japan.

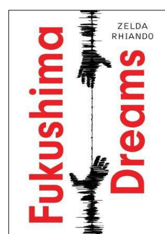
Despite this, throughout the book, Robertson's message sings clear: the discourse on robots is far more than just a high-tech vision of the future. Rather, it serves to reproduce hegemonic power structures and narrow, hostile conceptions of normalcy, eliding from view the range of bodies that should be allowed to exist in the world: it is 'as much, if not more, about social engineering than nuts-and-bolts robotics' (p.62). Robertson succeeds in following the anthropological tradition of rendering the normal strange, offering refreshing – although not ground-breaking – insight into how gender, family, nationality, race and disability are navigated within Japan. §

Fukushima Dreams

by Zelda Rhiando

Unbound (2018)
ISBN-13: 978-1911586883

Review by Poppy Cosyns



Irish writer Zelda Rhiando follows up her self-published debut *Caposcripti* with this deeply unsettling novel, set in the aftermath of the 2011 triple disaster. The book came into being after it was successfully crowdfunded through Unbound, a publishing house which allows writers to pitch their work to potential backers. On hearing of the disaster at Fukushima, Rhiando became compelled to write, having had what she calls, 'a very personal reaction to it'. She found herself trying to empathise with the 60,000 people of North-Eastern Japan, whose lives

were upturned by this catastrophic event. This led to her wanting to bring the stories of those affected to an audience outside Japan, in a way that they could meaningfully connect with.

Cultural responses to the 3.11 disaster were initially few and far between, as those both inside and outside of Japan struggled to absorb and confront the enormity of such an event. As Barbara Geilhorn and Kristina Iwata-Weickgenannt write in their book *Fukushima and the Arts: Negotiating Nuclear Disaster*, 'What sort of language in the wider sense could adequately express grief and trauma, and capture the profound socio-political implications of the disaster?'

The events of that day presented what they call, 'an artistic crisis', as a fitting reaction seemed impossible to distil into a creative project. In the period following the initial aftermath however, a huge variety of cultural responses began to emerge. Over the past few years a steady stream of filmmakers, visual artists, novelists, poets and mangaka have created works inspired by the disaster and its ongoing repercussions.

Fukushima Dreams tells the story of Sachiko and her English husband Harry, a couple who have recently relocated from Tokyo to the fictional village of Taro in Fukushima Prefecture. In the run-up to the disaster, we discover that their relationship has come under increasing strain, particularly following the birth of their son Tashi.

The novel begins by plunging its reader into the midst of the earthquake and subsequent tsunami; the disorientating reality of the characters' rapidly disintegrating surroundings described in gut-wrenching detail. There is 'a colossal grinding and rumbling, and beneath it, the sound of human screams' before Sachiko becomes 'blind and breathless' as she is 'engulfed in cold black water'.

In the confusion of the earthquake, the family become separated from one another, as Sachiko is swept along by the mighty force of the tsunami and Harry runs into the nearby hills. The whereabouts of their small baby Tashi remains unknown. From the beginning, the narrative is divided between Sachiko's experiences, told in the third-person and Harry's first-person account.

Rhiando's use of these two different perspectives cleverly aids in defining each of the main characters. Sachiko – dazed and aloof – is viewed from the outside, allowing the reader to experience her as the other characters do, while self-absorbed writer Harry's increasingly delusional state is communicated through a fevered inner-monologue.

The novel centres on the themes of collapse and estrangement. The destruction of the couple's environment, followed by their physical separation, seeming to mirror the process of their marriage breakdown. It is the birth of their son which proves the catalyst for this process and Rhiando describes the zombie-like state of new parenthood in a way that will strike a chord with many readers.

In flash-backs to the period before the earthquake, day and night merge into one, as the couple struggle to cope with their new arrival. Tashi – who appears perpetually beetroot-faced and bawling – is abstracted into something terrifying and uncontrollable, an obstacle too great for this fragile partnership to overcome.

We learn that Harry and Sachiko are both out of contact with their respective families, leaving them with little in the way of a support network. When therefore, they go on to become emotionally detached from one another, they find themselves entirely isolated. This island-like state, combined with the trauma of the natural disaster combine to loosen the characters' grips on reality and as the novel progresses it becomes increasingly dark and frequently surreal.

For the most part, Rhiando's prose is brisk and economic but often she makes way for little passages that bring the Japan she describes to life. Given the context of the novel, there is usually an inherent poignancy to the images she conjures – the plastic sandals arranged on the porch of the makeshift rescue centre or the 'delicately perfumed' *wagashi*, bought as a gift by Sachiko, that are 'coloured like shells'. Despite her being an outsider, Rhiando has managed to successfully convey a landscape and a society that anyone who has spent time in Japan will recognise. The strength of her research comes out in these small details and works to honour the highly sensitive subject matter of her writing.

This book will be of interest to those who want to understand more about the collective trauma of an event as cataclysmic as 3.11. Above all however, this is a page-turning drama that centres on a relationship in ruins; a haunting read in every sense. §

The Tokyo Express

by Una Rose

Estuary Publishing (2013)
ISBN-13: 978-0957063525

Review by Harry Martin

The Tokyo Express is the self-published debut novel of Anglo-Irish writer Una Rose. Taking inspiration from her time in Japan and her Irish heritage, Una has encased her story within these distant and distinct cultures, focusing on two international relationships in two very different periods of history. She explores how the cultural differences and similarities between these island nations can affect those committed to this ever-increasing scenario in our multinational society.

In the present day, protagonist Conner is a troubled and acrimonious 20-something Irishman living and working in Tokyo with his Japanese wife Mimi. Following the news of his father's passing, Conner is bound for an unplanned and unwanted return to his native Ireland, encumbered with the burden of taking up the family business and agonising about the possible treatment his wife might receive in small-town rural Ireland.

Following their return, Mimi is initially enthralled by the bucolic charms and quaint furnishings of Conner's hometown, but is soon challenged by the introduction of Conner's overbearing and colourful family, commandeered by his formidable mother who immediately shows lack of interest in and disapproval of the Japanese culture from which Mimi has come. From here the story takes us through alternately humorous and painful accounts of Mimi's gradual, laboured integration into Conner's family, confronted with a montage of cultural and linguistic barriers which cause clashes and pressure in their marriage.

Mimi's initial isolation is alleviated by the introduction of Conner's grandfather Owen, who spent a highly significant part of his life in Japan following World War II. This, in the form of his well-kept and extensive wartime diaries, introduces the secondary story line to the novel, which follows his experience of war-torn Tokyo and the love he found in the carnage there.

Una's depiction of post-war Tokyo is recreated with honest brutality as she evokes a sympathetic but candid portrayal of the starvation, death and destruction that affected much of the populace in greater Tokyo and wider Japan at the time. She manages to capture the exhaustion that the post-war generation felt, and their movement away from the traditions of imperial Japan towards the more modern society we see today. Owen was there to experience all this first hand, guided by his lover Mariko who, as a modern-day feminist, was paving the way for women's rights in the emerging Japan of the modern age.

The context of destruction and rebuilding around Mariko's and Owen's wartime relationship is immediately drawn into parallel with Conner and Mimi's story following the devastating effects of the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami – with Mimi's hometown decimated, Conner is forced to relive the apocalypse to which his grandfather was exposed sixty years earlier.

Una has woven the bilinear storylines with expert artistry; navigating this often challenging task with precision, she has allowed both Conner's and Owen's stories to flow in a harmonious parallel whilst complementing but not distracting from each other. Both stories carry weight and relevance in their own right but the way in which Una has brought them together in this familial saga creates an ambitious and profound work, resulting in a more lasting impression than either story on its own.

Despite the very specific Japanese-Irish confines of this particular love story, the theme is universal as the challenges, discomforts and complications experienced by both Conner and Mimi and Owen and Mariko are those to which many readers will be able to relate. Una has shone a spotlight on the struggles that can occur when trying to forge cross-cultural relationships against the sometimes resistant current of cultural norms and national identity. This is a pertinent contemporary subject for our modern age and one that is likely to be appreciated by a wide and varied audience. §

Interested in writing for The Japan Society Review?

Please write to alejandra.armendariz@japansociety.org.uk with examples of your work and information about your knowledge of and interest in Japan.