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People Who Eat Darkness

Michael Sullivan interviews author Richard Lloyd-Parry

Justice in Transit

Susan Meehan talks Masayuki Suo and false accusations

In this issue we focus on crime and the legal system in Japan. Richard Lloyd Parry, author of the acclaimed *People Who Eat Darkness*, gives us an interview about his new book looking at the life and death of Lucie Blackman. Lucie went missing in Tokyo on 1st July 2000, and months later her body was discovered, dismembered and buried in a coastal cave in Kanagawa. Parry's book comprehensively examines the whole case from various angles and perspectives. The investigation into Lucie's disappearance led several women to come forward about sexual assaults the Japanese police failed to investigate, and these and other clues would eventually led to Joji Obara. The police discovered large amounts of evidence in Obara's flat, videos of sexual assaults on countless unconscious girls in his bedroom as well as the last known photos of Lucie. Despite the overwhelming mountain of evidence against him, Obara would never admit any guilt and without a confession the Japanese system does not function well. In October 2000 he was arrested, his trial continued until April 2007, when he was found guilty on multiple rape charges and a manslaughter charge for the death of another women ten years previously. Finally in December 2008, after a successful appeal, he was found

guilty for the abduction of Lucie, the dismemberment and disposal of her body, but not for her murder. Richard Lloyd Parry analyzes the case which exposes shortcomings in both the police investigation and the legal system. Next Susan Meehan looks at the powerful movie *I Just Didn't Do It* which is a damning indictment of the Japanese legal system written and directed by Masayuki Suo. The narrative revolves around the twenty-six year old Teppei Kaneko, who while travelling to a job interview, is wrongly accused of molesting a young girl on a train. Jack Cooke looks at Seicho Matsumoto's *Pro Bono* which centres on Kiriko, a young woman whose brother is falsely accused of murder. She fails to persuade a leading lawyer to take on her brother's case partly because she cannot afford his services and the consequences of this are played out in the novel. In our final book, *The Devil's Whisper* by Miyuki Miyabe, Michael Sullivan explores a complex murder mystery. Mamoru Kusaka's life is turned upside down when his taxi driver uncle is arrested under suspicion of running a red light and killing a young female pedestrian. Mamoru decides to investigate this accident himself and in the process finds out that this was no ordinary accident.

Sean Curtin, February 2012

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People Who Eat Darkness

Interview with Richard Lloyd Parry

Article by Michael Sullivan

On 1 July 2000 Lucie Blackman went missing in Tokyo, months later her body would be found, dismembered, buried under a bath tub in a seaside cave in Miura, Kanagawa. The period of time leading up to that discovery would stir up a controversy as reporters questioned what exactly she was doing in Japan while her family desperately wanted to find out where she was. At the same time strange phone calls and letters would claim that she had joined a cult and did not want to be found, while the description of Lucie's last phone calls would stir up unpleasant memories for a number of young women. She had been on a 'douhan' (paid date), she was being driven to the seaside and she was going to get a mobile phone and free drinks.

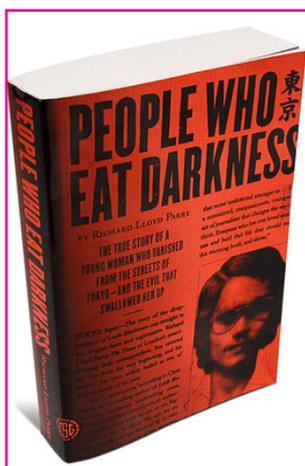
The recollections of these women, of being taken to a seaside apartment and waking up the next day feeling unwell and confused, would eventually lead the police to Joji Obara. What followed next almost stretches belief. The police discovered large amounts of evidence in one of Obara's flats, videos of girl after girl unconscious in his bed as well as the last known photos of Lucie, yet he would never admit any guilt for doing anything wrong.

In October 2000 he was arrested, following a trial that lasted years. In April 2007, he would be found guilty on multiple rape charges and a manslaughter charge for the death of another hostess ten years earlier. Finally in December 2008, he would be found guilty for the abduction of Lucie, and the dismemberment and disposal of her body, but not for her murder.

From the beginning to the end he argued continuously that he was innocent. Meanwhile Lucie's family struggled to get through long years of searching for an answer to why this had happened to their beloved daughter and sister.

Richard Lloyd Parry followed this case from start to end and his book presents a mind detailed with knowledge about every single person who was affected by this tragedy. It is a compelling book and it restores Lucie from being someone who was killed to a complex and loving individual. I, and the Japan Society Review editor Sean Curtin, were lucky enough to have a chance to sit down with Mr Parry and discuss his book.

Q: Why do you think in the appeal (2008) that Obara was found guilty? Was there any change in evidence or did something come up in the appeal that they hadn't considered before?



Richard Lloyd Parry: The prosecutors put their arguments better. The trial had gone on for so long, the Tokyo prosecutor's office was like any branch of the Japanese civil service; people changed jobs over the years. The prosecutors changed over the course of the trial and that was something that Tim (Lucie's father) was upset about. He felt there was a lack of co-ordination on the part of the prosecutor. For example, among other things the prosecutors drew attention to the fact that flunitrazepam (rohypnol) had been found in Lucie's remains. The remains had been in the cave for so long, it was difficult to establish cause of death and things like chloroform don't linger in tissue for long enough. So she may or may not have been chloroformed, there is no way of telling, but they did find traces of flunitrazepam and as Tim said she didn't date rape drug herself, someone did that. They found flunitrazepam amongst Obara's possessions, so I think that the reason the appeal judges took a different view was that the prosecutors had presented the case more persuasively.

Q: From my knowledge the lower courts tend to err on the side of caution and be conservative, while you have to go to the higher courts for a bolder decision as they seem to have a little more leeway. Could that have affected the different judgements, or do you think it is just primarily a better presented appeals case?

RLP: It may be broadly true, in both the district court and the appeal court, both of the judges made a point of saying it's not that we think he (Obara) had nothing to do with it, it's just that it hasn't been proved. As I say in some length in this book we often think of Japanese courts as being terribly tough, over 99% of defendants who walk in there don't leave through the front door. Normally they confess and it's extremely unusual for prosecutors to go forward with a case that doesn't have a clear cut confession, and judges feel very uneasy convicting without a confession. So when there isn't a confession, defence lawyers have much greater scope in doing their jobs successfully.

Q: I was thinking that the problem with Japan is that 99% of the people fall into the matrix of society, but it's the people like Obara who don't follow the rules, who don't confess, where the system breaks down. So, someone can do, like he did, for several decades and get away with it, because the nature of Obara himself is so removed from mainstream society. He convincingly pretends to be a participant while being outside it. Do you think he realised that himself and thought he could get away with it? Does this explain his own defence that the girls were drug-taking prostitutes and he wasn't doing anything wrong?

RLP: At one point in the book I talk about the police, that it was quite interesting talking to them about the case. Because, you could ask them about Obara and they would shake their heads. He was so unusual, so difficult, it was almost as if the police felt sorry for themselves and they felt that they themselves were the victims of a colossal piece

of bad luck; which is a dishonest criminal, a criminal who doesn't do the right thing and doesn't confess, because most Japanese do. Even the hard cases do.

Q: Regarding the crimes of Obara, besides the fact that he has argued that he has done nothing wrong, you also wrote that Obara's brother said 'what do you expect to happen if a girl enters a man's apartment?' Despite Japan being such a safe country, I got the impression from your book that there is almost a sense of it being the victim's fault for going into the wrong apartment?

RLP: Yes, I mean, the police then and I think still now are disinclined to take seriously reports of sexual assault from hostesses, from *mizu shobai* girls [*mizu shobai* is the traditional euphemism for the night-time entertainment business in Japan], and foreign girls. There seems to be a sense, and I am generalizing, that if you work in that world basically using your charms to make money off men, then you are taking risks and certainly if you go back to a guy's place and he has sex with you, then the attitude is 'you consented to it when you walked through the door, didn't you? What were you thinking?' It is a very old fashioned, certainly to us, attitude. To many Japanese it is an old fashioned attitude, but that was the attitude. So when a small number of these female victims found the confidence, could recollect what had happened to them, and went to the police to try to make a complaint, the police were uninterested.

Q: I noticed in the book that you give the example of Yuki Takahashi who always attended the hearings, and she said that she liked Obara. She also liked the prosecutor, observing he was cool and her type. Do you think that for many Japanese people the whole situation was too unreal? For example, here is a man who has done so many bad things and won't admit to it throughout this drawn out trial, so for some it became surreal and difficult to realise that any crime had happened?

RLP: I don't think Yuki Takahashi is typical of many Japanese people, but it's a feature of the public trials in Japan that eccentrics attend. I have been to a lot, more than in the

UK, and anyone can turn up for a public trial. You just sit yourself down, there is nothing to stop people going, but somehow to most Japanese it is something they would never think of doing unless they were law students or 'court *otaku*.' She is an *otaku* (nerd), for her and her girlfriends it was just a hobby to go to these trials and write it up in their blog. Like a lot of *otaku* their enthusiasm for the overall subject isn't a very discriminating one, they are excited by everything about it. Rather than going in there with a view to drawing moral conclusions about right and wrong, they went there for the excitement and that is reflected in the way I wrote about Yuki. I spent a lot of time looking around at the other faces in the gallery, and there was a funny crowd. You get some people who look as if they are basically there to keep out of the cold, like borderline homeless, you get some who are clearly law students that take notes and familiarise themselves with the court. And then, you get some really quite eccentric people, including her. There was also one chap called The Mighty Aso who wore a green skirt, he had a blog as well. He would sometimes turn up in a chequered skirt and green hair. He was at the extreme end of the odd factor. A lot of people looked a bit strange, were atypical, and didn't tell you very much about the attitude or disposition of Japanese people in general.

Q: In regards to Obara himself, do you think there is any chance he will ever admit some form of guilt for what he has done?

RLP: I don't know is the only honest answer I can give. My sense of Obara is that he was determined to prove himself not guilty and to escape legal penalty. Now that battle has been lost, his legal avenues

have shrunk; I have wondered whether he might make some kind of confession because he hoped that would help him in future parole proceedings. Obviously at some point, not soon but eventually, he will be eligible to apply for early release. I don't know the Japanese parole system very clearly. I know in the UK the extent to which you are penitent and take responsibility for the crimes of which you have been convicted influences whether you are let out early or not, so it wouldn't surprise me if at some point he said 'I am sorry, I did the wrong thing,' and that might help him get out.

Q: I was struck how Obara seemed to have no friends, no



Author Richard Lloyd Parry

one seemed to know him, and you mention in your book how he had several businesses. How did he conduct those businesses? Did he keep a distance between himself and his employees and associates? Or, would just no one talk about him?

RLP: What I know with certainty is in the book, I haven't held back anything I can prove, there is a lot of stuff I heard which I can't prove. I spent a lot of time researching Obara and his background, I could have spent more but it was really yielding diminishing returns. So I decided to stop and go with what I had. You are right; he did have people working for him. For example, at one point he was running a ramen restaurant in Ginza, we found the place but the restaurant had closed and no one knew what had happened to the employees. I would have loved to interview Obara's ramen chef, but my investigations just came to a dead end. By the time he was identified and was charged, he was close to going personally bankrupt. He declared himself bankrupt within two years of the trial, some of the companies were transferred to other members of his family, and others were just wound up by a bankruptcy authority. So, there weren't really companies to go to. On company documents we found addresses, but either the company didn't exist anymore or you got there and they were just postal addresses.

Q: I noticed that in your book you mention that some people were listed as members of the board of a company, but they didn't even know they were part of that company as he had just put their names down.

RLP: Apparently, yes, that was reported. There was one company which had the name of one of his relatives, I think a cousin, who we tracked down in Nara and this man ran a sake shop. We went in there and introduced ourselves, and well he wouldn't say anything. So it was very difficult to pursue that kind of enquiry.

Q: I was drawn to the fact that Obara's heritage is Korean. When we look deeper into his character and why he did it – it is difficult because he is something of a blank – we have to try to construct a lot ourselves. Presumably his ethnic heritage is an element in his sense of identity? It seems that quite a number of Koreans in Japan tend to conceal their heritage while Obara appears to demonstrate an extreme form of this trait by wanting to conceal everything about himself.

RLP: There is a chapter about his Korean background and the history of Koreans in Japan, their story is fascinating and very little is known. They are such a huge diaspora, but their history there is so little known, even in Japan. There are lots of things about what we know about Obara and his upbringing which might have disturbed his sense of identity. One is being the child of immigrants, also I think, as important as that, is that he went from the child of poor immigrants to being the child of very rich immigrants. So they were displaced by the Korean slum in Osaka to Kitabatake which is one of the poshest places in Japan. There was that displacement, there was the displacement

of his education, and he left his family and went to Tokyo to go to Keio University. As a seventeen year old he had basically gone to live on his own in a playboy mansion. Then there was the death of his father when he was quite young, whatever that was about – we still don't know what killed his father. He changed his name, he changed his nationality, changed his face, so you can look at all of those and think well no wonder he had issues. On the other hand there are millions of spoilt rich kids, millions of kids whose fathers went from poor to rich, millions of people who have issues about their appearance, their eyes, and only one Joji Obara. So, it just doesn't add up to what he became.

Q: Regarding the book itself, this case went on for years and years, was there a trigger moment when you decided to bring together all of your research and make it into a book?

RLP: There probably was, I started reporting the case for the Independent, which I was working for in 2000 when Lucie disappeared. This was obviously a story of interest for a British newspaper; a young British woman who had disappeared in Japan. It was an intriguing story, very far from straightforward, which had no early conclusion. I think it was after the trial began that I came to realise that it would make a good book, because that was when we got a good glimpse of Joji Obara. Although it took a long time for me to get to grips with him and understand what an extraordinary man he was. But it was straight from the beginning that it became apparent he was very unusual and very strange. So, it was probably as the trial was getting underway that the idea was formed.

Q: By then had you already got most of the material for the book or was there still a lot of research to do?

RLP: There was a lot to do. I was actually writing another book at that time about Indonesia, Lucie disappeared in 2000 and the trial got underway in 2001, and until 2005 I was writing another book. So I didn't start working on it as a book until around 2006, but I was gathering material and keeping everything, and making sure that my assistants were taking comprehensive notes in the court hearings as I had it in mind that it would be useful one day.

Q: When the book actually came out, how did the (Blackman) family react to the book? Did they read it before it was published?

RLP: They got copies before it came out, of course they were amongst the earliest people to be sent copies. Sophie Blackman, the sister, was very supportive. She said she liked the book and thanked me for it, she helped to promote it actually, and we did some radio together a year ago when the hardback was published. Tim and Jane (Lucie's parents), I haven't had long conversations with them about it since then, but in different ways they both felt at least slightly that it was biased to the other person. Rupert (Lucie's brother), I don't know. He was sent a copy, but I don't know if he read it or not. That is up to him, but I can understand why someone in his situation may not

want to. I am still in touch with them intermittently, but I have been trying to leave them alone. I spent quite a lot of time with them intensively, though I hope to remain friends with them and keep in touch, but I don't want to overdo it.

Q: I have one final question, having read the book I felt you have painted a very compassionate and full picture of Lucie, such as the information you got from her parents and sister, and obviously you studied the case for a long time. I think from the way you write that you feel that you got to know Lucie well. Do you feel in any way that some of your objectivity was lost, as you yourself were drawn into the narrative? Do you feel that this has impacted on your life as well?

RLP: It certainly had an effect on my own life, I got to know the family well and I spent long hours talking to them about unbearable things for any parents to experience. And those interviews were often very emotional and tears were shed. I tried to be a sympathetic listener, and I felt very sad, very sorry for them. It would be ridiculous to exaggerate my own emotional sufferings; I was emotionally involved to an extent that I felt very sorry for these people who I cared for. I felt sad seeing a mother weep for her dead daughter. Jane Blackman lost her daughter and will always struggle with that a lot. I had a job to do, and I think an important job, to get the story down and get it right, to tell the story in all its complexity. So, objectivity was the absolute goal and I hope I did preserve that. When I first went to see them, Jane and Tim, it was probably in 2006 or around then, I said to them I want to do this book, I want to know a lot about Lucie, and about what happened in Japan. I said I also want to know a bit about you, but I am not really that interested in your differences, as their marriage had gone bad before Lucie even went to Japan. I said I'm not so interested in that, it has to be mentioned of course, but it's not what the book is about, however a few years later that was no longer true. The relationship between Tim and Jane had become a central part of the story because of the issue of the blood money. I was in a situation where I was writing about a bad marriage, now all of us who know people who've had bad marriages know how hard it is to remain on good terms with both sides. You can only really do that if you achieve a certain amount of detachment, and you make that clear to both parties. If you make that clear and don't pretend anything else, then it is possible. I hope I was honest with them both, which is what I have tried to be.

Language notes:

Douhan – 同伴
Mizu shobai – 水商売
Kitabatake – 北畠

I Just Didn't Do It [それでもボクはやってない]

Directed and written by
Masayuki Suo [周防 正行]

2007, 143 minutes

Review by Susan Meehan

Along with *Confessions of a Dog* [see issue 35], *I Just Didn't Do It* is a damning indictment of the Japanese legal system. The audience palpably gasped at some of the more appalling scenes of unfathomable injustice and clapped as Masayuki Suo took to the front of the Institute of Contemporary Arts film theatre at the end of the screening to answer questions.

This film, Suo's first in 11 years since his fantastically popular *Shall We Dance?* (シャルレ ウィ ダンス), took four years of research. It was triggered by a newspaper article Suo read about a man falsely accused of being a *chikan* or 'groper' and who successfully took his case to a high court which overturned his conviction.

This was a turning point for Suo as he realised that the Japanese system of justice is nowhere near as fair as he had imagined and that it generally presumes guilt until proven innocent. This spurred him to make *I Just Didn't Do It*, a spell-binding courtroom drama which has as its premise that it is better that ten guilty people go free than that one innocent person suffer.

The film begins by swooping down on Tokyo, and its labyrinth of trains. Japanese trains are notorious for their *chikan* or 'gropers' who, amongst the crowds, touch women with relative anonymity. Japanese trains are rife with them. The *chikan*, if caught, are taken to the police station, made to confess their crime and to show remorse. Paying a fine, they are let loose to continue on their way, perhaps to work, and then return home as though nothing has happened. That they may continually repeat this behaviour is not uncommon.

Twenty-six year old Teppei Kaneko, excellently played by Ryo Kase, is the star of the film. Travelling to a job interview, he makes his way onto a packed commuter train – he is pushed on in fact – behind a 15 year-old school-girl whom he hardly notices as he is more concerned with his jacket which is caught in the train doors. Alighting at his stop, he is accused of being a *chikan* by the girl and is promptly arrested. A fellow passenger tells the station staff that she doesn't think Teppei was the groper, but she is disregarded. She is not asked for a statement or for her contact details, just ignored. Teppei is told to own up to groping so that he can be released quickly but he remains adamant that he's innocent and won't be made to budge on this.

Teppei is told that he may be kept in prison for three months and that there is no guarantee that he'll win his case as the conviction rate in Japanese courts is an unbelievable 99.9%.



Teppei is urged by a series of policemen and lawyers to admit blame and walk out of prison; no one would be the wiser. By denying his guilt, however, a long drawn-out investigation will ensue. The iniquity of this is hard to stomach and Suo spares no details as he reveals layers of corruption. Eyewitnesses are ignored, judges are replaced, the plaintiff is not required to release the entirety of the evidence to the defence team and Tepei's accuser receives special attention.

The film is harrowing in its portrayal of the flawed Japanese legal machine; that this is revealed by an ordinary young man, refusing to be browbeaten, rather than an idealist makes it all the more poignant and believable.'

Ms Sudo, assigned to be his counsel, visits Tepei and asks him to repeat the story for what must seem like the hundredth time. She doubts his innocence and ends up bullying him just like the police. Returning to her office she says that she hates gropers and that she doesn't want to defend Tepei as she has insufficient experience. Ms Sudo's rather world-weary superior, ably played by Koji Yakusho, reminds her that Tepei maintains he is not a groper, that he deserves the benefit of the doubt and that denials and acquittals are so rare, it would be a good challenge for her to defend him.

Teppei is subjected to a series of public hearings with Ms Sudo as his lawyer. She faces an uphill struggle when the initially sympathetic judge dealing with the case is replaced halfway through by a hostile one. As Koji Yakusho's character explains, a judge needs tremendous courage and wisdom to acquit in Japan and if he does, he garners a negative reputation. The film also makes apparent that judges are looking for signs of remorse in those they are trying regardless of protestations of innocence. It is maddening in its sheer Kafkaesqueness.

Teppei's supporters do all they can to persuade the judge of his innocence, even filming their own reenactment, faithfully recreating events on the train and showing how unlikely it is that Tepei could have groped the girl and pulled his arm out of the way as she alleged; his arm's position in relation to the door would not have permitted her version of events.

The judge's verdict is announced at the tenth hearing.

The film is harrowing in its portrayal of the flawed Japanese legal machine; that this is revealed by an ordinary young man, refusing to be browbeaten, rather than an idealist makes it all the more poignant and believable. We are left with the realization that, above truth the system values a high conviction rate.

It was heartening, therefore, to hear Suo say that a new system was introduced to Japan in 2009, which is modeled on the jury system. Criminal cases are now tried by three judges and six people. The jury doesn't have the last say, however, as this is negotiated by the jury and the judge leading to cries that a complete overhaul of the system is still necessary. Further positive news is that Suo was invited to join a Ministry of Justice Advisory Committee with a view to reforming the

Japanese justice system. That Suo's film is being used by Japanese universities in their law courses is testament to the power and authenticity of this film.

The film has deservedly received several prizes, notably several Japanese Academy Awards and the Best Director and Best Screenplay awards at the Kinema Junpo Awards in 2008. Don't miss it.

People Who Eat Darkness by Richard Lloyd Parry

Vintage, February 2011

416 pages, £7.99

ISBN: 0099502550

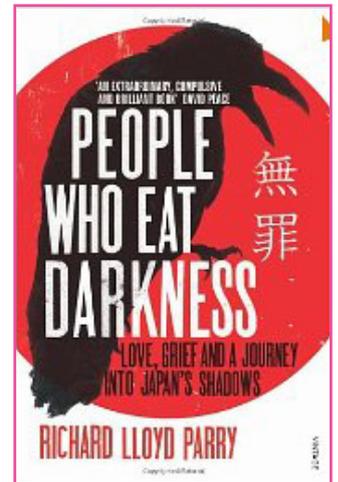
Review by Michael Sullivan

In 1995 Richard Lloyd Parry became the Tokyo Correspondent for *The Independent* newspaper and he was in Japan when a news story broke in 2000 that a British

girl was missing. In his book *People Who Eat Darkness* we get to see a new perspective of the events surrounding the disappearance and murder of Lucie Blackman as we follow his investigation into what had occurred to her. His research covers her family, her history, an overview of events from her disappearance up until the discovery of her body as well as an in-depth look into the most mysterious of people: Joji Obara.

Born in 1978 Lucie Blackman was 21 and had only been in Japan a short time when she disappeared. She had been working in Roppongi as a hostess and at first it wasn't clear where she had gone, it appeared that she had gone on a 'date' with a client and subsequent messages that claimed to be from her stated that she had joined a cult. It soon became clear that this was just an attempt to mislead the police investigation. Eventually suspicion centred on Joji Obara, but despite repeated questioning he never admitted to any knowledge of what had happened to her. Even to this day he claims his innocence in regard to her death. The police would be in for an unwelcome surprise when during a search of his home they discovered a massive video collection which recorded the apparent rape of hundreds of unconscious women. On the 9th February 2001 Lucie's remains were found just a few hundred metres from one of Obara's properties.

This book attempts to redress the balance that so much attention has focused on Japan and Obara and bring back into the focus who Lucie was. Beyond Lucie we also learn about her family and see the pain they experienced throughout the years and beyond. As can be expected a lot of the book also covers the problems the family experienced with the Japanese police and officials, the intense interest



investigative journalists took in the underworld of hostess bars and the difficulties of understanding Japan, such as the trial system. For example, normally in Japan a case only goes to trial once the criminal has confessed to their crime – in the case of Obara he has never admitted any guilt to anything.

Richard Lloyd Parry also attempts to shed some light into Obara and why he did what he did to so many women, unfortunately this mainly led into dead ends. Beyond a general background into his family history, originally from Korea, and his business activities there is tantalisingly little information about him. Seemingly without any close friends or associates, and with his family refusing to say anything, there are very few details that can be obtained about him. The one thing that is clear was that he believed he could do what he liked without suffering any consequences.

This meticulously researched book provides an interesting insight into Japan, but mainly it brings to the reader's attention the story of a young girl who thought she was going to a safe country and disappeared. It charts the sheer heartbreak and pain her family had to go through, as well as the author's involvement and torturous attempts to remain objective while having so much intimate contact with Lucie's parents. Ultimately, we get no closer to understanding how someone like Obara could get away with what he did for so long, but we do gain a new understanding of Lucie Blackman and what her family sadly went through.

Pro Bono

by Seicho Matsumoto
(translated by Andrew Clare)

Vertical Inc. 2012

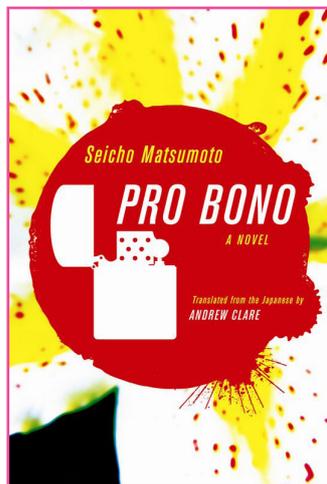
240 pages, £7.69

ISBN-10: 1934287024

Review by Jack Cooke

Fans of detective fiction are often obsessive, eagerly awaiting the next fictional crime scene to hit the market. When it comes to the cult surrounding one of Japan's most idolised crime writers, Seicho Matsumoto, his followers are as ardent as any. Even so, few can claim to have digested his complete bibliography.

Matsumoto only began writing full-time at the age of forty but over the next four decades he penned an astonishing 450 works, from his acclaimed detective novels to popular publications on history, ancient and modern. Even for the most committed fan, this is a pretty intimidating body of work. Matsumoto is the Bob Dylan of crime fiction; there are a thousand B-sides to choose from and almost all are worth a look.



Sadly, only a fraction of this prolific output is available in translation. At the time of writing, a paltry three novels remain in English print, with a selection of Matsumoto's short stories scattered around various compendiums of Japanese detective fiction. The list of titles yet to be translated includes many works that have become classics in Japan; his 1952 Akutagawa prize-winning *Story of the Kokura Journal* is one stand-out example.

News of the first English-translation of a Matsumoto novel in twenty-five years was consequently welcomed by fans and critics alike. The offspring of a transatlantic partnership, between American publisher, Vertical, and British translator, Andrew Clare, *Pro Bono* was published in July this year.

'Matsumoto only began writing full-time at the age of forty but over the next four decades he penned an astonishing 450 works.'

First printed as *Kiri no hata* in the early 1960s, the novel has aged well, with characters and scene-setting that feel remarkably contemporary. The plot centres on Kiriko, a young woman whose brother is falsely accused of murder in her native Kyushu. Making the long and costly rail journey to Tokyo, Kiriko solicits the help of Japan's poster-boy lawyer, criminal defense genius Kinzo Otsuka. Consumed by his own personal life and aware that Kiriko cannot afford his services, Otsuka turns her away. The consequences of his failure to take her case on merit, ignoring her appeals to his sense of justice and 'a righteous cause,' are played out across the remainder of the novel. The lethargy of the opening chapter, mirrored in the lawyer's own inaction, is replaced by a whirlwind of events that move the story toward its climax.

Regional politics are integral to the novel. The majority of the protagonists, including murderer and murderee, hail from the anonymous 'K-City' in Kyushu and yet the main action unfolds in Tokyo's Ginza district. The ties formed by these 'provincial' men and women in the face of Tokyo's unsettling metropolis provide much of the novel's intrigue; evolving from solidarity amongst newcomers to complicity and, finally, bitter rivalries.

Another ploy used to engage the reader is the insertion of court reports and statement witnesses, italicised throughout the novel. At first, this may seem like a simple plot-filler device but the aggregate effect is to convince the reader that they themselves are conducting research essential to solving the crime. When Matsumoto describes a journalist, Keiichi Abe, lost in the archives of a regional newspaper, the combination of a perfectly imagined setting (weak sunlight, frenetic activity beyond the blinds of the archive room) with a series of obscure newspaper cuttings, makes us palpably feel the character's own excitement. It is as if we, the reader, were leafing through the dusty records ourselves.

Matsumoto is an undeniable master of atmosphere. Whether the scene is dawn or dusk, a crowded Ginza street or an empty back alley, the author instils distinct moods into every location in the novel. Interiors and exteriors alike are rendered

in minute detail. One of the most memorable settings in the book is the site of the first murder. Matsumoto's evocation of a simple domestic scene, a sliding door, an iron kettle, cushions and tatami mats, is unsettled by the subtle agitation of every object; door ajar, kettle lopsided, cushions skewed and a floor dusted in spilt ash. This is Matsumoto's art; we are always left chasing the action, a few footsteps behind the violence.

Like many other Japanese novels of its era, *Pro Bono* was originally serialised (*Fujin Koron*, July 1959 – March 1960) and was most likely condensed when first published in Japan. In spite of this, translator Andrew Clare has done an admirable job of reworking the original Japanese. A literary translator with a background in law, Clare has the perfect credentials for dissecting a novel that focuses on criminal defence. The task of combining fidelity and transparency in Japanese-English translation is always a challenging one. Clare preserves Matsumoto's subtleties but manages to make the novel an engaging and fluid read. Let us hope there will be more to come from the many Matsumoto mysteries that remain hidden from an English-reading audience.

The Devil's Whisper [魔術はささやく]

by Miyuki Miyabe,
translated by Deborah
Stuhr Iwabuchi

Kodansha International, 2007
(originally published in 1989,
Tokyo),

264 pages, £8.99

ISBN: 4770031173

Review by Michael Sullivan

Miyuki Miyabe was born in 1960 in Tokyo, she has been writing since the 1980s and a number of her books have been adapted into dramas and films in Japan. For example, just last year her 1992 novel *Kasha* [火車] was released as a TV movie starring Takaya Kamikawa. Although her work touches upon a number of genres, it is often quite firmly classed as mystery, and *The Devil's Whisper* has a very puzzling plot. In particular there is a strong element focusing on guilt and secrets, whether the feeling is acknowledged or not, all of the characters strive to repress it. However, as this book develops the discovery is made that guilt will eventually catch up. Only since 1999 have Miyabe's novels started to be translated into English, though only a handful so far and as such represents the burgeoning interest in Japanese literature that was sparked by other novelists such as Haruki Murakami.

Mamoru Kusaka is a sixteen year old boy, and yet despite a turbulent childhood he is very cool headed and practical. When he was a small child his father was embroiled in an embezzlement scandal, one day he left home and never returned. His mother refused to believe he wouldn't return

and so, ostracised by the local people, they lived on in the same town until his mother died. Now living with his aunt, uncle and cousin in Tokyo, Mamoru attends a local school and works part time at a book shop. His new family clearly dote upon him, but Mamoru's life is again turned upside down when his taxi driver uncle is arrested under suspicion of running a red light and killing a young female pedestrian. With no witnesses, time running out for his uncle, bullies at school who seize upon this opportunity to make his life difficult, and strange phone calls to his house, Mamoru decides to investigate this accident himself and in the process finds out that this was no ordinary accident.

As his investigation progresses, strange things begin to happen at his book shop, a man goes berserk and a young girl becomes suicidal, and he discovers about some other apparent suicides that seem to have a connection with the girl who ran in front of his uncle's car. A lucky break appears when a mysterious, and rich, middle aged businessman claims to have witnessed the car accident and exonerates Mamoru's uncle from blame. However, this businessman seems to have an agenda of his own that he is following, and clearly knows secrets pertaining to Mamoru's troubled past.

This novel maintains a fast pace and it is easy to become totally engrossed in the plot and lose track of time. Miyabe weaves a very intricate story where it is easy to make suppositions about the truth, and be surprised when she pulls apart those suppositions. As mentioned before, there is a strong element of guilt pervading all of the characters, but the guilt is clouded by justifications that they have nothing to be guilty about. Ultimately, they are all shown that no matter what they are guilty of, guilt has a way to pursue them.

'Only since 1999 have Miyabe's novels started to be translated into English, though only a handful so far. They represent the burgeoning interest in Japanese literature sparked by other novelists such as Haruki Murakami.'

