

The March issue of *The Japan Society Review* opens with close attention to material culture and artistic practice, beginning with Nick Rowan's *Japanese Wine: History, Regions, Wineries (and Cheese)*. The review traces the development of Japan's wine industry through regional histories, producers, and changing tastes, while also considering the growing place of cheese within Japan's evolving food culture. This focus on craft and experimentation continues in *Modern Japanese Printmakers: New Waves and Eruptions* by Malene Wagner, which examines how contemporary artists have expanded the boundaries of printmaking while remaining in dialogue with the medium's traditions.

Fiction in this issue turns to questions of intimacy, distance, and self-understanding. Ruth Ozeki's *The Typing Lady and Other Fictions* blends narrative play with philosophical reflection, exploring language, connection, and the act of storytelling itself. In *Don't Laugh at Other People's Sex Lives* and *Beautiful*

Distance, Yamazaki Nao-Cola presents two sharply contrasting works: the former offers an unsettling portrayal of an emotionally imbalanced relationship, while the latter unfolds as a quiet and compassionate meditation on love, care, and everyday life. *Jackson Alone* by Jose Ando adopts the pace and structure of a crime novel to explore race, sexuality, and visibility in contemporary Tokyo. Centring on a group of queer, mixed-race men brought together by an act of digital violence, the novel uses genre conventions to deliver a socially incisive and unsettling portrait of marginalisation and belonging.

The issue concludes with cinema. *A Pale View of Hills*, directed by Kei Ishikawa, offers a restrained and atmospheric adaptation that engages with memory, trauma, and silence, drawing together personal histories and broader postwar legacies with emotional precision.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

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Image: Detail from the cover of *Jackson Alone* by Jose Ando

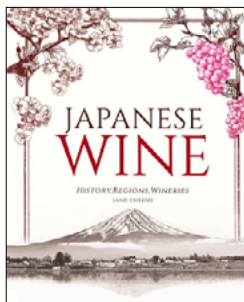
Japanese Wine: History, Regions, Wineries (and Cheese)

by Nick Rowan

Wine Fogg (2025)

ISBN-13: 978-1806054961

Review by Kylie Clark



Several high schools in Japan now produce wine, and in some regions, even elementary school children participate in winery activities such as planting, picking and crushing grapes, designing labels, and enjoying a meal at the winery - without tasting the wine, of course. These programs reflect Japan's strong emphasis on food and nutrition education, where farm visits and hands-on agricultural projects are common from an early age. It's the kind of insight that shifts your perception: wine in Japan is no longer something foreign or occasional, but part of everyday life. It was one of many fascinating insights in *Japanese Wine: History, Regions, Wineries (and Cheese)* by Nick Rowan.

Spread across Japan's 47 prefectures are over 520 wineries used by over 725 producers, with Saga in Kyushu the only prefecture without a winery. In what is surely the most comprehensive guide to Japanese wine (not just in English - more detailed than anything currently available in Japanese), Nick Rowan provides everything you need to explore the world of Japanese wine. This includes profiles of every single producer, a history of wine in Japan, a thorough guide to grape varieties (including Japanese varieties such as *Ryugan*, or "dragon's eye", and Black Queen - names that may be unfamiliar, but which this book brings to life), and practical advice on where to try Japanese wine - from wineries offering tastings and accommodation, to wine bars and shops across the country.

Seldom seen outside Japan, and often thought of as a Western import, Japanese wine has a number of preconceptions to overcome. Japan's officially recognised traditional alcoholic drinks - *kokushu* (国酒), meaning "national alcohol" - include sake (*nihonshu*), honkaku shochu and awamori, all of which are heavily promoted as representatives of Japanese culture. Naturally, when seeking a "Japanese" drink experience, these - along with whisky or beer - are usually chosen ahead of wine.

Yet, as Rowan explains in his history of wine in Japan, wild-growing *yamabudo* grapes were being fermented here as far back as 4,000-6,000 years ago. He also highlights that one of the earliest Japanese winemakers came from the Satsuma samurai clan and went on to make wine in California, becoming a major figure in the Californian wine industry in the early 20th century.

At a hefty 438 pages, this is an encyclopaedic guide, but it is thoughtfully structured and accessible to both wine enthusiasts and casual readers with an interest in Japan, food, or travel. Rowan himself spent three years in Tohoku teaching English, before moving into a corporate career. His growing passion for wine led him to undertake WSET qualifications, the internationally recognised Wine & Spirit Education Trust courses, and on return visits to Japan he found it surprisingly difficult to access information about wineries and the people behind them. This book is, in many ways, the guide he wished he'd had - and was inspired to write with encouragement from Johnny Toppon, former staff at The Japan Society, who is now establishing Zambia's first vineyard and winery.

Partly inspired by travel guides, each wine region is accompanied by maps showing winery locations, along with practical tips for visiting. The Japan Winery Award ratings are included next to each producer, making it easy to identify standout wineries at a glance. For each listing, you'll find website and social media details, guide prices, opening hours (where applicable), and information on what's offered - be it tours, tastings, accommodation, cafés or restaurants.

I visit Japan on average six to eight weeks a year, and on recent trips I've increasingly been offered both sake and wine pairings at restaurants and ryokan that champion local ingredients. Yet when I've discovered a wine I particularly liked, it's often been difficult to find out more about it. With the aid of Rowan's book, I've been able to uncover the stories behind several producers I liked - and, importantly, discovered that some have tasting rooms open to the public in Yamagata, Yamanashi and Nagano. While I'd previously thought I might like to visit, I likely wouldn't have made the time to work out how. Rowan's book makes that entirely manageable, and I'll certainly be planning visits on a future trip. A calendar of wine fairs and events also makes it easy to see what might coincide with your travels.

The book is invaluable for anyone hoping to explore Japan through its wine - or just to track down great wine bars in Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka, or anywhere else in the country. It also serves as a useful resource for finding Japanese wine outside Japan, with listings of importers across Asia-Pacific, Australia and the USA. A section on award-winning wines helpfully highlights gold medal winners, which is particularly useful if you're still getting to grips with producers or grape varieties. There's even a list of Japanese winemakers working abroad, enabling you to seek out wines made by Japanese producers in countries such as France, Germany, Italy, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the USA.

The organisation Koshu of Japan has done excellent work promoting wines made from the Koshu grape, particularly from Yamanashi Prefecture, and has helped

secure listings in UK wine shops and restaurants. Beyond Koshu, however, Japanese wine remains relatively hard to find outside Japan - and even Koshu often requires some effort to track down. This is not a reflection of quality: Japanese wines are winning international awards. Rather, it reflects the small-scale production of many wineries. At Obusé Winery in Nagano, as an extreme example, purchases are limited to one bottle of each wine per group - showing the artisanal, small-batch approach of some producers, though Japanese wine is increasingly accessible both in Japan and abroad.

There is a deep respect for farmers in Japan. It's common to see information about who grew specific produce - watermelons, cherries, pumpkins - and wine is no exception. There is a clear appreciation for small-scale, high-quality production, and the grape growers and wine makers behind it. *Japanese Wine* brings these stories to life, revealing the journeys of individual producers. Notably, around 25% of Japanese wine production falls into the natural or low-

intervention category (helpfully flagged throughout the book), further underscoring this artisanal approach.

If you needed any further convincing that this is the book on Japanese wine, it even includes lighter (but no less enjoyable) details: which wineries have the best resident pets - useful if a cute on-site *shiba inu* (a small, fox-like Japanese dog breed) might sway your itinerary - as well as notes on historic buildings, social welfare initiatives, and even glassware designed specifically for Japanese grape varieties. The book also goes beyond wine, including details of 115 cheese producers and some unique Japanese cheeses, making it a dream book for wine and cheese lovers interested in Japan's broader food culture.

For anyone visiting Japan, or simply exploring its culinary and wine culture from afar, this book offers a journey through the country's history, regions, and producers - a fascinating world that's as enjoyable to read as it is to experience. [S](#)

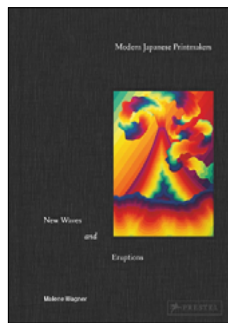
Modern Japanese Printmakers: New Waves and Eruptions

by Malene Wagner

Prestel (2025)

ISBN-13: 978-3791377841

Review by Laurence Green



How much do you know about post World War 2 Japanese printmaking? If the answer is 'Not a lot, but I want to learn more...' then this luxe, visually arresting hardback volume definitely deserves a space in your bookshelf, capturing at a glance a movement that fuses exacting craftsmanship with fearless experimentation, in the process reinventing the very language of the print medium itself.

The message throughout is about countering expectations - we all have an image in our minds of what Japanese prints look like, maybe typified by something globally iconic like Hokusai's *The Great Wave*, but this book utterly explodes those preconceptions from the off, bringing together an ample compendium of artists from the last hundred years whose work conveys a ceaseless urgency, daring, and creative spark.

With more than 100 breathtaking full-page reproductions, a story of radical reinvention unfolds. Some of the artists here synthesise tradition and modernity, while others opt for either sharp monochrome or eye-dazzling psychedelic colours. Conventions are well and truly shattered, and the overriding sense is one of both intense

seriousness about the artform, but also a crucial playfulness. There's also much to lap up here about the parallels and connections between Japanese printmakers of this era, and parallel movements in the pop art / fine art space in mid-century America, for example (think Andy Warhol, etc.).

Not everything here will be to everyone's tastes - the kaleidoscopic rainbow-like work by Ay-O that graces the cover might feel like the height of hip modernity to one viewer, for example, but come on as an overpowering assault on the senses for another. But then, that's where the variety on offer across all the artists collected here wins out - and I imagine readers will be hard pressed not to find at least something they personally enjoy here.

This is a classy production - the epitome of a luxe coffee table publication if ever there was one. The paper feels rich and high quality, perfectly capturing the colour palette and tones of the prints; they leap from the page with a cleanliness and verve that instantly dispel any preconceptions readers might have of print-making as something arcane or somehow 'lesser' than painted works. This is serious stuff, and the variety of material shown here is matched only by the impressive sense of printmaking as a lived tradition - the theme coming through again and again of a sense of lineage, past masters passing on the skills to new generations, who each in turn then pass it on to others.

If I were to offer some criticisms - it is that the book can feel a little too much like a compendium at times; the introductory text accompanying each artist is largely biographical - and no doubt for reasons of space - can only afford minimal critical analysis to individual works

themselves. All the key salient facts are here, backed up by profuse references, but this can leave the book feeling like a springboard for future research at times, rather than a definitive catalogue. A couple of eloquent essays or thematic box-outs interspersed into the biographies would have helped vary the tone a great deal, and it's telling that the most interesting bios are of those still-living artists that the author personally interviewed themselves.

It's worth noting that the book also stretches to include artists not known primarily as printmakers - and while their works are absolutely valid as part of the broader mission of the volume, it can feel a touch jarring to see global art megastars like Ruth Asawa, Yayoi Kusama and Yoshitomo Nara positioned directly next to artists dedicated purely to the print medium, and largely unknown outside of a connoisseur audience.

With the recent *Samurai* exhibition in the British Museum, Japanese prints are front and centre before a sizeable paying public here in the UK again, following swiftly on the heels of the Hiroshige exhibit in the same venue last year. This book offers a much needed sequel, as it were, to lay forth plainly and clearly that Japanese printmaking, both in the traditional woodblock medium, but also utilising other techniques like silkscreen, does not belong only in the past. Rather, the vibrancy and range it can offer has ensured its relevancy as a living practice on into modern times. Seen as part of wider trajectories of graphics, cartooning, design work and fine art, the spectacle of the Japanese "print" as object continues to enthrall, and this book offers one of the most vital surveys of the medium to date. §

The Typing Lady and Other Fictions

by Ruth Ozeki

Canongate (2026)

ISBN-13: 978-1837261598

Review by Azmina Sohail



My admiration for Ruth Ozeki's work is confined to a time capsule. When the world descended into lockdown, my own expanded into the metaphysical realm of *A Tale for the Time Being* with Tokyo city, Zen Buddhism and a peculiar diarist. Soon the "feminist" within me was intrigued by *My Year of Meats* and thus began an interest in this acclaimed writer.

We often say that novels speak to us so you can imagine my surprise when upon opening *The Typing Lady and Other Fictions*, Ozeki herself greeted me, saying that the book was 'For you. Who else?' (dedication page), as if she had since been standing on the periphery of lockdown, tapping her foot impatiently.

She wastes no time in introducing me to *The Typing Lady* in the first story, 'The Typing Lady: An Author's Note,' a woman in 'her fifties or sixties, Asian-looking with black-framed glasses and gray-streaked hair' (p.1) who was typing and scanning the room. No doubt, this is Ozeki herself - or a version of her. The writer.

Do I wish she withheld this physical description so I could've guessed? Yes. Do I continue reading and literally suspend my disbelief? Absolutely.

The Typing Lady is being observed by the narrator, who, I presume is Ozeki as well. She has a pattern of including herself in her work and for a moment the two conjoin

to explain the reason for this book's existence - a new challenge for her, shorter attention spans and technology's effect on 'reading skills' (p.5). The honesty is admirable.

See this is not just a collection of short stories (a new genre for Ozeki) but 'it had to be autofiction' (p.7), a combination of autobiography and fiction.

I began perusing through the stories and noticed a thematic pattern; each one involved at least one of the following: academia, birds, etymology, race, mortality or the act of writing. Their constant reappearance and level of detail made it clear to me that these were potentially part of her autobiography; ideas which have occupied her mind, body and soul.

She has attempted to blur the lines of fiction and reality before but, in my view, is now taking it a step further and trying to break the fourth wall. I reflect that it is possibly this type of skill that has awarded her literary accolades.

There are messages behind each of the stories either for Ozeki herself or for us as readers. The characters and their lives feel so close to reality that they must, in my view, signify a meaning to real lives being lived. Whilst they don't always evoke a sense of excitement, they encompass realism not unfamiliar to her style.

'The Anthropologist's Kid' details the fractured friendship of two students against a background of childish mistakes and cultural difference. 'Ships in the Night' is a story of an unsuccessful writer and the effect on family life that leaves you with a sense of sadness but belief in stoicism for the next generation. 'Where Ambition Goes to Die' is an unusual second person narrative analysing the push and pull of inspiration. But the story which stood out to me was 'Leafblower' about Mel, a writer and inadvertent carer of her landlords, the Professor and his bed-bound wife, Dr. Fae.

Mel is not where she wants to be in life and spends her time writing, taking instructions from the couple's real daughter and stealing and selling the Professor's books, all against the backdrop of the neighbourhood leaf blowers, 'the Lawn Kings' (p.54).

I couldn't help but dislike her, primarily for stealing. In fact, despite being the most able-bodied character, she is the least honourable. That would be attributed to the Professor, who is a lot more cognizant than at first appears, telling Mel 'we've been asking too much of you' (p.99).

As her responsibilities increase so do the signs of mortality; Dr. Fae becomes fixated on a red cardinal that appears at her window commanding her attention; a symbolic image of spirituality and death. A long-living, family rhododendron is cut down and the risk of fatal elopement becomes all too real.

The sense of mortality is what left a lasting impact on me. Ozeki takes a microcosm of three separate lives and forms a tether through the notion of impending death. As the mundanity of suburban life goes on and the leaf blowers continue, the disappearance of life becomes inescapable. Mel, the Professor and Dr. Fae are almost lifted from the page and placed in front of us to scream the reality of their

situation. It leaves us with no choice but to recognise the truth of human life and how fragile, unexpected and certain it is.

These are the types of stories, I feel, where Ozeki shines; those that leave us stuck between wanting to know more and moved by her observation of humanity.

Overall, this collection is not what I expected. Instead of a world of Japanese cities, Zen Buddhism and strange writers, I have been presented with the heart and soul of Ruth Ozeki herself. She has become emboldened and more reflective of who she is, both as a writer and as a human being. Her skill is still apparent but now takes on a personal angle and in a new style of writing.

What I've learned is that not every story can be like *A Tale for the Time Being* or *My Year of Meats* and nor should they be. What stories and writers should do is evolve and *The Typing Lady and Other Fictions* has certainly proven this. My fondest memories of Ozeki's work may be locked in a time where the world stood still but that doesn't mean my expectations should be too. Ruth Ozeki has transformed and skilfully evolved through the passage of time and likewise so should we. [S](#)

Don't Laugh at Other People's Sex Lives

by Yamazaki Nao-Cola
translated by Polly Barton

Daunt Books Publishing (2026)
ISBN-13: 978-1917092357



intense and confusing affair. As Mirume sinks further into infatuation, making illicit visits to Yuri's studio and home, the teacher remains elusive, as much to the reader as to Mirume. Yamazaki documents the push and pull between these two unlikeable but pitiable characters, as Mirume's puerile disdain towards women is overridden by his fixation on the teacher. In a brisk 80 pages, the novella captures the unwieldy passion and disorientation of the affair.

While *Don't Laugh at Other People's Sex Lives* offers a darker rendition of a student-teacher relationship than Kawakami Hiromi's best-selling *Strange Weather in Tokyo*, the authors both take a radically non-judgemental stance towards their characters, opening up their revelatory potential. Kawakami wrote of Yamazaki's *Beautiful Distance*, 'This novel moved me to tears'.

Beautiful Distance, first published a decade later in 2016, and now in translation by Charlotte Goff, strikes a very different chord, following a man caring for his wife through terminal cancer. Yamazaki's telling pushes back on medicalised narratives of illness, and their often cold focus on life expectancies or treatment regimes. Instead, people are kept at the heart of the story, and brought to life with compassionate humanity.

Told through the husband's eyes, the story attends to the evolving nature of their connection, in the minutiae of caring responsibilities and brushes of intimacy while washing

Beautiful Distance

by Yamazaki Nao-Cola
translated by Charlotte Goff

Daunt Books Publishing (2026)
ISBN-13: 978-1917092623

Review by Jemma Rose



The simultaneous translations of two books by Yamazaki Nao-Cola, five-time nominee for the prestigious Akutagawa Prize, introduce to English readers a daringly honest portraitist of intense emotion across the peaks and troughs of life.

Yamazaki's debut, *Don't Laugh at Other People's Sex Lives*, originally published in 2004 and newly translated by Polly Barton, explores the nature of relationships with particular attention to gender dynamics. After art student Mirume agrees to model for his enigmatic teacher Yuri (married and twenty years his senior), they embark on an

her face, braiding her hair, or applying her moisturizer. Their deeply felt love remains grounded in an authentic sense of pragmatism throughout, never veering into cloying cliché.

The scope of the novel expands to encompass the wider community and the incalculable value of all the people in their lives. Generous space is devoted to the regular customers of the wife's sandwich shop, for example, who visit the hospital to share the personal impact she had on them, in a moving examination of the role of work in life and identity.

The novel grapples principally with the question of how to be happy in the moment when the future is uncertain, with far-reaching resonances beyond the hospital bed. Although its focus is in extremis, *Beautiful Distance* provides a gentle reminder to treasure the joys of everyday life, even just enjoying a sandwich at lunchtime.

The simultaneous translation of the two books, originally published more than a decade apart, poses an elucidating contrast. *Beautiful Distance* is certainly the more mature and fully-realised work, offering a comprehensive meditation where *Don't Laugh at Other People's Sex Lives* reads as an evocative impulsion. But each is well-served by this stylistic differentiation. The reflective mode afforded by the later novel only highlights the limited psychological resources of the teen-aged narrator of the novella in his struggle to make sense of an unresolved relationship. Together they bookend the stages of adult life, from a mystified young student to the accumulated wisdom of our final moments.

Translator Polly Barton's own debut novel *What Am I, A Deer?* was also published on the same date, and touches upon the tension in literary translation between 'trying to create an experience for its new readers at least as enjoyable

and immersive as the experience of those who'd read it in the original, or rather trying to represent the cultural and linguistic specificities of the source.'

This balancing act is deftly navigated in both translations, achieving highly readable texts which also preserve the particularities of their cultural setting. In *Beautiful Distance*, this is evidenced by a remarkable delicacy around the social encounters which take place in the hospital, teasing out unspoken nuances and interpersonal assumptions which may be unfamiliar to English readers without ever disrupting the flow of narration.

More than twenty years after its original publication in 2004, the ambivalence in *Don't Laugh at Other People's Sex Lives* around its imbalanced central relationship lands somewhat uncomfortably in a post-Me Too landscape. Yamazaki has [stated](#) that they now 'have questions about the relationship between teaching and being taught, power in balance, [sic] and how my characters' relationship may have been similar to grooming' and expressed their intention to write a new novel exploring the subject. It would be a welcome return to some of the under-examined issues raised in the novella.

The author has also reflected on other changes since their debut. In a [handwritten address](#) to new English readers, Yamazaki reflected on their pen name: 'When I was younger, I really loved cola. So Naoko plus cola makes Nao-Cola. The funny thing is ... I actually don't drink cola these days. So sometimes I think about changing my pen name.' The growing power of psychological insight and deeply compassionate characterisation in Yamazaki's writing promises much to look forward to in their future work, whether under the name 'Nao-Coffee, Nao-Cocoa, or even Nao-Cognac...!' §

Jackson Alone

by Jose Ando
translated by Kalau Almony

Footnote Press (2026)
ISBN-13: 978-1804442838

Review by Hester Mullen



'But this was Japan, and here in Japan, it was Jackson alone who looked like this and was treated this way' (p. 1).

Jackson Alone, a darkly comic and provocative novel by Jose Ando, follows its mixed-race, openly gay protagonist Jackson as he navigates a world that persistently defines him by his otherness. It's an exciting introduction to Ando, who won the 172nd Akutagawa Prize for his most recent

novel *DTopia*. Hopefully it's only the first of his books to be translated into English.

As a sports massage therapist, Jackson is fetishised by colleagues, and subjected to constant scrutiny by the local police, who profile him as a likely thief. He wears a shirt to work one day with a black and white pattern that, unbeknownst to him, hides a QR code. His colleagues discover that the code leads them to a violent, pornographic video of a mixed-race gay man. As rumours spread that the man in the video is Jackson, he must search for the video's real origin alone.

But Jackson isn't alone for long. This is the first of many ironies Ando plays with in *Jackson Alone*.

He soon meets three men who have also been exposed by the video. Jerin, a store clerk and drag performer, is being blackmailed by a colleague. He sends the video to pornstar

Ibuki, asking him to post it as his own. Ibuki's friend X (*ekkisu* in the original Japanese) berates Ibuki for sharing the video, and seems to know more than he says about its origins. All four men find each other at the scene of the original video. They are so alike that Jackson refers to them mentally as the 'Jackson Four' (p. 41). While searching for the real origin of the video, they also discover that by posing as one another, they can seek revenge for the implicit and explicit racism that defines their lives. But in doing so, they find themselves playing into the very stereotypes that confine them.

As a Tokyo native with African-Asian heritage, Ando seems to dare you to compare him to his characters, perhaps as the missing member who could make it the "Jackson Five". He ambushes you in the opening page of his novel with the 'cocoa skin, the devilish eyes, too big, too bright' of the victim in the pornographic video (p. 1) who screams out in pain while 'tied to a bed' (*haritsuke*, which can also be translated as 'crucified') (p. 8).

As soon as he sees the video, Jackson immediately relates to this mixed-race man. He even recognises the hotel room in the shot as a popular location for gay hook-ups that he's been to previously. Despite having no memory of the abusive scene, he wonders if it could be him, as his colleagues assume. This feeling intensifies when he poses as the victim to gather information, and realises that 'everything he was saying was, in fact, the truth' (p. 20). Jerin also takes on the persona of the victim when he contacts Ibuki, embarrassed to explain how he came to be associated with the video. And Ibuki and X both publicly claim the video as their own, causing further embarrassment. All four men are trapped between two identities: the fake victim of the violence in the video, and the real victim of speculation from their peers.

No one exemplifies this more than X, whose name even traps him between multiple identities. You learn later in the novel that he's named after 'a famous Black American hero', perhaps the civil rights activist and proponent of violent resistance Malcolm X (p. 121). We learn too that his name is written with the kanji for 'cross' (*juuji*) which recalls the violent crucifixion of the man in the video. But all four characters have been the targets of aggression, whether physical or social, and they struggle to trust each other despite their shared victimhood.

This creates a fascinating tension between the four men, as chafe against the assumption that they are the same, homogenous victim. In one scene, Ibuki mocks the uncritical racism of manga: "This white part is skin. A human, just like us!" (p. 60). But Jerin and Jackson disagree. For Jerin, anime offers a world where protagonists can transform into different forms, escaping an identity defined

by aesthetic appearance. In the English translation, Kalau Almony uses male pronouns for Jerin, but in the original Japanese pronouns are easily avoided, and references to Jerin's 'sports bra' and his drag shows could hint at differences between the four men that go beyond popular culture (p. 57). Although they are all accused of being the same victim of violent objectification, the Jackson Four are distinct individuals.

Yet they find power in pretending. Hitting a dead end in their search, they hatch a plan which demonstrates Ando's aptitude for irony: They can call out the discrimination forced upon them by posing as each other. What starts as humorous hi-jinks soon takes a darker turn. A plot to take revenge on Jerin's manipulative co-worker-turned-boyfriend ends with X assaulting him. Jackson, also posing as Jerin, gets stopped by a police officer in a familiar stand-off to check his bicycle registration, only this time he doesn't have Jerin's identity card to prove he's not a thief. And their attempt to shame the man who implicated Jackson in the video also backfires, when they are unable to force him to admit any remorse. By becoming each other, they have only reinforced the pressures of conformity and shame forced on them by others.

These pressures are amplified by technology, through hidden QR codes, the smartphones that activate them, and the screens that follow the characters through the novel. Ando embeds the QR code into the narrative, daring you to take on the role of voyeur yourself. Scan it, and it will take you to a website, 'blackmixroom.org', and a message reading 'THIS WEBSITE IS NO LONGER AVAILABLE. ACCESS DENIED :)' (p. 7). Presumably, whoever hosted this fictional forum no longer pays for the domain. But in the novel you learn that it is a community of men who share pornographic videos of mixed-race men, emboldened by the '120,000 likes' they receive for increasingly violent content (p. 92). But the conspiracy goes deeper still, as Ibuki learns in the final pages of the novel.

That's a lot for 150 pages, and *Jackson Alone* rushes to an off-kilter conclusion, its final conspiracy difficult to unpack. Meanwhile, all the characters ultimately remain trapped by the same forces. Although it's an odd and even unsatisfying conclusion, it feels appropriate considering that questions of diversity and acceptance are still far from settled in Japan today.

In *Jackson Alone*, Ando captures the frustrations of anyone caught in the trap of an identity policed from all sides. It's darkly comic primer on the intersection of race, sexuality, and personal identity in Japan with real bite. And hopefully, there will soon be more of Ando's novels in translation to sink our teeth into. [S](#)

A Pale View of Hills

directed by Kei Ishikawa

In cinemas across the UK from 13 March 2026

Review by Mayumi Donovan

How reliable are your memories? Especially when you don't want to believe that what you remember is what really happened? Is it even possible to rewrite your memories?

A Pale View of Hills takes us back to 1950s Nagasaki, a city still scarred by the second atomic bomb that devastated the town, its people, and their lives. Etsuko has since moved to England with her late husband.

The story begins in 1980s England, following the older Etsuko (Yo Yoshida). A track by New Order immediately situates us in the era. Her daughter Niki, an aspiring journalist, is eager to prove herself. Encouraged by her editor - who she is also in a relationship with - she sets out to uncover her mother's past in Nagasaki. Etsuko is reluctant to speak, but gradually begins to share her memories, perhaps prompted by the fact that she is preparing to sell the house she has lived in for so long.

The film moves back and forth between the 1950s and the 1980s, and in both timelines there is a sense of something unresolved hanging over the family. At times, it even feels like a quiet psychological horror: what happened to the elder daughter, Keiko? What lies behind the locked room?

In postwar Nagasaki, the young Etsuko (Suzu Hirose) lives a quietly conservative life, devoted to her husband. On the surface, her life appears calm and content, yet there is something unsettling beneath it. The arrival of her father-in-law, Ogata (Tomokazu Miura), subtly disrupts the household. Etsuko plays the role of the perfect wife, warmly caring for him while her husband, Jiro (Kohei Matsushita), keeps a certain emotional distance.

In one revealing moment, Ogata asks whether Jiro is kind to her. Etsuko replies that he is, and Ogata expresses relief that she is happy. She confirms it - but is she really? The camera pointedly avoids showing her face, a quiet but powerful suggestion that her true feelings remain hidden.

Etsuko becomes more alive after meeting Sachiko (Fumi Nikaido), a single mother with a young daughter, Mariko, who dreams of moving to the United States with her American boyfriend. Drawn to Sachiko's optimism - "You can be anything in America" - Etsuko begins to reconnect with her own buried desires. Her dreams, like her emotions, seem locked away. One particularly striking moment comes when Ogata speaks about life before the atomic bomb; here, the film briefly exposes the deep scars carried by Etsuko and



the people of Nagasaki, even though it rarely addresses the bomb directly.

All the performances are excellent, especially from Suzu Hirose and Fumi Nikaido. Both are major stars in Japan, and this marks their first on-screen collaboration. They share a subtle but powerful chemistry. Tomokazu Miura is equally impressive as Ogata, portraying a man who is gentle yet firmly rooted in traditional values.

The cinematography is both beautiful and deliberate. The Nagasaki scenes are bright, almost oversaturated, bathed in warm light that gives them a dreamlike, almost unreal quality - perhaps reflecting the version of the past Etsuko chooses to remember. The influence of Yasujiro Ozu is clear in the static camera placements and carefully composed interiors, where elements like *hashira* (pillars) and frosted glass subtly obscure and divide the frame, hinting at what remains unspoken. In contrast, the England scenes are darker and more subdued, grounding the narrative in a more tangible reality.

At its core, this is a film about the past we wish we could rewrite. It reveals fragments of truth but leaves many questions unanswered. By the end, you may find yourself wanting to return to the beginning, searching for meaning in what was left unsaid. What lingers most is its quiet message: we all have to change - no matter the era. [S](#)