

The June issue of *The Japan Society Review* brings together works that explore Japan through history, literature, biography, landscape, and cultural encounters. The issue opens with Andrew W. Bernstein's *Fuji: A Mountain in the Making*, which examines how Mount Fuji became one of Japan's most enduring national symbols. Moving between geology, religion, politics, and cultural memory, the book offers a rich account of the mountain's changing significance across centuries.

Questions of representation and storytelling continue in *The Cinema of Kinoshita Keisuke: Films of Joy and Sorrow*, edited by David Desser and Earl Jackson. This collection reconsiders the prolific filmmaker's contribution to Japanese cinema, highlighting the emotional range, formal innovation, and social engagement that have secured his place in the history of film. Literature likewise offers fresh perspectives on identity and convention through *Torikaebaya Monogatari: A Japanese Tale of Gender-Swapped Siblings*, a new translation of the classical tale in which gender roles and courtly expectations are playfully and provocatively inverted.

Several of this issue's reviews consider encounters between Japan and the wider world. Pierre Loti's *Madame Chrysanthème*, one of the most influential foreign literary portrayals of Japan in

the late 19th century, provides a revealing glimpse into Western perceptions of the country during the Meiji era, while also inviting reflection on the origins and legacy of many enduring cultural stereotypes. Charlotte Cory's *Six Months of Dreaming* offers an imaginative blend of fiction, archival research, and artistic homage, reconstructing the life and ambitions of the largely forgotten necktie designer Kajikawa Yutaka. Through a creative engagement with rediscovered designs and historical sources, Cory explores artistic ambition, cultural exchange, and the possibilities of re-imagining overlooked histories.

The final books in this issue focus on voice, memory, and personal experience. Ito Hiromi's *The Thorn Puller* combines pilgrimage, folklore, and contemporary life in a distinctive narrative that moves between the spiritual and the everyday with wit and emotional depth. Emily Midorikawa's *A Tiny Speck of Black and then Nothing* concludes the issue with a poignant memoir of family, grief, and identity, reflecting on loss while tracing the complexities of mixed heritage and belonging.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

Contents

- 1) *Fuji: A Mountain in the Making* by Andrew W. Bernstein
- 2) *The Cinema of Kinoshita Keisuke: Films of Joy and Sorrow* edited by David Desser and Earl Jackson
- 3) *Torikaebaya Monogatari: A Japanese Tale of Gender-Swapped Siblings*
- 4) *Madame Chrysanthème* by Pierre Loti
- 5) *Six Months of Dreaming* by Charlotte Cory
- 6) *The Thorn Puller* by Ito Hiromi
- 7) *A Tiny Speck of Black and then Nothing* by Emily Midorikawa

Editor

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

Reviewers

Thomas Caffrey, Laurence Green, Conor Hodges, Miki Hosaka-Green, Isabel Mermagen, Electra Pappa and Maxine Stacey

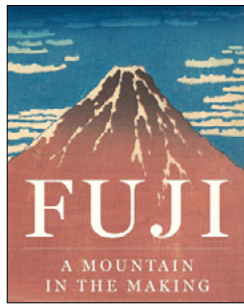
Image: Detail from the cover of *The Cinema of Kinoshita Keisuke* from the film *The Lighthouse/Times of Joy and Sorrow* directed by Kinoshita Keisuke in 1957.

Fuji: A Mountain in the Making

by Andrew W. Bernstein

Princeton University Press (2025)
ISBN-13: 978-069125629

Review by Laurence Green



Mount Fuji has been in the news lately, but then, when has it not? The most recent debacle regarding the mountain comes with the cancellation of the annual Arakurayama Sengen Park cherry blossom festival, which typically attracts over 200,000 visitors to the mountain's vicinity. Drawn to take a pretty snap of Fuji flanked by the blossoming *sakura* petals and a five story pagoda, tourists will no doubt be disappointed - just as they were in a similar case a few years' back when a local municipality had to erect an ugly black barrier opposite a Lawson store to stop people taking photographs after a shot of Fuji flanked by the *konbini* went viral. Fuji, it seems, just can't shake its status as one of social media's biggest star attractions.

The still active volcano is instantly recognisable: a flawless snow-capped cone, a timeless emblem of Japan. But beneath this serene, picture-perfect surface lies a far more turbulent story. Across the centuries, Fuji has on occasion erupted with violent force (most recently, in the 1707 Hiei eruption) devastating communities and seeding terror. Revered as a sacred peak, it has housed shifting pantheons of deities whose meanings and powers evolved with the times. In short, as both an explosive icon of nature, and deeply spiritual domain of the gods, its history is complex, and forever intertwined with the values and beliefs of those living in its proximity.

From ancient times through to the modern age, Fuji has served both as a unifying national icon and as a battleground for economic and political conflict. And while its towering beauty has inspired poets, painters, and pilgrims, its lower slopes have also been claimed by military training grounds and polluting industries. From its deep geological beginnings to its modern designation as a World Heritage Site, in this exciting new book Andrew Bernstein unearths the mountain's many contradictions, using Fuji's history to challenge how we understand nature, power, and our entangled relationships with the world around us.

The story that arguably dominates across this particular history of Fuji is an increasing slippage between Fuji primarily as a geological and spiritual site, to one of recreation and tourism. Pilgrims shift to sight-seers, and stories of shrines jut up against meteorological stations, rest stops and toilets. Fuji's slopes are covered in toilet roll, trash and mountaineers ascend its slopes in carefully timed 'bullet climbs' to see the sun rise from its summit. The numbers attempting to climb Fuji before COVID happened - sometimes over 300,000 a year - is simply staggering. While these numbers have since dipped, chiefly through regulatory efforts, many of the issues facing the mountain persist - part of a deep tapestry of competing interests for its space, both physical and spiritual.

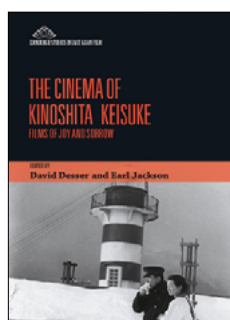
As a site-specific study, Bernstein's book is refreshingly readable - part of this strength clearly stems from the fact that each of its nine core chapters never outstays its welcome. If the mountain's geological history bores you, then perhaps the legal wrangles about who owns its slopes will grab you, or vice versa. The mountain - which in its monolithic, iconic symbolism, often seems so simple - is actually full of complexities, and the way this book deftly interweaves these to help shape its own story as part of the wider tale of Japan is masterfully done. Each disparate thread is cleanly and carefully woven back into the core of the mountain's importance, and by the time we reach the end, and the successful bid for Fuji's status as a World Heritage Site, we understand why even this comes with loaded implications.

Lushly illustrated, and with an approach that strikes the perfect balance between accessibility and scholarly rigour, it's easy to see the book becoming a foundational reference point for those looking to carry out further work on any of the aspects of the mountain covered here. The field of tourism studies in particular relation to Japan, for example, has seen a startling wealth of output over the past decade, and much of the work here is prime scaffolding to support the perpetuation of this. As we mentioned at the start - it seems like Fuji is never out of the news these days, and whether this is as a symbol of Japan itself, or perhaps more crucially, as a lodestone for many of the keenest issues that face Japan right now, the mountain's status as both treasure and symbol of the nation shows no sign of dimming. §

The Cinema of Kinoshita Keisuke: Films of Joy and Sorrow

edited by David Desser and Earl Jackson

Edinburgh University Press (2025)
ISBN-13: 978-1399523363



Review by Electra Pappa

Kinoshita Keisuke (1912-1998) was a beloved film director in Japan and among the most recognisable names of the Golden Age of Japanese cinema, directing an astonishing fifty feature films between 1943 and 1988. He began his directing career in 1943, in the same year as Kurosawa Akira, whom he was close friends with, but to this day he has received relatively little

recognition outside his home country. This collection of essays by leading scholars from the US, Australia, the UK and Japan is the first book in English to discuss Kinoshita's work, which makes it an important step into his wider recognition outside Japan.

The book consists of thirteen essays and offers fascinating insights into multiple aspects of Kinoshita's filmmaking. Each contributor handpicks films among the director's extensive oeuvre and approaches them through a specific lens, ranging from his use of camera techniques and long-term collaborators, to recurring themes that emerge throughout his work.

The book opens with an essay by Lauri Kitsnik, who focuses on the *Kinoshita-gumi*, the group of collaborators Kinoshita surrounded himself with. This chapter provides an excellent introduction to Kinoshita's work by offering an in-depth account of the Japanese studio system and the nurturing relationships that Kinoshita fostered with his collaborators, which sets him apart from the often unhealthy work environments associated with that generation of filmmakers. Kitsnik emphasises Kinoshita's role as a mentor and teacher to his crew, an observation that is later echoed in other chapters.

Understanding Kinoshita's personality provides a clearer picture of the *auteur* and allows us to appreciate the sensitivity with which he approached his subjects. Several essays in the collection focus on the director's critique of war, which is sometimes subtle and others not so much.

Considering that Kinoshita began directing during World War II, it is unsurprising that his first four films were wartime propaganda. Yet even in these early works, his unfavourable view of the war is evident.

Notably his fourth film, *Rikugun* (Army, 1944), passed the censorship during preproduction but was met with a lot of criticism after its release, and even deprived Kinoshita of his licence to direct films until the end of the war. This was because of its final scene, which shows a tearful mother seeing her son off as he heads to battle. It was great to see a few of the scholars in this book discuss this film by taking distinct approaches to the film and by extensions Kinoshita's indirect criticism to the war. I found Daisuke Miyao's chapter especially compelling. Drawing on filmmaker Yoshida Yoshishige's discussion of *Rikugun*, Miyao

presents an extraordinarily detailed analysis of shot duration and camera composition, arguing that the camera itself becomes a vehicle for conveying an anti-war message. As he notes, the extended takes in the film's final sequence exist "beyond the political enforcement of the period, the economic request from the company, and the expectation from the audience of a war-propaganda film" (p.84), which helps explain how the script was able to pass censorship as pro-war propaganda, but the camera managed to communicate a different message.

An interesting addition to the collection is Jennifer Coates's study, which serves as an epilogue to the book. Coates draws from a broader ethnohistorical study of cinema-goers to examine the role that Kinoshita's films played in shaping the political and social attitudes of post-war Japanese audiences during their formative years. Out of the one hundred participants interviewed, several participants attributed their pacifist views to watching Kinoshita's films in their childhood, while many mentioned his work as inspiring their broader interest in cinema. I found this chapter to be a valuable addition in a volume of film criticism, as it shifts the focus away from the perspectives of scholars and instead describes the experiences of audiences themselves.

One of the book's greatest strengths is the way the essays seem to be in conversation with each other. Rather than functioning as isolated studies, they complement one another while also offering different perspectives, which lead to a more rounded understanding of Kinoshita's work. Although a few of his films naturally receive more attention, the collection succeeds in discussing the majority of his oeuvre. And even when the contributors do discuss the same films, each approaches them through a distinct critical lens.

Ultimately, David Desser and Earl Jackson have done an excellent job assembling this collection of essays, demonstrating the richness of Kinoshita's cinema. By bringing together a wide range perspectives, the volume makes a compelling case for Kinoshita's inclusion alongside his better-known contemporaries, such as Kurosawa and Ozu Yasujiro, and represents an important step towards greater recognition of his work internationally. [S](#)

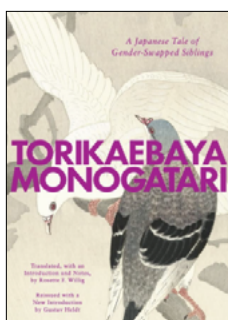
Torikaebaya Monogatari: A Japanese Tale of Gender-Swapped Siblings

author unknown

translated by Rosette F Willig

Stanford University Press (2026)

ISBN-13: 978-1503646544



Review by Thomas Caffrey

Any novel of the Heian period (794-1185) will inevitably be compared to The Tale of Genji. Rosette F. Willig's translation of the 11th century Japanese novel *Torikaebaya Monogatari* (author unknown) gets comparisons out of the way early: in a lively and contextually rich introduction, Gustav Heldt immediately tackles the Genji-shaped elephant in the room. Yes, like *The Tale of Genji*, this is a deep, complex novel with

distinctive and memorable characters. But no, it is nowhere near as long, nor as canonical as Lady Shikibu Murasaki's classic.

What *Torikaebaya Monogatari* is, however, is a boundlessly entertaining and surprisingly forward-thinking novel of intense psychological complexity. The narrative centres upon a brother and a sister, born to the high-ranking politician Sadaijin. His children pose a unique problem: while they are peerless in most ways, his daughter seems a prototypical tomboy, given to archery and outdoor pursuits. Meanwhile, his son is the opposite, playing with hina dolls and hiding behind curtains. This gives rise to the title of the book, taken from Sadaijin's exclamation 'If only I could exchange them' (p. 16; *torikau* meaning "to switch" or "exchange", *-baya* meaning "if only I could"), prefiguring the central drama of the novel. Willig's translation, originally published in 1983, was first released as *The Changelings*, thereby sidestepping an awkward literal rendering of the title, which could run thus: *The Tale of Had They Been Exchanged* or *The Tale of If They Were Switched*.

The drama of the tale is generated by the siblings' exchange of identities: the perceptibly feminine "son" takes their apparent sister's name and lives as the noblewoman Naishi no Kami. At the same time, their sibling becomes Chunagon, an ostensibly male member of the court. As brother and sister mature, their biological identities clash with their social identities, resulting in moments of sustained tension (Chunagon hides every month for the duration of his period, and later falls pregnant for much of Book Two). By the tale's ending, the two have swapped places once again and are seemingly content to live as their assigned-at-birth gender.

These narrative turns render *Torikaebaya Monogatari* a difficult book. Because the siblings' shifting gender identities resist tidy categorization, the novel is tricky to discuss without falling into endless explanation and exposition. Willig manages to render a sometimes-confusing story both lucid and exciting, punctuating the text with short, indispensable footnotes. These explain allusions, suggest further reading, and enliven the overall experience of *Torikaebaya Monogatari*.

An example of the necessary contextualization Willig performs: Japanese *monogatari* typically refers to characters not by name but by rank (which naturally changes throughout the course of most *monogatari*). The *Torikaebaya* doubles down on this complexity by presenting readers with characters who not only change ranks, but also swap places and genders. Willig's footnotes brilliantly keep track of these changes for the reader, while her decision to continuously refer to most characters by a single name makes for a more approachable read. This pays dividends: Book Two ends with the characters exchanging places yet again, meaning that who once was Chunagon is now Naishi no Kami (the inverse is also true). Willig makes these twists navigable: not an easy task.

While it is tempting to characterize Chunagon and Naishi no Kami as straightforwardly trans characters, this reading is complicated by the tale's conclusion, which finds the siblings happily returning to their birth genders, seemingly for good. Furthermore, while the narrative alludes to feelings of gender dysphoria, these mentions are muddled by the insistence that the two siblings were cursed by a *tengu* in their past lives: 'in previous lives, their paths were crossed and in retribution [a *tengu*] changed the boy into a girl, the girl into a boy' (p. 149). Still, while the story does not neatly cohere to contemporary categorizations of trans literature, it remains an important precursor: *Torikaebaya Monogatari* foregrounds gender transition(s) with empathy and dignity. While the tale does have a tragicomic register, it is not at the expense of Chunagon and Naishi no Kami, but rather their friends and rivals.

Further to this, when Chunagon's friend and rival Saisho begins to make clear his desires for Chunagon, it is impossible to read his motive as anything but homoerotic; Saisho knows nothing of Chunagon's queer gender identity at that point. Likewise, Naishi no Kami's close relationship with the Imperial Princess is suffused with quasi-lesbian desire. Gregory M. Pflugfelder argued against a neat classification of the *Torikaebaya* as a lesbian text in 1992, writing for [Monumenta Nipponica](#). Pflugfelder reminds us that just as readers of *The Tale of Genji* must remain cognizant of the fact that courtship standards of Heian Japan are contextually specific and rooted in a particular time and space, so too must we recognize that depictions of sex and gender in *Torikaebaya Monogatari* pre-date modern sensibilities.

And yet, some aspects are strikingly modern, such as the tale's presentation of gender as performance. When Chunagon becomes pregnant by Saisho, he is forcibly reconditioned as a woman: 'he plucked his brows and blackened his teeth, making him look like a woman' (p. 117). When the siblings reassume their birth genders, it is through action and adoption of gendered signifiers. More powerful yet however, are the doors left ajar by the tale: *Torikaebaya Monogatari* shows Heian Japan as a place where sex and gender can be fluid and unfixed: these are learned prospects.

There are endless ways to read this text. In the introduction, Willig points to *Torikaebaya Monogatari*'s tragicomic register, which rewards comedic as well as serious interpretations of the story. Likewise, it can be read as a precursor to trans fiction, a landmark queer text, or something of a ghost story (owing to the shadow of the *tengu* that lingers over proceedings). In any case, no matter what reading prevails; *Torikaebaya Monogatari* is well worth reading, and this new release deserving of both attention and support. S

Madame Chrysanthème

by Pierre Loti

translated by Clémence Aubert

Espresso French Classics (2026)

ISBN-13: 978-8183841541

Review by Miki Hosaka-Green



Well before Puccini created his tragic heroine Cio-Cio-San in the enduringly popular opera *Madama Butterfly* (1904) - which has been played over 12,400 times around the world in the 21st century alone, Pierre Loti's "autobiographical journal" *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887) had already been born in novel form. Set in Nagasaki - a Japanese harbour city - a naval officer from the West "marries" a temporary Japanese wife, until the day he leaves to his country for good.

Loti's imagery of Japan has been passed down to many subsequent works. Modelled on Loti, the short story *Madame Butterfly* (1898) was written by John Luther Long, emphasising the tragedy of the heroine. The short story was adapted into David Belasco's one act play *Madame Butterfly: A Tragedy of Japan* (1900), with a dramatic turn that highlighted the narrative after the officer left the port, with the heroine left longing for his return. This stage version in turn inspired Puccini to create the most well-known version, the opera *Madama Butterfly*.

While all of these works feature a similar setting evolved from Loti's original *Madame Chrysanthème*, the underlying tone of voice ultimately shifts from its original nuance in the novel. This can be read chiefly through the portrayal of the relationship between the protagonists - the naval officer and the heroine - and how the officer himself is characterised.

In the opera, Cio-Cio-San appears to be granted a greater personal voice and emotional depth, in comparison to Loti's Chrysanthème who exists as an objectified being. The reader of the novel has no real sense of her internal discourse - whereas in the opera, she was transformed into the core of an intensely dramatic tragedy as a submissively innocent Japanese woman who sacrifices herself for love. The story of an exotic young woman who sincerely loves a Western man, is betrayed because of that love, and ultimately chooses death, was such an emotionally compelling narrative, and for the purpose of theatrical effect required Cio-Cio-San to wholeheartedly believe in the romance. As Cio-Cio-San sings the beautifully iconic aria *Un bel dì, vedremo* (One Fine Day), longing for Lieutenant Pinkerton's return, the audience knows the cruelty of Pinkerton declaring from the start of the opera that he intends eventually to find a "real wife" in America. The opera is clear in its depiction of a Western man who toys with a young woman's unwavering devotion, turning her into something to be consumed.

By contrast, Loti's treatment is far more detached. Although the man likewise intends from the beginning that she

will be only a "temporary wife," he does not appear to regard Chrysanthème either as a person or as a wife in any meaningful sense. She is described like an observable item - through her clothing, hairstyle, gestures, voice, and small physique - while her emotions are rarely presented in the text. The narrator is unable to assign meaning to her behaviour, and she is instead represented as something resembling a doll, a cat, or a child. This is particularly evident in the scene of her first appearance. Having rejected the first woman presented to him for marriage, the male narrator remarks that he would prefer 'one who was yellow, for a change' (p.46), selecting Chrysanthème for her skin colour. The scene reads almost as though he were selecting a flower to decorate his home.

While Chrysanthème in this story does not express her feelings directly, it is unclear whether her apparently submissive personality is due to an actual deficit of emotion on her part, or rather that the narrator lacks the ability to perceive her emotions. Indeed, he may not even have had any intention to understand her to begin with.

Whereas Cio-Cio-San believes in a future with Pinkerton without a doubt, interestingly, the narrator in Loti's novel mentions that Chrysanthème behaves as though she knows that the marriage will not last long. Likewise, Loti's narrative does not especially depict any romantic involvement in Chrysanthème's behaviour towards her "temporary husband". Does this suggest that she deliberately refuses to participate in the Western man's romantic fantasy, or that the narrator's failure to communicate with her prevents her from participating in it? Because her own intentions are never articulated in the narrative, the whole story remains fundamentally one-sided, written as a travelogue of Japan through Western eyes. This produces a distinctly dry sense of realism - Chrysanthème is not constructed as a tragic heroine, but as a woman whose presence is defined, above all, by the terms of a temporary arranged marriage that eventually terminates.

In Puccini's opera, Pinkerton himself is also exoticised and reduced to a stereotype - a young, aggressive, and consumptive embodiment of "American masculinity". Loti's self-insert narrator, on the other hand, may be considered a valuable character precisely because he exposes, with unsettling vividness, the prejudice and unconscious viewpoint of people when encountering Other cultures; fundamentally separating them from one's real life, and treating them as something you can only objectify. This is why Loti notices almost everything about Japan except the internal voices of the Japanese people around him.

When we consume sushi, matcha, and kimono in our contemporary life, how different are we from Loti asking for a "more yellow" woman, as though selecting the particular flower he wishes to possess? The internalised Orientalist gaze underlying this novel may still persist in contemporary ways of

seeing Others. The work's present-day value lies not in teaching us about an authentic Japan, but in revealing, in an almost unguarded reality, how the "West" constructed an alluring and

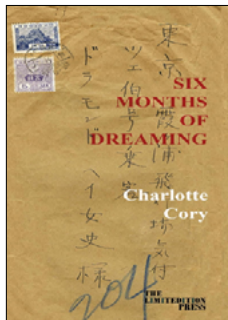
consumable image of "Japan" that still attracts many people today, offering a raw and candid expression of attitudes that contemporary society would hesitate to acknowledge openly. [S](#)

Six Months of Dreaming

by Charlotte Cory

The Limitedition Press (2025)
ISBN-13: 978-1739511388

Review by Maxine Stacey



In *Six Months of Dreaming* (2025), contemporary multimedia artist and author Charlotte Cory balances creative and archival curiosity through an imaginative reconstruction to revive the almost-forgotten ambitions of an innovative Japanese neck-tie designer, Kajikawa Yutaka. The rediscovered designs by Kajikawa form the premise for the novel, and their visual depiction combined with historical archival research, result in a work that inhabits the space between fiction, historical inquiry and artistic homage. Through this creative exploration, Cory delivers a work that challenges the boundaries of archival research and artistic storytelling, highlighting new perspectives on how histories can be re-imagined.

Within *Six Months of Dreaming*, the accompanying visual materials provide a historical and design-focused backgrounding to the narrative, giving a unique and compelling contribution to the re-imagining of Kajikawa's life. The historical fictionalised account of Kajikawa's life establishes itself in the late 1920s, aligning the storytelling to a letter to Lady Grace Drummond-Hay, an aristocratic journalist visiting Japan during a global voyage on the LZ 128 Graf Zeppelin airship. The letter details the aspirations of Kajikawa, and tightly stuffed in the same envelope were 14 "Jazz Age" neck-tie designs showcasing his work deemed too outlandish and Western for Japanese markets. Cory imagines the life that may have unfolded around that moment of hope. As such, the work alludes to the barriers facing designers ahead of their time through the consideration of identity and belonging in a world facing rapid globalisation.

Cory's narrative presents Kajikawa not just as an individual but as a representative figure of the interwar period's cultural

exchange between Japan and the West. The book explores themes of artistic ambition, modernity, and the optimism of creative labour. Kajikawa's letter becomes the symbolic centre of the work, embodying both the promise and uncertainty of international artistic networks in the early 20th century.

A key part of this work that I thoroughly enjoyed was Cory's acknowledgement section, written 95 years to the date of the arrival of the Zeppelin in Japan and the deliberate choice of the Zeppelin font. It is these small details and significant research and consideration conducted by Cory that truly make this an enjoyable read. I believe that the extensive attention to detail can and should be deeply appreciated when reading this work. It demonstrates Cory's passion and interest and links the two creatives, Kajikawa and Cory, beautifully. If I were to offer some criticisms to the work, there are often overly long sentences, that at times, can cause difficulty with reading the work. Additionally, the speculative narrative of the life of Kajikawa needs to be considered before reading this book. If you are seeking a well-documented creative exploration of Kajikawa's life, and particularly those with an interest in art and design, you will enjoy Cory's work. For readers seeking a non-fictitious account of Kajikawa's life, Cory's re-imaginative account may not meet your expectations.

With the current global interest in Japanese arts and culture transcending mediums through digital platforms, this book deserves wider recognition and readership. It is a truly enjoyable read for those with an interest in fashion, history, design or Japan. Additionally, whilst there has been a [one-off exhibition](#) of Kajikawa's real designs, there is clear scope for these designs to be exhibited more widely in the future.

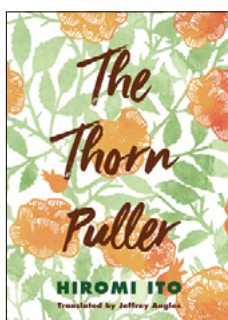
Ultimately, *Six Months of Dreaming* is an engaging experimental form of creative writing that through the research efforts and imaginative writing style makes it an enjoyable light read at just 224 pages. Cory brings an artistic approach to archival writing and that is what makes this work particularly distinctive. [S](#)

The Thorn Puller

by Ito Hiromi

translated by Jeffrey Angles

Stone Bridge Press (2022)
ISBN-13: 978-1737625308



Review by Conor Hodges

Ito Hiromi is in a pinch. Just shy of fifty, she lives a life straddled across the Pacific: her parents live in Kumamoto city on Kyushu and her husband – a Brit thirty years her senior – and youngest child Aiko live in California. Over years, she has crafted a precarious balance of sorts, shuttling herself between the two huge commitments of her life – her two families – while

trying to stay above water and carve out a living. Her balance, however, comes crashing down once time catches up to her ailing parents and husband and the reality of Japan's ageing population is brought into a starkly personal focus. She must choose between the Western conception of valuing your spouse and children above all, and the East Asian sense of filial piety and duty to one's parents. Ito, a mother, daughter, wife, and person stuck between life's demands, chooses both.

The Thorn Puller, originally published in Japanese in 2007 and in English – with Jeffrey Angles's fantastic translation – in 2022, is a record of this decision, a part-autobiographical, part-mythological exploration into the external pressures that accumulate as we age and that threaten to explode our lives from the inside. The title references Tokyo's Togenuki Jizo Kouganji temple, where ailing hopefuls visit in the hopes that Jizo, the bodhisattva guardian of children and those who cannot protect themselves, will pull the thorns (*togenuki*) of their pain out from them. Ito spends most of the story hoping that Jizo will help her family, imploring him to 'pull out the deep, deep thorns' (p. 34) embedded in her mother's body, her experiences each a 'needle piercing her flesh' (p. 47), or to 'protect my husband... accept him into his fold' (p. 248). But through her constant care and her vow to sacrifice herself 'solemnly and silently' (p. 167), she has embodied the role of Jizo, the remover of others' pain, herself.

Beyond Jizo, Japanese literary tradition has greatly influenced Ito's way of thinking. Myths are woven into the fabric of this novel and often invoked in what Ito calls 'voices' that she 'borrows' from Japanese texts, both classical and contemporary. These include *noh* plays, books of classical poems and the sermons of Miyazawa Kenji. Every chapter has a 'notes from the author' section that detail the 'voices' she borrowed from, which helps to contextualise the frequent moments when the prose disintegrates into beautiful poetry or Ito's mind wanders, imagining these stories bleeding into the reality before her eyes. In one particularly striking example, she imagines her husband, exhausted after being set upon by deranged old women, as a *gaki*, a starved spirit that must be dragged on an oxcart in a direct evocation of the medieval Oguri Hangan myth (p. 252). Buddhism, too, permeates the novel, and offers Ito comfort when she needs it most. When she speaks of her chosen home, California, she mentions the Buddhist word *saha*, meaning 'the world that must be endured', helps her to 'grin and bear it' (p. 54). Likewise, when she sees her mother, newly hospitalised and essentially unable to move her arms and legs, she sees her as 'some calm and collected bodhisattva' who listens to the nurses, who 'had been coming in with all sorts of personal problems late at night' (p. 138). Again, the thorn puller himself is invoked.

Perhaps this is a way of asserting her Japanese identity after moving away and feeling more disconnected to her home

country than ever. When she arrives in Kumamoto in the height of summer, the weather itself shuns her. 'I'd grown used to the dry air of southern California,' she says, 'and the humidity was sheer torture' (p. 16). She has to leave the air conditioner on overnight when she sleeps, 'something that Japanese people never do' (p. 22). Again turning to legends, Ito imagines that, like Persephone, by eating the fruits of the underworld (cinnabons in America) she has made it impossible for her to return completely to Japan. However, her metaphors speak to a fundamentally Japanese mindset: when she argues with her husband in English, she feels that he is 'picking up my poor English with chopsticks and dropping it into a sizzling hot vat of tempura oil' (p. 69).

In what must be particularly painful for a poet, someone who so deftly pushes language to its limits and plays with meaning and undertone, Ito is unable to fluently communicate with Aiko. Ito cannot express herself properly in English, and Aiko speaks Japanese blended heavily with her English mother tongue. Ito cannot even communicate effectively using maths, a supposedly universal language, due to the huge differences in the American and Japanese systems of measurement, accidentally telling Aiko that eight metres of rain had fallen in Kumamoto (p. 145). The problem is starker between Ito and her husband, whose failure to even attempt to learn his wife's language feels almost intentional. He pronounces her name 'HEE-roh-MEE' in an unconscious Anglicisation of the flat-sounding 'Hiromi', but in the process alienates Ito to the point that she feels that, after ten years of pronouncing her name wrong, he was 'not really talking about me' (p. 165). Her husband, never named, becomes the chief antagonist, pig-headedly refusing to understand the Japanese parts of Ito and appearing stubbornly concerned only with himself. When she takes him to see the thorn-pulling Jizo and explains that she believes in the healing power of incense smoke, he scoffs and asks: 'what kind of dumb religion is that?' (p. 242).

In these moments, one is reminded that Ito came to prominence in 1980s Japan for vocalising women's issues and examining the roles of wife and mother in a patriarchal society. Through her fictional self in the book, Ito remarks on the fact that, while dealing with her own work, her daughter's school, caring for her parents, her pets and her parents' pets, she has to make sure her husband's ego is sufficiently massaged. 'If I could help my husband's cock – his sense of self-reliance, I mean – then I'd do it', she says after he lashes out at her due to his own fading sense of self-worth (p. 154). But stuck between spending more time with her increasingly frail parents, who she admonishes herself for leaving to grow old alone, and providing a sense of stability for her youngest daughter Aiko, now in primary school, Ito feels that she is consistently making the wrong choices in impossible situations. When her mother becomes unable to walk by herself and her father grows more

and more senile, Ito transfers Aiko into a Japanese school for a term, and Aiko begs her mother for a Tamagotchi because 'I want to be like my friends' (p. 28). The guilt compounds. 'I'm just a middle-aged woman in a little car. Give me a fucking break,' she implores (p. 27).

Amid cultural confusion and trancelike steps backwards into myths and legend, the twin fears of ageing and dying plague the novel. The precipitator of all the imbalance and strife that Ito feels throughout the novel is her first visit to the hospital with her mother in what soon becomes a 'pilgrimage' from clinic to clinic (p. 26). Her mother gets sick and bedridden, her father becomes lonely and senile, and her husband has heart surgery and grows mysterious lumps on his face. But the message that carries through to the end is one of absolute positivity about our limited time on earth. Lamenting her parents' decline, Ito remarks that 'nothing stays the same. Everything is impermanent' (p. 244), but her narrative is so

deeply suffused with myth, real-world situations in constant contention with those about which she has read, that the book itself seems to imply the direct opposite. We are in cycles of pain meted out to our ancestors and our progeny, and the best we can do is help ease each other's suffering. An older poet, one who looks exactly like Ito and who may be a manifestation of an older, wiser Ito herself, confirms this by telling her:

Hands together in prayer... Truly, this is the merit of coming and going.

Use it as the ability to help others.

Use it as the ability to help others. (p. 267)

Her mantra, therefore, is to be as a certain bodhisattva: in between your coming into the world and your leaving it, do your best to pull the thorns of suffering from others. Only once Ito realises this, she can end her narrative with the repetition of a realisation that she seemed to have denied herself while wading through the death all around her: *I'm alive.* §

A Tiny Speck of Black and then Nothing

by Emily Midorikawa

Manilla Press (2026)

ISBN-13: 978-1786584793

Review by Isabel Mermagen



Like Anna, the protagonist of Emily Midorikawa's debut novel *A Tiny Speck of Black and then Nothing*, I remember the sense of disorientation and trepidation when I first arrived in Japan for a work placement as a green and callow young woman. My adventures were nowhere near as sinister and eventful as Anna's, but I had friends who worked as hostesses and who were more familiar with the seedier side of Tokyo nightlife. This novel sets the scene in Osaka, where Anna has arrived to work as an English teacher. Her motivation for coming to Japan seems to be to learn more about her half-Japanese heritage, but there is always the sense that she might also be searching for her mother who we learn fled the family home when Anna was nine years old. The sense of mystery surrounding Anna's mother's disappearance is echoed in the Japanese fable that she remembers her mother recounting when she was little, that of *The Crane Wife*. In the story, a poor and lonely old man comes across a wounded crane. Rather than killing the bird and taking it to market, he decides to nurse it back to health until it flies away. Not long after, a beautiful woman appears at his door and offers to weave fine cloth for him to sell on the condition that he does not watch her weaving. Of course, the inevitable happens and when he spies the woman, transformed into the crane, weaving her feathers into fabric, she takes flight into the sky, 'gradually fading to a tiny speck of black and then nothing' (p.22).

This theme of disappearance and mystery continues as Anna befriends Loll, an enigmatic British woman working as a hostess at the "Moonglow" bar in Osaka. Loll's glamour and mysterious comings and goings seem to fascinate Anna and contrast with her own humdrum experience as an English teacher. There are shady clients, a jade stone necklace and hints that Loll may have a self-destructive streak. When Loll finally disappears, Anna takes it upon herself to find out what has happened to her friend, drawing her deeper into a world whose very real dangers she does not fully understand.

There are various motifs that appear in the book alongside the aforementioned crane, and these are illustrated by brief excerpts from fictional publications. These interludes provide a welcome relief from the relentless intrigue with titles such as 'New Horizons: A Survival Guide for the 'Gaijin'' (p.7) and 'Modern Japan: A Guide to Japanese Etiquette and Culture' (p.35). I wondered if these interludes would help those readers who might be less familiar with Japanese cultural norms, but I think they also serve to allow the main story to zip along without getting bogged down in too much cultural explanation.

Ultimately, Midorikawa's novel succeeds in depicting a neon-drenched and vibrant Osaka, whose seedier corners seem impenetrable to the brave but naïve Anna. The author also eloquently describes that struggle to find one's way in a land with unfamiliar customs, transient friendships with other foreigners with whom one often has little in common, and the tension that comes with often being on the "outside". The story continues at a fair lick, although I found the speed with which Anna and Loll become friends and then flatmates seemed rather rushed. There is also a huge red herring and a somewhat improbable coincidence that solves another mystery, but I love a good thriller and confess the suspense kept me hooked until the very end. §