

This final issue of *The Japan Society Review* for 2025 turns its focus to the richness of contemporary Japanese fiction. From quiet psychological portraits to noir tinged thrillers, this selection of novels and short story collections reflects the diversity of voices and imaginative worlds shaping Japan's literary present.

We begin with *Sisters in Yellow* by Kawakami Mieko, a dark, propulsive novel exploring the lingering impact of past relationships and the emotional wounds that resurface over time. Set against the pressures of a changing Tokyo, it follows young women navigating hardship, power imbalances, and the long shadows cast by formative experiences.

Matsuie Masashi's *Summer at Mount Asama* is a contemplative debut set in a village beneath the volcano, where a young architect spends the summer with his firm. The novel foregrounds atmosphere over plot, blending reflections on art, nature, and architectural practice.

Matsuda Aoko's *The Woman Dies* offers a bold, razor-sharp collection of fifty-two short stories that expose the everyday sexism embedded in contemporary Japanese society. With humour, bite, and a flair for the surreal, Matsuda gives voice

to overlooked perspectives, from the casual glamorisation of women's suffering to the subtle and not-so-subtle ways women are silenced or diminished.

A different kind of tension animates *Tokyo Swindlers* by Shinjo Ko, a gripping novel that plunges readers into the intricacies of deception, ambition, and survival in the capital's underworld. With its fast pace and noir-inflected atmosphere, the book offers a stylish portrait of the city's hidden corners.

Hirano Keiichiro's *At the End of the Matinee* brings an elegant and introspective counterpoint, following the intertwined lives of a classical guitarist and a journalist whose connection unfolds across continents. Through its reflective tone and emotional precision, the novel examines love, timing, and the choices that shape a life.

We close the issue with Miyamoto Teru's *Phantom Lights*, a collection of eight stories linked by themes of personal hardship and told through shifting, nonlinear perspectives. Drawing on elements of the author's own life, the pieces explore poverty, illness, loss, and the quiet endurance found in ordinary lives.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

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Sisters in Yellow

by Kawakami Mieko
translated by Laurel Taylor and
Yoshio Hitomi
Picador (2026)
ISBN-13: 978-1035024131
Review by Laurence Green



This might just be Kawakami's best book yet. An epic running to nearly 600 pages in the Japanese original, it's full to the brim with the stuff of life. Kawakami has always done social realism so very very well, it's her bread and butter. But whereas previous books like *Heaven and Breasts & Eggs* paired that social realism with a decidedly quirky, whimsy touch, *Sisters in Yellow* feels like a straight shot of hard-edged impact, often feeling more like a crime thriller at times. This thrill-ride lean toward a tale that takes in criminality as part of a wider-sweeping look at working class life in Japan - a rare, and often overlooked aspect of urban life there - is all the more compelling because its central character is nuanced in a way that their actions, as painful as they can be at times, are always understandable.

Our protagonist is fifteen-year-old Hana; she's full of hope, but has little else going for her in her life, that is, until Kimiko bursts into her life like a spark of flame, lighting the touchpaper on a journey that seems to offer a way out of the grinding poverty of her upbringing. Together they build Lemon, a rundown bar that becomes Hana's first taste of belonging, friendship, and easy money. For the first time, she feels normal. Untouchable. She even manages to make friends her own age. But in the shadowy alleys on the edge of central Tokyo, dreams don't come for free, and Hana's newfound world will test her courage, loyalty, and sheer ability to survive to the absolute breaking point.

What follows is a dizzying, but utterly believable spin into the murky depths that exist on the periphery of the Japanese underworld, criminality in its most sinister form - the kind that rubs shoulders daily with normal people, whilst on the face of it seeming completely "victimless". It's the world of pyramid schemes, gambling, credit card fraud and countless other kinds of money-movement that grips the characters of the novel tight in a web that seems to only stick harder the more they struggle. Money lies at the centre of it all, accumulating, piling up (never in bank accounts, always seemingly stuffed in a box at the back of a cupboard), a world where backstabbing

and betrayal seems only a turn away. And always, always, the threat of discovery, an end to everything Hana has strived for.

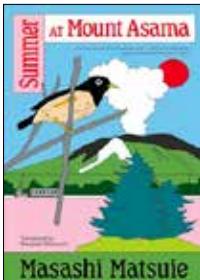
Sisters in Yellow bites deep into the seemingly perfect mirror of Japanese modernity and reflects back an ugly truth; it's not so perfect for everyone. Single mothers, ethnic minorities, the working classes, women in general - all have their trials and tribulations, all fight against the behemoth that is the social norm of what society says is correct and true. Hana fights hard to build her own version of the truth amid this, her own 'sisterhood' on her terms, but the world is primed and ready to fight back. Kawakami juggles the pacing with precision tooled dexterity - you want Hana to succeed, even though you - as the reader - know what she is doing is resolutely illegal. A void opens up in you when her money is stolen, and you feel every backbreaking hour of the labour she puts into the assorted jobs she works - both legal and less-so.

The minutiae of life are observed with laser-like focus; the hum and pulse of the urban environment written out in the fabric of dive bars and little alleyways that feels like photo snapshots from a guidebook to all the places only locals would know. Kawakami takes it all in - her writing acting like a camera lens; crisp, clinical, yet imbued with an inner passion. There are new translators on board for this book too, in the form of Laurel Taylor and Hitomi Yoshio. It's an inspired switch up, and addresses the chief criticism that surrounded Kawakami's previous English language releases - handled by two male translators - which many readers felt to be an odd choice, considering the powerful feminist tone of Kawakami's work. *Sisters in Yellow* (originally released back in 2023 in Japan) feels as alive in English as it does in Japanese - the language, like the content, feels vibrant, unfiltered and unafraid to tackle the rough and ready lives of these working class characters.

Playing out as the epitome of that just one more page drive that compels you to keep going from beginning to end, the sense of tension in Hana's story never lets up, and you ultimately grow to love these characters, as faulted and frustrating as they are. The book ends with a sense of deep sadness, but paired with a weird kind of hope - ultimately, the message is a simple one, the utter messiness of humanity and our clumsy attempts to make some kind of order that is the chaos of modern life. Life is hard, but we have to live it, all the same. §

Summer at Mount Asama

by Matsuie Masashi
translated by Margaret Mitsutani
The Indigo Press (2025)
ISBN-13: 978-1917378000
Review by Tabitha Carver



Summer at Mount Asama is the prize-winning debut novel by Matsuie Masahi (1958), first translated into English in 2025 after its original Japanese release in 2012.

Before its publication, Matsuie worked as an editor for many of Japan's most successful authors such as Murakami Haruki, Ogawa Yoko, and Yoshimoto Banana. Having won the Yomiuri Prize, an award rarely given to debut novels, this work confirms Matsuie's literary talents in his own right.

In the book, we accompany the newly graduated Sakanishi Toru as he joins the esteemed Murai architectural agency established by the man we come to know as *Sensei*, the fictional Murai Shunsuke, a former student of the nonfictional pioneering architect Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959).

Every year, the architectural agency team makes their way to a small village at the base of Mount Asama, an active volcano. There, they live and work together against the backdrop of a changing village, once an active artist's colony, as it deals with modernization and the realities of an aging population in rural Japan. While the central narrative revolves around the production of the agency's entry into a competition to build the new National Library of Modern Literature, the essential currents that carry this novel are its philosophical ponderings on life, nature, beauty, art and creation.

Lovers of architecture as well as those with no prior knowledge of the craft will enjoy learning about key tenets of modernist architecture. This occurs both through the fictional work of *Sensei* and our protagonist (the ritual of pencil sharpenings at the company, the intricate creation of blueprints, the deep and rich description of a fictional church hidden in the depths of Tokyo) and insights into the historical trailblazers of Western architecture: notably, the aforementioned American Frank Lloyd Wright, as well as the Swedish Gunnar Asplund.

Wright had a huge influence on modernist architecture in Japan, where his modernist and organic approach complemented Japanese architectural traditions - he leaves behind not only his own material legacy (most known perhaps, the Imperial Hotel in

Tokyo), but the philosophies carried on through the apprentices he trained in Japan and beyond.

In *Summer at Mount Asama*, Sakanishi, our protagonist, is equally concerned with the legacies left behind by architects, in particular, those of his own *sensei*, under whose tutelage he begins to gain confidence in his craft.

Sakanishi sleeps in a library at the Summer House, surrounded by books on architecture. It is the cemetery designed by Asplund that leaves a lasting impression on him. Asplund's clear thoughtfulness on the choice of materials and placement of structures is mirrored in the in-depth considerations of what an accessible, lasting, national library structure should look like and who it should serve.

In that sense, it is not insignificant to hold this book while reading. As we learn about detailed considerations for appropriate bookshelf height in the National Library, ventilation to avoid mold, which exact material will age well to preserve the content of the books on the shelves, the reader cannot help but contemplate the importance of archiving ideas - you may even find yourself treating the very pages in your hand with a little more care. The material explanation around preservation again invokes questions of legacy - what it means to create, leave behind, and maintain.

Throughout the novel, our fictitious architect grapples clearly with what the legacy of an architect can and should be. What responsibilities might an architect bear in the construction not only of a National Library, but in that of a church or cemetery? When the architect has passed on, who can make delicate repairs when the materials used are tested against time?

This question of legacy and preservation is crucially not isolated from the perpetually present forces of nature, reminding us that we can never fully control our environment. While there are smaller narrative examples of this (a damp stain in wallpaper to be fixed in a previously constructed house in the village), the most striking example of this is the shadow of Mount Asama itself: an active volcano, whose unpredictability, its showers of enveloping ash, loom over the book.

However, despite nature's might, these reminders aren't always threatening: In fact, it is the sprinkle of bird calls, the rich descriptions of the origin of certain plants, the katsura tree outside the summer house (which seems to grow and mature in tandem with our narrator) that reminds us: there is beauty in the coming and going of life.

In one example, we meet with the potential for human legacy in a beautiful scene, as volcanic ash is

cleared to make way for the discovery of preserved pottery of the Jomon period (14,000-1000 BC), known as the earliest known pottery tradition in the world.

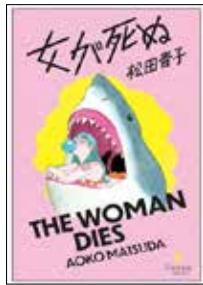
In addition to the deep philosophical questions examined in this novel, its sincere exploration of work, family and romantic relationships in 1980s Japan is equally insightful. A western reader will be interested in learning about certain Japanese customs, for example how formalities interplay with intimacies that may seem surprising (one must at once be extraordinarily mindful of how to speak to one's elders and consider comfortable attending a nude hot spring with those same elders).

While our narrator is often reserved, we discover alongside him the surprises of first romance, the importance of community and the true expansiveness of what family means, as this group of architects live together, create and negotiate life at the base of Mount Asama.

The threat of the unknown looms over the narrative, explored through unexpected challenges and the unpredictable forces of nature around them. However, *Summer at Mount Asama* ultimately tells us it is precisely the impermanence of life itself - the marching on of time and history - that makes possible humankind's persistence in building structures, art, love, and relationships across generations. §

The Woman Dies

by Matsuda Aoko
translated by Polly Barton
Europa Editions (2025)
ISBN-13: 978-1787705876
Review by Laurence Green



Bold, electrifying, and wickedly funny, Matsuda Aoko's *The Woman Dies* slices with razor-sharp deftness through the everyday sexism woven into modern Japanese life. Across fifty-two dazzling stories, Matsuda exposes the quiet and not-so-quiet ways women are silenced, sidelined, and spectacularly underestimated. You feel their pain, their anguish, but also their sarcasm, venom and lop-sided humour at a world that seems forever skewed against them.

In the title story, Matsuda needles the casual glamorisation of female suffering on screen and in the media. The woman dies so the man can be sad, so she can be a plot twist, so someone can have a destiny. By forcibly unmasking the tired trope of women sacrificed or harmed simply to serve someone else's narrative, she invites the reader to take a second glance at our favourite streams of popular media and consider whether alternatives can exist. Elsewhere, she gives voice to objects, toys with technology's aesthetics, and twists language into absurd, glittering shapes; every tale a rebellion against the ordinary.

In one of the most explicit, yet hilarious of the tales – 'The Masculine Touch' - Matsuda imagines a world where male genitalia are scrutinised and objectified to the same degree women face daily. In other stories, the tone veers across a wider spectrum of political hot-points; the Japanese national anthem, Japan's position within Asia, and the rote learning of

English typical to the Japanese education system. And then there are some tales that are just outright bizarre: Hollywood actor Nick Cage confined to an actual cage by an obsessed fan, only to explode out of it and speed away on his motorcycle.

The book is all at once both a short story collection, but also more than that. You can dip into it a tale at a time, or power on through in a single sitting or two. It's a rip-roaring rollercoaster ride through surrealism, satire, and feminist fury: a full on pick-n-mix of ideas from one of Japan's most fearless and inventive storytellers.

The Woman Dies is also a spot-on meeting of minds - translator Polly Barton is on a roll right now. Fresh from the success of her translation of Yuzuki Asako's *Butter* - which literally everyone seemed to be reading on the morning commute at one point - her handling of Matsuda's short stories is a perfect fit for her continued handling of quirky, engaging writing by Japan's foremost contemporary female writers. Barton's translations have a winning aptitude for a witty, conversational tone that not only feels utterly natural, but manages the difficult job of making you believe the protagonists are real - even when all around them, things are getting distinctly weird. These characters could be right there, walking the streets beside you, working in the same office as you, and it's testament to both Matsuda and Barton that the tone hits right every time.

And if anything, it's the tone that serves as the most memorable aspect to *The Woman Dies* - while certain tales in this volume rise to the fore more than others, the title story not least among them, it's the body of work as a whole that proves to be the real winner. There's the meticulous sense of pacing that sees longer works interspersed by the palette

cleansing one liners, the tilting between the all-out feminist powerhouse manifestos vs. the light, airy pop-cultural references, and everything in between. Taken as a whole, Matsuda's authorial voice is convivial to the

extreme, a friend letting loose over a glass of wine at all society's ills, yet always loaded with bite and humour. You'll laugh a lot here, but it'll give you plenty to think about too. §

Tokyo Swindlers

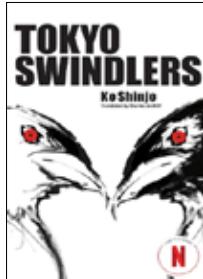
by Shinjo Ko

Translated by Charles De Wolf

Shueisha (2024)

ISBN-13: 978-1611720846

Review by Shaun English



Adaptations of anything are often tricky businesses, with one eye on the huge commercial potential of recreating works onto a different medium, but with much scrutiny of the media and the following created by original work. The Netflix show *Jimenshi-tachi*, or *Tokyo Swindlers*, was released in 2024, five years after the publication of the homonymous book by Shinjo Ko from which it was adapted. Watching/reading both at the same time was the mistake I made, but since this the review of the book, I will reduce talking about the Netflix adaptation to only a reference point, because for me, that is what this show deserved anyway – with the exception of Lily Franky, one of my favourite actors and writers and Anthony from the comedy group *Matenro*, who portrayed Orochi (I frequently see him on Japanese variety shows, so this was interesting to watch).

Contrary to the usual fast-paced, aggressive crime thrillers belched out by Netflix, Shinjo Ko's novel is a sobering, patient and meticulous study of society and the characters in it. Central to the novel is Takumi, a swindler of four years, with a backstory comparable to something Dazai Osamu could come up with. And, whilst some completely disregard backstories as just meaningless character building, readers should pay attention to this one, because not only does it come early, but is also extremely relevant to the story. Harrison Yamanaka is the ringleader, a calm and calculating individual never giving away his true intentions or his composure, and their group consists of diverse and entertaining characters, from the recluse with his own backstory Nagai, to the timid comic-relief-type guy, Orochi. This group are land scammers, and through forgery, deception and identity theft, they target businesses for their money, and take advantage of their naivety, vagueness in the Japanese legal system, and pressure from the Japanese corporate mindset.

Not only is the book a deep and complex look at how these scammers operate, with the level of research

and dedication extremely respectable, it is also a greater look at Japanese society and its many deep-rooted flaws. Many of the characters, even those who operate just as background characters, are victims of an old and outdated system, one which prioritises collective over individuals, but benefits only the few at the top. Many are in debt, or in difficult marriages, or struggle under Japan's strict and cut-throat work culture and expectation, no matter if you are a swindler, salaryman, millionaire or seller. What makes these characters interesting is that they all have something they hide, whether it be literally, such as Reiko and Nagai with their appearances, or in a deeper sense, like Takumi's family background or Kawai with her relationships. They all suffer somewhat in an unforgiving world where they were dealt nothing but a bad hand, something which, I think, resonates with the average Japanese reader living in an intensely shame-driven society.

Take Tatsu, the veteran detective. Whilst many might believe he should be a character we should follow as the "protagonist" due to his profession and therefore perceived moral standing compared to others, the truth is he is he effectively consumes himself in his work, taking little part in his family life, straining their relationships, a very common and typical stereotype of the Japanese white-collar worker. This morally nuanced standpoint, whilst definitely a much more respectable character, is still someone affected deeply by the flawed mindset of Japanese society, past and present.

When I watched the Netflix series, I felt it was your typical action thriller inseparable from its genre which cultivated successful shows, such as an *Alice in Borderland* to give an example. One of the things from the book missing from the Netflix show was the slow and careful worldbuilding. It was clearly deliberate that the story started from the climax of one major scam by the swindlers, because it helped me understand the stakes and environment within one short chapter, whilst feeling natural at the same time. Starting with one scam, some backstory and the progression to the real project of the story, the nun scam. Creating the status quo makes the shock of the next big scam much more impactful, as the series of events leading to and after are the climax similar to some of the most tense and thrilling chapters of other crime novels. The way

the show deals with perspective was also interesting to me. It is very different from the book which has three main viewpoints, one from the view of Takumi, one from Tatsu, and one from Aoyagi. The way the three interpret similar situations - particularly between the scammers and Aoyagi, the scammed - made for much humour, suspense and plot progression and made my interest in the book spike upwards.

As mentioned the book was released in 2019 and, at that time, the vague memory of the 2017 Sekisui land scam was probably restored in some Japanese's heads - a case where 5.5 billion yen was swindled by a fraud ring, led by a man called Uchida Mike, from the property development firm Sekisui House. 14 people were arrested in the following year, including Uchida, who was caught that November, and were recently ordered to pay 1 billion yen in reparations, as well as lengthy prison sentences. Of all the so-called "land scam" cases,

this was by far the highest profile, due to the sheer amount of money involved. 5 billion yen is around 25 million pounds (the story in the bookspeaks of 10 billion yen), and only a handful of people were involved in the ring. They took advantage of some in Japan's large elderly population, as well as pressure within the Sekisui company to succeed, shocking and unsettling the Japanese public, and making them question who or what to trust.

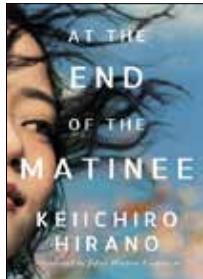
The characters and the name of the company are very, very similar to the real case – for example, the name of the house is Sekiyo which very much resemble Sekisui House. I would encourage readers to research more of the real life case to recognise the parallels with the book. After the novel's commercial success, Netflix milked out the money in an average TV adaptation, but I still did enjoy the show if I removed the link between it and Shinjo's masterpiece novel. §

At the End of the Matinee

by Hirano Keiichiro
translated by Juliet Winters
Carpenter

Amazon Crossing (2021)
ISBN-13: 978-1542005180

Review by Azmina Sohail



There is nothing that will prepare you for the rollercoaster that is *At the End of the Matinee*. The novel by Hirano Keiichiro won the Watanabe Junichi Literary Prize in 2017 and it is clear to see why. This isn't just a love story but a testament to fate and how what is meant for you, will undoubtedly reach you.

Every author has a reason to write their story and Hirano's is laid out in his prologue. '...while fiction makes it possible to refrain from revealing some secrets, it is the only way to reveal others. I wished...to write freely about their inner emotional lives by presenting them as fictional characters' (p.1). By characters, he means his protagonists, classical guitarist Makino Satoshi and journalist Komine Yoko. He implies that these characters exist in real life but various details like names, 'organisations they belong to, the chronology of events, and so forth' have been altered (p.1). It is this notion that will spur your excitement and elevate your curiosity to go on because whilst fiction is storytelling at its finest, it is often real life that contains the greatest stories.

Human emotion drives the plot forward. We are first introduced to Makino backstage after a concert, exhausted but proud of his performance; a man

clearly aware of his talent and status in the classical music world. Yoko, a sweet-natured but head-strong journalist is appreciative of his work and has a clear personal connection to it. Whilst their initial dialogue is moderate, it is this moment that connects the two and sets off a turn of events that bring them closer and separate together.

Curiosity and interest in each other are slow but intense with music being the tether. Some of the most standout scenes detail their deep expressions of admiration for it which fans of the genre can fully indulge in. The notion of change is a prominent idea for Makino for when 'listening to a musical theme develop, you come to see that it contained a certain potentiality all along. Once you follow it to the end, the theme never sounds the same again' (p.18). The subtle reference to Beethoven's diary entry is the essence of his approach to composition: 'Ascertain all in the evening' (p.18). He believes that when you reach the end of a piece of music, your perspective on what you first heard changes. Similarly, the events of the day often look much different once you reach the evening. A clear and beautiful allegory for life also reflective of the novel's title and reminiscent of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*.

Like all memorable stories, an unexpected twist is always welcome. Hirano explores this through mental health and PTSD, offering us insight into the strength it takes to deal with a destructive and debilitating condition, particularly during a war. It seems that no matter what the brain experiences, it will always find

a way to fight back and heal, but time is needed. A testament to the beauty and strength of neuroplasticity.

Throughout the book, Hirano's language is gentle and therefore reflective of Yoko and Makino's feelings for each other. But like all relationships, jealousy can appear from external forces. It becomes a vicious emotion signifying nothing but weakness and can alter the course of a life forever.

Despite this, Yoko and Makino remain stoic. They seem to be connected to a power greater than themselves and turn fate into something very plausible. Their love is slow but not certain but as the story

progresses there is something that tells us that these souls are connected beyond human understanding. They are thrust across countries, people and time, all the while serving as a mirror for each other battling love, loss and uncertainty.

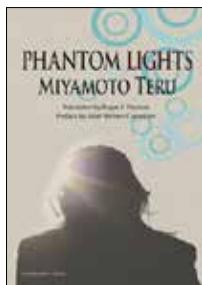
Ultimately this story has the power to reflect and question reality. It a love story about composition; how in life and in music, what has been planned will inevitably play out. As much as we feel we are in control of our destiny, there are signs that a power beyond human control is at work. Hirano Keiichiro understands this and has laid it out beautifully for the world to see. §

Phantom Lights

by Miyamoto Teru
translated by Roger K. Thomas

Kurodahan Press (2011)
ISBN-13: 978-4902075427

Review by Lachlan Evans



Phantom Lights by Miyamoto Teru is a short story collection comprised of eight stories, the last and longest of which being the titular story. Mirroring Miyamoto's own life, the book is entrenched in the Kansai region, and the stories are linked thematically by personal hardship, all employing a nonlinear narrative structure to describe how these hardships affect characters on a lifelong timescale.

The first story, 'A Story of Tomatoes' struck me as an intriguing look at the intersection between capitalism and humanity, grappling with the tension between a heartfelt personal struggle and the swarm of infrastructure and machinery which makes up the story's backdrop. The image of the letter encased in concrete is a clear and potent statement about the apathy of a capitalist society. Some drawbacks I found with this story lay in details which came across as needless throwaways, for example the entire expositional conversation in the advertising agency added nothing to our knowledge of the character, and tomatoes seemed to have no literary purpose, not being explained or given as much importance as would be expected of a titular detail.

The next story, 'Evening Cherry Blossoms', is perhaps the most vivid example of the thematic motif of beauty abounding from tragedy. After seeing a beautiful view of cherry blossoms against a black night sky, Miyamoto writes "she had a feeling that at that very moment she was capable of becoming any sort of woman" (p. 36). Outside of this heartwarming character transformation however, it seems as though

much of the story has no relevance to any other part. This gives a somewhat realist effect in which we feel as though we are following a very regular human life, but in terms of emotion, this style didn't have much impact at times. Additionally, the prose read as dryly translated, taking sentences very literally with not much attempt to translate the poeticism of the original Japanese—which could be sensed through the barrier of the translator, but which did not carry over in effect.

The third story, 'Eyebrow Pencil' takes a more linear approach to describing tragedy, this time surrounding the failing health of the narrator's grandmother. The story cuts off on a quiet domestic moment rather than at the traditional end, making for a feeling of appreciation for the present moment and a more optimistic outlook on the future, which is outside of our or the narrator's control. Unlike the previous stories, this instalment also gives literary meaning to the style of Miyamoto's writing. The modest, undramatic prose becomes a strong symbol of the outlook of the grandmother when faced with tragic circumstances.

The story 'Strength' specifically mentions the word 'stagnating' (p. 60), recalling the economic stagnation of the 'lost decades' in Japan's recent history. Within this context, Miyamoto focusses on inter-generational dynamics, introducing both the narrator's parents and children through its nonlinear timeline. We are shown how troubles in his parents' relationship manifest as poor behaviour in both him and his children, the latter being an echo of the narrator's childhood self. We follow an account of the narrator walking to school without his parents for the first time - an intriguing perspective of someone who is lost in the world - highlighting the ways in which all generations are navigating the world in their own manner.

'The Lift' is a very parable-esque tale about a seemingly mentally ill cyclist being the only source of

transport for the narrator who runs out of money for a train and is forced to walk miles home in the freezing cold. Still saturated by Miyamoto's themes of destitution and unemployment, the story is atmospheric and the character of the man on the bike is enigmatic and captivating. He is described as 'divine' (p. 82) which carries an interesting weight in a world struck by misfortune and desperation. He is a momentary beacon of hope for someone stuck in miserable circumstances, even though he himself is volatile and capricious, constantly shifting between bouts of intense suicidal thoughts and mental clarity - a behaviour which worries the narrator greatly.

'The Stairs' is another story that centres on the idea of cycles of abuse, painting a vivid picture of the narrator's fractured family and the apartment block in which they live. The goings-on in this setting are presented as a direct result of the lower socioeconomic class the residents belong to. Miyamoto writes: 'he [...] wanted to get far away from the stench of apartments where poor people live and from the unhappiness that unfolds in such places' (p. 86). This is yet another example of characters desperate to escape circumstances brought upon them by the failures of capitalism and stark wealth inequality. One feature I enjoyed in 'The Stairs' was the lucidity with which the action in the stairwell was described. Miyamoto has shown in this collection his aptitude for writing from a child's perspective, and we once again feel very close to the narrator as he sits observing the people in his building. However, once again I feel the authorial sheen on the language of the story is somewhat lost through the translation, which came across as largely plain and uninspiring.

The penultimate story, 'Vengeance' was perhaps my least favourite of the collection, with its only redeeming quality being that it utilises the time-skipping narration for some kind of narrative purpose, which cannot be said for some other stories. However, what particularly frustrated me was the careless and insensitive handling of the theme of rape in the story. The logic behind the story is that a group of former students seek to get 'revenge' on their old teacher, who it is later revealed raped the narrator as a child, by luring him with a high school girl into sexually abusing her and being fired from his job. This disturbing plot shows no empathy towards the main character - who this 'revenge' will help in no way whatsoever - or the high school girl, who is distressingly coerced into this with no clarification as to what knowledge she had of the other characters' intentions. This is a story in which I could find no literary value and preferred not to think about any longer as soon as I had read the last word.

On a more positive note, the final and titular story 'Phantom Lights' was naturally one of the strongest in the collection, primarily due to how much more fleshed out it was than the other stories. It was the only instalment in the book which I felt gave the characters the space needed for us to grow to care about them. The main character specifically is shown from childhood to adulthood, and this longitudinal storytelling gives us a glimpse into her development as a person. The second person narrative style also worked well, adding another dimension to the prose which served the short story well and portrayed in its tone the quality that the main character was describing her innermost thoughts which she would only confide in her husband. The ambiguity of the ending also came across as a strength as we never really find out what happened to either her grandma or her husband after they both disappeared at different points in her life. This kind of mysticism gave the story an edge of magical realism at times, which I felt worked very harmoniously with Miyamoto's style. This final story was written noticeably more sharply too, indicating a much more well thought out translation in this instance. Despite the many strengths of the story however, a small number of minor details left something to be desired. There were still some instances of seemingly pointless sections which had no bearing on any other part of the story, particularly the family being blamed for the murder of their neighbours as well as the scene where the narrator recalls her first period. These scenes show us traumatic events in her childhood but don't serve any other meaningful purpose beyond that, an example of places where the story is not as tightly wound. Themes are also left unresolved, for example the parallel of the husband, grandma and the old fisherwoman's disappearance is never really explored, with the latter returning after she was thought dead, but nothing being said about what this means to the themes being tackled.

Overall, the short story collection *Phantom Lights* was an intriguing look into the work of Miyamoto Teru, and clearly a very personal body of work to him. At its best, this collection is a great interweaving of fantastical elements with the grounded reality of class struggle, poverty and personal tragedy. The tone is reserved and contemplative, offering a less dramatic approach to these humanist dramas. At its worst, the prose can read as mechanical and dry - suggesting some literary magic was lost in translation - and the narratives can lack direction, often featuring plot devices, events and themes that could have just as easily been omitted, or say nothing at all about the characters, world, or ideas with which they share the page. §