



The Tale of Genji (*Genji monogatari*) is arguably Japan's most celebrated work of literature. Written by Murasaki Shikibu, a lady-in-waiting in the early eleventh-century imperial court, it is often considered the first example of a psychological novel in the world. *The Tale of Genji* has influenced Japanese literature, art and crafts for more than ten centuries and still does so today. This issue of *The Japan Society Review* opens with a review of the catalogue of an exhibition held at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in recognition of the one thousandth anniversary of the publication of *The Tale of Genji*. As Professor Timon Screech (SOAS) discusses in his review, both the catalogue and the exhibition illuminates the importance of *Genji* in Japanese visual culture.

The second review of this issue focuses on an academic publication *The Ghost of Namamugi: Charles Lenox Richardson and the Anglo-Satsuma War*. The book re-examines the death of the British merchant, Charles Lenox Richardson, in the so-called 'Namamugi Incident' which resulted in the British bombardment of the city of Kagoshima, during the late Tokugawa shogunate. Locating the incident within the wider context of British imperial expansion in East Asia, *The Ghost of Namamugi* makes use of previously unpublished sources, such as Richardson's personal letters, to explore this difficult episode in the Anglo-Japanese relations.

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The Japan Society Review also includes reviews of two Japanese novels. *Picnic in the Storm* by Motoya Yukiko is a collection of short stories examining a wide range of issues such as loneliness, loss of identity and gender roles in contemporary Japan. A celebrated and prolific playwright and theatre director as well as novelist, Motoya won the Akutagawa Prize in 2016 for 'An Exotic Marriage', a novella-length story included in this volume. *Ueno Tokyo Station* by Yu Miri describes with a touching authenticity the experiences of an unfortunate man whose life is tragically linked to Ueno Park in Tokyo. Yu, who also won the Akutagawa Prize in 1996, uses her perspective as a *zainichi* Korean writer to depict concealed parts of Japan's history in relation to the social issues of poverty and exclusion experienced by vulnerable people in Japan.

Finally, this issue also presents for the first time the review of a TV show, Japanese drama *Switched*, an exhilarating, beautiful and dark story of body swapping and friendship. Based on the homonymous manga by acclaimed writer Kawabata Shiki, this 6-episode Netflix show addressed global issues such as bullying, beauty stereotypes and mental health through the lives of four teenagers attending school in Japan.

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Image: *Butterflies (Kochō)*, Tosa Mitsuyoshi, late 16th–early 17th century
The Tale of Genji: A Japanese Classic Illuminated

The Tale of Genji: A Japanese Classic Illuminated

by John T. Carpenter and Melissa McCormick with Monika Bincsik and Kyoko Kinoshita, preface by Sano Midori

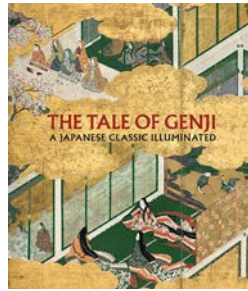
Metropolitan Museum of Art (2019)
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Review by Timon Screech

It is customary to refer to the *Tale of Genji* as the world's first psychological novel. The case can be argued, for over the course of its 54 chapters, the reader follows the lives, states of mind and emotional shifts of a range of characters. Prince Genji dies long before the end, and the tale continues with his son. 'Novel' is a modern word and appeared many centuries after the *Tale* was written, and on the other side of the globe. The Japanese term is *monogatari*, 'talking about matters'. The title of *Genji monogatari* may or may not have been assigned by the author, but the work was soon known as such, and the designation defined the work's meaning ever after. It focusses on the eponymous hero and 'matters' surrounding his life.

The *monogatari* became an established form well before the year 1000, and some examples from that early period survive. Others are known only from references in other fictional texts, or court diaries. Some *monogatari* speak of ghost and monsters, or far-away lands, but the majority address the world in which the reader lived. They cover the 'matters' of real life, and unfold in the types of building in which readers lived in, with people they might plausibly meet, and the thrills and anguishes that attended their daily round. The 'they' was the tiny number of literate courtiers – whose attitudes towards people beneath them, when such persons even appear, is deplorable. Some *monogatari*, like early novels, offered moral lessons, about hubris, immorality or other wickedness, and some characters gets their comeuppance, but not always, and *Genji* has only the subtlest advice to offer here. It depicts a world governed by karma where spirits can help or hinder, but only in ways that would have seemed logical to readers of the time, and on the whole they still do today. It is the complexity of emotions that is to the fore, and which makes *Genji* so fascinating.

Interestingly, within the tale is an episode in which Prince Genji stumbles on ladies reading



monogatari, and offers some thoughts. The extract has been repeatedly quoted to illustrate how readers probably understood the genre at the time. *Genji* makes a positive contrast with histories, which deal with event and fact. *Genji* is made to say that, indeed, *monogatari* and their emotions can be the better way to understand human existence. It seems implicit that histories were male domains, while *monogatari* were for women. However, this gender division has recently been challenged. It was certainly the case that men read *monogatari* too, and also wrote them. There was no reason, then or now, why 'matters' were a female preserve. However, the *Tale of Genji* was itself written by a woman, that is, by a court lady, who could not have known as much about 'history' as a learned male might.

In keeping with expectations of the time, the author's name is not recorded. Ladies did have names, but these were taboo outside the family, so they were known by sobriquets, taken from a feature of their apartments (eg, 'lady of the wisteria tub') or the title or office held by a male relative. The author of *Genji* must have had a relation in the Office of Rites (*shikibu*) as *Shikibu* is the name by which she was known. The chief female character in the *Tale*, whom Genji idolises, pursues and (since his is a child) rears, is referred to as Murasaki, 'purple'. Life follows art, so this name was adopted, and the author became widely known as Murasaki Shikibu.



Parody of Murasaki Shikibu at Her Desk, Okumura Masanobu, ca. 1710, Japan

What looks like a depiction of an Edo-period courtesan at a writing table is actually a parodic image of The Tale of Genji's author, Murasaki Shikibu. While most imaginary portraits show her in eleventh-century dress, here she appears clad in the fashion of the artist's own day.

Part of the exhibition and catalogue *The Tale of Genji: A Japanese Classic Illuminated*

Some earlier English discussions call her Lady Murasaki. Historians can discover hidden given names, and it is proposed that Murasaki Shikibu was Fujiwara no Kaoruko. Certainly she was from that powerful court family, though a minor branch of it. Her father, Fujiwara no Tametoki, did indeed serve in the Office of Rites. The identify of her mother is not clear.

We know a little about the historical Murasaki Shikibu from comments by other ladies, many of whom kept diaries (Murasaki kept one too). She must have been reclusive, or at least capable of isolating herself from court intrigues long enough to concentrate on a book well over 1000 pages in a modern edition. Frustratingly, it is not quite certain when she did this, or how long she took. Murasaki is known to have lived from about 975 to about 1016 (though some date her death as late as c. 1130). She probably lived to about the age of 40. She went to court in 1005 to serve the empress, some dozen years younger, and whose father, Fujiwara no Michinaga, was a distant kinsman of the writer and the most powerful person at court. The empress encouraged the literary arts. After a short number of years, having born sufficient sons, she retired, rather notionally, spending time outside the Capital. Murasaki Shikibu seems to have accompanied her, and a myth was generated that she wrote *Genji* at the Ishiyama Temple overlooking Lake Biwa. Surely it took a decade to complete. The first reference to the tale dates to 1008, when it was underway. A reference from 1020 refers to 54 chapters, meaning it was finished. The assumption is that the work was concluded in 1019. At once it was recognised as a stunning achievement, and it was an immediate classic.

In recognition of the one thousandth anniversary the Metropolitan Museum has mounted a glorious exhibition. Many people (including the present reviewer) will not be able to get to New York, but the Met has produced a fine accompanying volume. Although a catalogue, it is likely to enjoy an independent and lasting existence after the exhibition is over. The coverage is large, from some of the earliest extant transcriptions, and pictures on *Genji* themes, including masterpieces from US and Japanese collection, through later works referencing or illustrating the tale, along with the wealth of artefacts and household luxuries on *Genji* themes, right up to manga versions. Other than the Bible, *Genji* has arguably generated more visual culture than any single work (and the Bible isn't a single work). There catalogue provides a comprehensive overview across all major types and schools and materials.



Costume (*Karaori*) with Cypress Fans and Moonflower (*Yūgao*) Blossoms, 18th–early 19th century, Japan

The pattern of a moonflower lying on an open cypress fan evokes Chapter 4 of *The Tale of Genji*, “The Lady of the Evening Faces” (*Yūgao*), and *Genji*’s tragic love affair with the woman known as *Yūgao*.

Part of the exhibition and catalogue *The Tale of Genji: A Japanese Classic Illuminated*

It was not long before *Genji* became too hard to read. Its text was unfathomable to later generations, especially those without access too – or perhaps little sympathy with – the self-obsessed court of c. 1000. Only major works of retrieval scholarship, in the 17th century brought *Genji* back into the orbit of actual readers, though even though, its length was prohibitive. People knew *Genji* more than they read it (also like the Bible). Stories were detached, which also allowed problematic parts to be obscured (such as *Genji*’s philandering having corrupted the legitimate imperial succession). Educated people knew *Genji* themes, one of two per chapter, and could recognise episodes from well-established pictorial types, or from rebus-like analogies. *The Tale of Genji* is as much, if not more the domain of art history than of literary history.

More than lining up *Genji* artworks, the Metropolitan Museum has sought to reinterpret. The catalogue entries are arranged into essays, some on expected themes. One is of monochrome illustrations, unexpected because *Genji* is associated with the colourful *yamato-e* (or *waga*) manner. Much emphasis is also placed on Buddhism, and this is welcome. Over history, clergy sought to come to terms with the fact that all *monogatari* are ‘lies’, and *Genji*, being so widely

known, was the worst offender. Religious services were conducted to console the author as she languished in hell.

In this catalogue, and even more in the exhibition, we have the best of *Genji* objects, and with them, the best of contemporary *Genji* scholarship. §

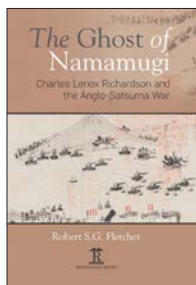
The Ghost of Namamugi. Charles Lenox Richardson and the Anglo-Satsuma War

by Robert S.G. Fletcher

Renaissance Books (2019)

ISBN-13: 978-1898823834

Review by Trevor Skingle



On 14th September 1862 a merchant recently arrived in Japan from Shanghai, Charles Lenox Richardson, set out from Yokohama on horseback on a sightseeing trip. He was accompanied by two other merchants, Woodthorpe Charles Clarke, an old friend from Shanghai who worked in an American owned shop in Yokohama, and William Marshall, the principle merchant of Yokohama traders Marshall and Hart Ltd.. Margaret Watson Borradaile, the wife of a British Merchant living in Hong Kong and Marshall's sister-in-law, was also with them. They were travelling along the Tokaido road heading via Kanagawa towards the Kawasaki Daishi-ji temple.

Travelling in the opposite direction was Regent Shimazu Hisamitsu (aka Shimazu Saburo) representing his young son Lord Shimazu Tadayoshi, the twelfth and last Daimyo of Satsuma Domain in Kyushu. He was travelling to Kyoto after a stay in Edo (now Tokyo) where he had been helping to promote a political partnership between the Imperial Court, the Shogunate and the great south-western domains of Satsuma, Choshu, Hizen and Tosa. This had been undertaken as part of the Bunkyo Era Reforms of 1862 which were intended to relax the restrictions placed on Daimyo by former Tairo (Senior Minister) Ii Naosuke during the purges of the Ansei Era. He was accompanied by a large retinue which included two hundred Satsuma samurai.

Fictionalised at the start of James Clavell's novel *Gai-jin*, the events which occurred when both parties converged at the then small village of Namamugi, some 9km out of Yokohama, would reverberate down the years in the minds of both Japanese and Western politicians, press, and academics.

The Ghost of Namamugi is the most recent English language publication to attempt to explain the wider context which led to this incident and its repercussions. This book is also an attempt to

illustrate the background and character of the ill-fated protagonist Charles Lenox Richardson through, amongst other things, the inclusion of his family correspondence whilst in China and Japan, made available for public consumption for the first time.

The book is broken down into two parts. Part One consists of four chapters while Part Two includes the correspondence of Charles Lenox Richardson. The first chapter looks into Richardson's family background as well as his development as a trainee in the merchant community in the foreign settlement in Shanghai. It also explores how these experiences may have affected his attitudes, deportment and reputation.

The second chapter covers the Anglo-Satsuma War and the exchange of fire between British gunboats and the on-shore Satsuma batteries at Kagoshima in southern Kyushu. This chapter introduces the Namamugi Incident and makes a preliminary investigation into the subsequent state of British mercantile attitudes in Japan as a consequence. It also delves into the attitude and responses of the merchant community towards the *Chargé d'affaires* in Japan, Colonel Edward St. John Neale, as a result of his perceived inaction after the attack (he was later vindicated by the British Government).

In the third chapter there is a more in depth investigation into, and analysis of, the general attitudes of the British Press and the merchant community to the responses of the British authorities to the Japanese. It examines the merchants' perceived lack of trading freedom and their attempts to leverage British trade policy towards Japan in order to enhance their trading fortunes to the degree that they themselves felt was acceptable, in a way somewhat analogous to Eisenhower's Military-Industrial complex.

The final fourth chapter of part one looks at the political turmoil and the repercussions arising from the destruction of the city of Kagoshima. It also analyses the rehabilitation-vindication of Colonel Neale and how his character and the narrative of Richardson's death changed in the years after the incident. How Britain's relationship with Japan was affected is also explored in this chapter.

Part One is very evocative of the similar state of thinking and attitudes within the mercantile communities at that time within both China and Japan,

and what they felt could be achieved in Japan with the help of a combination of the British Government's Trade and Military policies. How that had been achieved in China is underpinned in much more detail by many of the footnotes in Part Two.

Part Two contains Richardson's correspondence from January 1853 up to June 1862. It covers his departure for China and residence in Shanghai, and a single last letter from Yokohama in Japan dated 3rd September 1862, eleven days before his death.

There is a good balance between the first part of the book and this second part which gives a really fascinating and intimate window onto Richardson's character, the ebb and flow of his fortunes during his time in Shanghai and his relationships (both professional and personal). The book is also useful in understanding the relationships between the British Foreign Settlement and the Chinese, and the vicissitudes of Chinese politics and resultant internal strife at the time. The single last letter from Yokohama is a surprisingly upbeat missive given the somewhat dour picture painted of Richardson over the years as a result of the incident and his part in it. What does come across in his correspondence, apart from explaining an incident where he sustained an injury to his hand knocking down a Chinese man who had been insolent, is the lack of any detail about the British communities' engagement and social interaction with the local Chinese community. This lack is something which also comes across in Part One in relation to social interactions between the British Community and the local Japanese. The overall picture wasn't quite as gloomy as it might seem in this book.

Though fundamentally academic the book is written in a way which makes it relatively accessible for non-academics and, though the account is non-sequential in parts, it is laid out in such a way as to make it comparatively easy to follow events and their consequences. Though there is a feel that the author is writing for those who may already be aware of the incident, there is also a good introduction which neatly summarises the issues as the author perceives them and explains the layout of the book.

However the omission of information from other reports has resulted in what I felt was a slightly skewed narrative, the addition of which might have made for a more balanced account illustrating the perspectives from both the British and the Japanese points of view whilst still allowing the reader to come to their own conclusions. For example; fuller testimonies from both sides of the incident itself up

to the moment when Shimazu Hisamitsu apparently gave the order for *todome* (*coup de grâce*) or the admonitions given by Satsuma to the Shogunate prior to the date of Hisamitsu's procession about the 'intolerable' behaviour of foreigners on the road might have proved interesting. Similarly, explaining the consequent warnings given by the Shogunate to Colonel Neale and the British for foreigners to stay away from the Tokaido Road during Hisamitsu's journey and the Shogun's communication to Hisamitsu requesting his restraint when dealing with any foreigners he might meet. Other perspectives that might have also proved interesting were the comments made about the reasons for Charles' departure for Shanghai made by his uncle and the opposing view of Charles from Admiral Kuper. Also other interesting evidence to consider could be the *tomowari* (an act of extreme disrespect under the Laws for the Military Houses) as a potential cause of the incident, Dr. Willis's autopsy report which objectively illustrates the extent of Richardson's injuries and the exchange of letters and a record of what was said during the visit by the Satsuma Envoy Ijichi Shoji to Admiral Kuper's flagship H.M.S. Euryalis prior to the commencement of hostilities at Kagoshima. Finally, a chapter on the political turmoil that was engulfing Japan at that time, including the tensions between the opposing camps of *kobu gattai* (Union of Court and Camp) and *sonno joi* (Revere the Emperor and Expel the Barbarian – which was inspiring attacks against foreigners) and how this affected the relationships between the various Japanese factions, and between them and the Treaty Powers could also have been of interest.

Whilst there are plenty of illustrations to highlight some of the key issues relating to this pivotal collision of cultures, it might have also helped to include a couple of maps, firstly to help place the incident geographically by showing the locations in modern Namamugi where the initial confrontation took place and where the subsequent *todome* was given (both of which are today marked by monuments); and secondly to show the location of Richardson's grave between the later graves of Clarke and Marshall (his male companions at Namamugi) in the 22nd section of the Foreigners Cemetery in Yokohama (normally not open to the public but that can be seen through the fence from the road on the Motomachi side of the cemetery). Unfortunately for those interested in further reading no bibliography has been provided though this omission is balanced out with plenty of references in the text alongside abundant footnotes.

Indicative of the great effect that it had, the incident continues to prompt the publication of articles and books such as this. All in all it's a very interesting read for anyone curious about the Bakumatsu period, the opening up of Japan at the end of *sakoku* (Japan's

enforced isolation), and the British expat community in Japan at the time. Unfortunately, as with many academic books, this in depth analysis is a tad on the expensive side. §

Picnic in the Storm

by Motoya Yukiko
translated by Yoneya Asa

Corsair (2019)
ISBN-13: 978-1472154347

Review by Beau Waycott



Motoya Yukiko's *Picnic in the Storm* is a collection of short stories examining the wide range of issues Japan faces in its continuing mission to remain amongst the world's superpowers. Far from being illogical or overly ambitious, the collection succeeds in its representation of such a plethora of ideas through Motoya's expertly crafted unities: loneliness, a loss of identity and, above all else, disturbing and engrossing surrealism.

The collection centres around the novella-length 'An Exotic Marriage', which won Motoya the Akutagawa Prize in 2016. The protagonist, San, is ignored by her older husband, and we join her as she develops anxiety over their marital problems that manifest themselves not just emotionally but physically: on her husband's face she begins to see a monster, then a snake, then a mountain peony and then, most worryingly of all, herself.

Alongside her native Edo-gawa Ranpo, Motoya's other childhood reads included Agatha Christie and Arthur Conan Doyle, and this lifelong love for suspense and mystery has translated itself into commanding yet subtle enigmas throughout the collection. Accomplished enough to avoid circumlocution, Motoya's positioning of the reader is subtle yet wholly effective, with the dramatic and engrossing wrestle of San to reclaim her personality and the reader prompted to consider how people lose themselves to mundanity and repetition. On a deeper level, the almost Kafkaesque surrealism of the work draws a startling juxtaposition to the encouraged conformity of Japanese society, much like the shorter ending story 'The Straw Husband', which also explores how even the most normal characters and activities can become alien.

Unlike the subtler themes of 'An Exotic Marriage' and 'Straw Husband', Motoya also makes unashamedly clear criticisms of modern Japanese society. The most obviously feminist narrative of the book, 'Q&A', avoids any sense of cliché in its satire of consumerism and

gender roles, whilst the anime-esque ultraviolence of 'How to Burden the Girl' is a blazen pastiche of the hyper-conservative attitudes towards women often found in anime and manga, exports which undoubtedly inform a large proportion of the world's perception of the country. Indeed, Motoya herself began to read horror manga as a child, and we can hear clear anger voiced throughout the collection at the fettering stereotypes often found within the genre.

The collection finds one unity in its motif of thoughtless and moodless men, who usually appear under the guise of husbands, with dominances that seem unbelievable to the point of absurdity in almost all of the texts. Far from being a shortcoming of Motoya's writing, this is the very crux of her purpose: throughout, we see relationships as a forerunner to a loss of identity, not just loneliness but a far deeper lack of connection that the female protagonists find from themselves. The women certainly don't lack license in their narration or thoughts, but there are clear yearnings to exist as something they simply can't be. Here, once these women venture outside of their long-established domesticity, the quiet elegance of Yoneda Asa's translation really shines. The unwavering certainties of description are what allow Motoya's surrealism credit in such domestic tales, whilst Yoneda also continues her skill, first pioneered in her Yoshimoto Banana translations which included culturally-relevant examples of the original Japanese onomatopoeia often lost in translation. Much like in Yoneda's Yoshimoto translations, these flashes of sound lend a synaesthetic and gripping aura to the writing that compliments perfectly the tone she allows Motoya.

Above all else, this collection firmly marks Motoya as a name to watch for in the current literary market, where Japanese in translation is finding a much deserved rejuvenation. A celebrated and prolific playwright and theatre director as well as novelist, whose works have been adapted for film on numerous occasions, it is likely we will be seeing a great deal more of Motoya's variety within the English canon very soon, something I am sure any reader of *Picnic in the Storm* will celebrate. §

Tokyo Ueno Station

by Yu Miri

translated by Morgan Giles

Tilted Axis Press (2019)

ISBN-13: 978-1911284161

Review by Morgane Chinal-Dargent



Ueno station is a singular place. Adjacent to Ueno Park - which was gifted by Emperor Taisho to the city in 1924 - the station is a hub to a wide and eclectic range of Tokyo dwellers. Some of them use it to commute, others come to peek at the famous pandas in the zoo, or some simply stroll among the flourishing sakura trees. However, what animated Yu Miri to write about the eponymous station is the forgotten history this place holds.

Through her haunting novel, she reveals the story of Kazu, one of the many young men who came from the Tohoku region after WWII. In search of a steady income to send to their family back home, many of them boarded the train to reach the capital through the 'Gateway to the North', a nickname that Ueno station earned after this wave of Northerners migrated to the city.

As they were mainly given constructions jobs, their efforts largely contributed to the post-war reconstruction of the city as well as preparing the 1964 Tokyo Olympics Games. Nevertheless, most of them ended up jobless and penniless when their services were no longer needed. Rapidly falling into destitution, a large portion of these labourers from the North were left with no other choice than to set up a tent at Ueno Park, near the station which remains the closest home from home within the capital.

Their stories might have fallen into oblivion, but the 2011 Fukushima incident reawakened the suffering of this destitute working class as their actual home was swept away by the tsunami and nuclear incident. For Yu, Fukushima holds a special meaning, as the author decided to move there shortly after the accident. Connecting the dots all the way to Ueno, the author interviewed the homeless in the park and took the opportunity to raise their voices through this short novel.

In *Tokyo Ueno Station*, the reader follows the ghost of one of these unfortunate young men, Kazu, whose fate is tragically linked to Ueno Park. Through dialogues with himself and the reader, Kazu recalls the many events in his life that led him to pass away, homeless in the park. From his childhood in Tohoku to his young adult life in Sapporo and finally his late years

in Tokyo, the protagonist reveals the widening gap between classes in modern Japan as his life strangely mirrors that of Emperor Akihito.

Despite sharing the same birth year and welcoming their first sons to the world on the same day, the two men followed radically different paths. Nonetheless, the meeting point of these opposed destinies finds itself in Ueno Park. By documenting Kazu's life as a series of heartbreaking and unfortunate events, the author introduces us to the people with which the protagonists shares a meal or a conversation, showing us that Ueno Park is home to hundreds of souls experiencing the same fate as Kazu.

Through her novel, Yu makes a bold but desperately needed statement about poverty in Japan and how it is largely disregarded as a social issue. The anecdote of the 'Mountain Hunt', where Ueno is cleared from all signs of homelessness residing in the park for a day on the occasion of the Imperial Family's visit, exemplifies this issue perfectly. Rather than violently attacking the Japanese Government, Yu describes with a poignant authenticity the injustice experienced by Kazu and his peers which results as an even more powerful and moving critic.

Social issues have always been a personal favourite of the Japanese-Korean award-winning author whose sharp and honest perspective lead her to receive threats from the Japanese right-wing parties who consider that her novels tarnish the country's reputation.

It is difficult to imagine a better match than translator Morgan Giles, who is herself a self-defined socialist. Her passion for the topic clearly shines through in the quality of her translation, flawless despite the added difficulty of the back-and-forth between Tohoku's dialect and standard Japanese. She perfectly transcribes the cultural symbolic of Ueno Park to Western audiences, depicted in the novel as an ambiguous place where the internationally celebrated Japanese tradition meets the unappreciated and concealed parts of Japan's history. Despite being 300 pages long, *Tokyo Ueno Station* manages to immerse the reader into the hardship that is Kazu's life and, as a result, shows a Japanese Government disconnected from the true needs of its lower classes. With the upcoming 2020 Tokyo Olympics Games the timing could not be better for such a powerful book to be released in order to prevent history from repeating itself. §

Switched

TV series directed by Matsuyama Hiroaki

Switched's Season 1 is available on Netflix UK

Review by Severah Noureen Akhtar



If you haven't already heard of Netflix's latest obsession, Japanese drama *Switched*, you will probably not be prepared for the exhilarating, beautiful and horrifying ride you are about to embark, thanks to director Matsuyama Hiroaki (*Liar Game*) and the stellar cast who make this show compulsive viewing. Based on the manga by acclaimed writer Kawabata Shiki, *Sora wo Kakeru Yodaka*, this 6-episode show is a twist on the once family friendly concept of body swapping, reviving it as a dark psychological drama contrasted against heart-warming friendships. Centred around four teenagers attending school in Japan, the show moves steadily across its web of intricately connected storylines to create a world of darkness, loyalty and friendship, through its fine dialogue, stunning cinematography, and suspenseful plot twists, making this show a must see for both Japanese and non-Japanese alike.

Starting with a confession of love, the protagonist, Ayumi (Kiyohara Kaya, *My Tomorrow Your Yesterday*, 2016), whilst on her way to meet her boyfriend, witnesses the death of her classmate Zenko (Tomita Miu, *Solomon's Perjury*, 2016), only to wake up in hospital, in Zenko's body. From that point onwards, the narrative creates a very intriguing tale, seen mostly from a female perspective. The story is not for the faint hearted, and even the toughest of viewers will find themselves weeping at parts, either in anger or joy. Without any question of a doubt, the show is not aimed at young children. In fact, I would advise caution and a trigger of suicide from the start for even the adults. But don't be fooled into thinking you can ever understand the depth of this show without watching it. The plot not only thickens from the get-go, it will stir in you a deep sense of injustice, love and frustration, which will surprise and shock you, whilst leaving you in absolute awe at the talent of the director, writers and cast.

The foundation of *Switched*, is best described as the grass isn't always greener on the other side. A lesson which the key characters learn very quickly. It's no surprise then, that with this cautionary tale, you can't help but ponder to yourself and relate to the harrowing issues of self-loathing, internal struggles, mental health issues and loneliness. *Switched* addresses with

the issues of body shaming and attractiveness in the most shocking yet beautiful manner. Whilst Japanese media is known to be openly critical to people of a larger size, this show does something different. It turns that whole idea on its head. And if you thought that Japan glamourises bullying, well, be prepared to be proven wrong in the most fantastic way through the brilliant character developments of the fabulous four throughout the show. Each character's storyline is interwoven with the next, creating a web of stories that compliment yet devastate each other's in the process.

Despite the darkness of the tv show, the key messages are actually very positive, with the sweetness of Ayumi's character whilst in the body of Zenko, the show emphasises that your inner beauty is what matters the most. And in a time when social media has created a world of fake bodies, fake lives and fake smiles, this message is not only very welcome, but also extremely important.

One of the most entertaining aspects of this short but exhilarating drama, is that it is in fact, not a teenage drama at all. It's every design and storyline scream dark humour, horror, and psychological thriller yet you are transported into the darkness of a teenage fantasy. The character portrayal of Ayumi residing within the body of Zenko is played with such natural sweetness and charm by Tomita and wins over the viewers hearts to such a degree that you wish, surprisingly, that she remain in the body of Zenko and continue to be as adorable as she is seen. This in itself will leave many a viewer wondering and confused about who they are truly rooting for, making even more emotionally charged viewing.

In conclusion, *Switched* has an absolute stellar cast, who manage to bring to life the original manga, better than itself. Whilst the premise of the show is a far stretch from reality, it's intense performances will leave you at the edge of your seat throughout the 6-part show. A word of caution though, don't watch this show if you have an early start the next day, as there is no question of a doubt that you will binge watch the whole series and be up all night in the process. Not only that, you will be left clutching your nearest and dearest till the end and spend the next week or two with a deep yearning for another episode, and another glimpse into the lives of your new friends. *Switched* receives the highest of recommendations, with a trigger warning of suicide and death for viewers who may be affected. It has mild violence and gore. [S](#)