

Japan and the Shackles of the Past R. Taggart Murphy's overarching history of Japan

Japanese War Crimes and Chinese Justice Barak Kushner on a Cold War dynamic that continues to colour East Asian relations

Pinball Wizard Murakami's debut novels make their British debut

The Book of Tokyo The world's largest city in fiction

Throughout 2015 many people took part in events marking the 70th anniversary of World War II. Unsurprisingly, in the UK the focus was on the war in Europe, but it is important to remember that the war in the Pacific took place on a greater geographical scale, accounted for around fifty percent of the overall deaths and casualties, and continues to play a major role in regional and international relations. Coinciding with the anniversary, Barak Kushner – a world expert on the legacy of the Asia Pacific War – published *Men to Devils, Devils to Men*, looking at the trials of Class B and C war criminals in China and Taiwan (Class A crimes were dealt with by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East in Tokyo). In his review Sir Hugh Cortazzi looks in particular at how the process was complicated by immediate post-war geo-political relations.

The Pacific War features heavily in *Japan and the Shackles of the Past*, economist R. Taggart Murphy's meta history of Japan, although in attempting to explain

the country's current economic, political and social situation he goes back as far as the Heian era (794-1185). Here, Richard Coxford suggests that readers may be left frustrated by Murphy's reliance on generalisations and a narrow range of American literature.

The Book of Tokyo: A City in Short Fiction was released back in 2014, but has been growing steadily in exposure and popularity in the UK. In her review Annabelle Sami looks at whether it lives up to its hype. Finally, we review works by two giants of Japanese literature. Chris Corker looks at the first UK release of Murakami Haruki's debut novels, *Hear the Wind Sing* and *Pinball* – what can they tell us about the development of one of the most successful writers on the planet? While Murakami fans have long been calling for him to receive a Nobel prize, Ōe Kenzaburō became a Nobel laureate back in 1994, and at the age of 81 is still going strong. Here Charlotte Goff reviews his heavily autobiographical *Death by Water*.

William Upton

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(Image: *Japan and the Shackles of the Past*, cover)

Wind/Pinball

by Murakami Haruki, translated
by Ted Goossen

Harvill Secker (2015)

336 pages

ISBN-10: 1846558352

Review by Chris Corker



These two novellas, available for the first time in English outside of Japan*, were Murakami Haruki's first works. They form the first two parts of the unofficially-named *Trilogy of The Rat*, which concludes with the critically-acclaimed *Wild Sheep Chase*. Murakami affectionately refers to *Wind* (full title *Hear the Wind Sing*) and *Pinball* – both a little more experimental and rough around the edges than his later works – as his 'kitchen table novels', written in brief snatches after finishing work at his jazz club. Despite the difference in style between these formative works and his mature oeuvre, however, the themes are unmistakable as Murakami: a misanthropic loner with a dry sense of humour bobs along in an ocean of jazz, sex, booze, cigarettes and fleeting liaisons with other misfits. Readers are naturally divided as to whether this easy familiarity is one of Murakami's strengths or weaknesses.

Murakami now has an almost unparalleled fan base, indomitable in its calls for him to win a Nobel Prize. In Japan, at least, there is no author more famous, and on the international stage – at least to the layman – he *is* Japanese fiction. Yet it could have been a very different story. In an interesting introduction comprising autobiographical shorts, Murakami tells us that had the first novella, *Hear the Wind Sing*, not won the Gunzo Literary Prize, his aspirations to being a novelist would have ended there. The manuscript he submitted – in the age of the typewriter – was his only copy, and the prize did not return unsuccessful entries. Also of interest here is a description of the author's methodology. Unhappy that his early drafts were florid, he resolved to write the first two chapters in English before translating them back into Japanese. Thus his economic and fluid style was born, bucking the trend of other famous Japanese authors such as Yasunari Kawabata and Jun'ichiro Tanizaki.

In *Hear the Wind Sing* our unnamed narrator is back from university for the summer, whiling away his time in J's Bar with the trilogy's titular character, The Rat. There is always the nagging feeling that they are in a sense doubles leading parallel – albeit disparate

– lives. In *Hear the Wind Sing* The Rat is only given reality with the return of the narrator, like a character coming out of its box. In *Pinball* they are dealt with separately, although their fates still seem shared, and again there is the sense that the disparity in their lives is the product of minute chance rather than anything more profound.

J's Bar provides a backdrop for the character's reminiscences about their youths – their sexual conquests and their drunken exploits. Philosophy-light rears its head in-between mouthfuls of beer and peanuts, and as is often the case with Murakami, transience is a common theme, characters coming and going 'like a summer shower on a hot pavement'.

Written in a casual and punchy style, *Hear the Wind Sing* is easy to read and often funny. It feels very much like a first novel, crammed full of ideas and thirty years of life experience. At times Murakami's innovations feel a little forced – there is one short chapter comprised of Beach Boys lyrics – but on the whole it remains refreshing. The humour is at times extended to serious topics. Mentioning The Rat's father's versatile and popular, albeit dubiously effective, liquid formulas the narrator notes that:

'[T]he same ointment slathered on the heaped bodies of Japanese soldiers in the jungles of New Guinea twenty-five years ago can today be found, with the same trademark, gracing the toilets of the nation as a drain cleaner.'

This quote, with its nihilistic meaninglessness blended with dry, dark humour, is a good representation of the novel as a whole.

Pinball takes place three years after *Hear the Wind Sing*, in 1973. The still nameless narrator has moved to Tokyo where he makes his living as a translator while living, in a typically Murakamiesque phallogentric fantasy, with female identical twins. In contrast, The Rat, who has remained in their hometown in an unfulfilling yet apparently addictive relationship. He drives around the town for something to do, always finishing up at J's Bar. These sections are the weaker of the novel. Gone is the fluidity, replaced by an overly descriptive style, in which similes and metaphors run rampant.

In *Pinball's* stronger half, the narrator dwells on the memory of an old girlfriend who killed herself, her reasons a mystery. In his visits to the past, he remembers a pinball machine on which he used to play in J's Bar, and becomes fixated on the idea of playing again. When he finds that the machine is incredibly rare, he embarks on a frenzied search. A book he reads

apparently gives him an insight into the emptiness that drives him:

'No, pinball leads nowhere. The only result is a glowing replay light. Reply, replay, replay – it makes you think the whole aim of the game is to achieve a form of eternity.'

Pinball paints a picture of early adulthood characterised by anonymity and loss, and is not always as fun to read as *Hear the Wind Sing*. It remains intriguing in parts, though, and the atmosphere of decline and dissolution is perfectly apt for the death of childhood dreams.

Murakami fans will find enough familiar elements here to feel at home, yet this is also this collection's weakness. Murakami himself doesn't rank these novellas very highly in his oeuvre, which is surprising for one reason: Murakami hasn't really changed as a writer since 1979, when *Hear the Wind Sing* was written. You'll find mentions of wells aplenty, as well as baseball and the other stalwarts such as jazz, and

women with apparently alluring physical deformities. It's embryonic Murakami, but it is all there. There are also elements that seem to have been directly recycled for *Norwegian Wood*, such as an ill-fated girlfriend named Naoko and a belief that books by dead authors are the only ones worth reading. If the reader can accept that as their lot, then they will find this collection enjoyable. *Hear the Wind Sing* especially, thanks in no small part to Goossen's great translation, is a joy to read. If, however, you are looking for a book that says something new about the author, this would not be the place to start. In these novellas, as in his later works, Murakami writes Murakami.

* The books were previously available in Japan in English, in an edition translated by Alfred Birnbaum and published by Kodansha, intended for Japanese students of English. §

The Book of Tokyo: A City in Short Fiction

edited by Michael
Emmerich, Jim Hinks and
Matsue Masashi

Comma Press (2014)

224 pages

ISBN-10: 1905583575

Review by
Annabelle Sami

I had high hopes for *The Book of Tokyo*. I expected from the title something of a literary tour through the city, or at the very least, interesting and idiosyncratic snapshots, atmospheric vignettes, of Tokyo life.

However, the stories within the collection fail to convey a sense of place, which is after all the pulling power of the book, with enough clarity to make them enlightening in this regard to a British reader. The likely audience for this book will surely be expecting to be able to 'discover' Tokyo through this selection of short stories by ten different authors. Certainly, its emphatic title and stylish front cover highly resemble a tour guide (to the extent that someone on the tube asked me if I was preparing to visit Japan.)

However the stories are too general to make them stories about Tokyo. It feels as if some of them deliberately avoid mentioning street names or locations, and so they become more like insights



into contemporary Japanese life than anything more specific. The mood of the stories is often that of introspective contemplation; characters constantly reminisce, trapped in their own internal worlds, and this often leaves their external world – Tokyo – unmentioned.

The most disappointing factor was that the majority of the stories were rather uneventful, lacking the narrative arc that readers might expect of a self-contained work of fiction. In particular 'Vortex' by Hashimoto Osumato and translated by Yoneda Asa was quite dull and monotonous as the main character reflects on her life – something that seems odd to attempt in a short story.

The collection peaks early, its highlight the pairing of editor Michael Emmerich's introduction and the first story 'Model T Frankenstein' by Furukawa Hideo and translated by Samuel Malissa. In his Introduction, Emmerich describes Tokyo as having 'a sense of disorientation that blends seamlessly into a seemingly opposite sense of rootedness.' This was mirrored well in Furukawa's story whose peculiar abstractness juxtaposed the insistency with which the author specified particular Tokyo locales. However, this is the one notable exception to an otherwise underwhelming book. *The Book of Tokyo* remains simply a good way to sample the writing styles of ten contemporary Japanese writers. Sadly, its claim to being 'A City in Short Fiction' is open to question.

Other authors and stories included in this collection:

'Picnic' by Ekuni Kaori
'A House for Two' by Kakuta Mitsuyo
'Mummy' by Yoshimoto Banana
'The Owl's Estate' by Horie Toshiyuki
'Dad, I Love You' by Yamazaki Nao-Cola
'Mambo' by Kanehara Hitomi
'The Hut on the Roof' by Kawakami Hiromi
'An Elevator on Sunday' by Yoshida Shūichi §

Men to Devils, Devils to Men: Japanese War Crimes and Chinese Justice

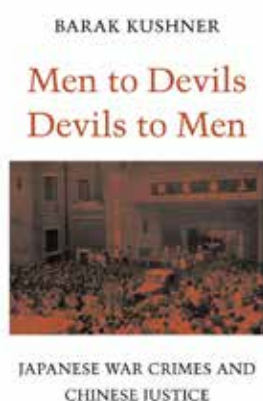
by Barak Kushner

Harvard University Press
(2015)

403 pages

ISBN978-0-674-742891-2

Review by Sir Hugh Cortazzi



'War crimes' judged at the international tribunal at Nuremberg were divided into three categories. Class A were 'crimes against peace,' Class B were 'conventional war crimes' (such as rape, murder, illegal incarceration, abusing POWs etc.) and Class C were 'crimes against humanity' such as genocide. Class A war criminals in East Asia were tried by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (IMTFE) in Tokyo. The trial lasted two and a half years. Although Barak Kushner deals in his book with aspects of the IMTFE his focus is on Class B and C war crimes and the way in which trials were held in China/Taiwan. He stresses that war responsibility and war crimes are 'two different species.' Kushner is senior lecturer in modern Japanese history at the University of Cambridge.

Barak Kushner's book ranges widely and deals with issues beyond the definition, nature and legal aspects of war crimes, covering aspects of Japan/China relationships, which are relevant to our understanding of the issues between the two countries today.

It is based on meticulous and detailed research in Chinese (and Taiwanese), Japanese and American records. He notes that the trial records (p.20) bequeathed a legacy of historical records about Japan's military action in China.' Kushner draws attention to

the relative absence of desire for revenge as shown by Chinese treatment of Japanese guilty of war crimes.

Kushner's first chapter, headed 'Defeat in Denial, The Regional Impact of Japan's Surrender', reminds readers that the Japanese military in China were reluctant to accept orders to surrender as they did not see themselves as defeated. Even though officially hostilities were over, Japanese forces remained in control of vast areas of China for some time after the surrender. If all Japanese forces had been immediately disarmed, there would have been chaos in parts of China. The same was true of parts of South East Asia. In the Netherlands East Indies (NEI) and in French Indo-China the allies were at first dependent on Japanese military guards.

The occupying forces in Japan were concerned that the large number of Japanese returning from China who did not feel that they had been defeated might pose a security threat to the relatively weak allied forces occupying Japan. Many Japanese who had lived in China and Manchuria had indeed hoped to be able to stay.

The Japanese authorities, aware at the end of the war that war crimes trials were inevitable, made some half-hearted efforts (p.51) to 'chase its own war criminals.' 'The pursuit of justice appeared secondary to the aim of mitigating any blemish on the imperial prestige of Japan – seemingly unsullied even with the unconditional surrender.' One argument made on behalf of those accused of war crimes was that the crimes were 'merely "over-exuberance" on the battlefield or, rather, the natural by-product of a fierce war.' Another Japanese report (p.54) argued that B & C class crimes trials were 'misguided revenge, publicly permitted under the guise of legality.'

The Japanese navy tried particularly hard to exonerate their personnel. A group led by a Captain Toyota (p.56) worked tirelessly to encourage former naval officers to lie under oath during Allied court proceedings.'

Accusations were made that allied war criminals e.g. aircrew who carried out indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets in Japan went unpunished. Some Japanese also argued that Japan was more a victim than a perpetrator.

Japan continues to suffer from amnesia about its imperial past (p.230). Up to the surrender, Japanese official propaganda maintained that its soldiers did not give up until death. As soon as the war ended, the Japanese were very intent on saving from execution those charged with war crimes. As Kushner points

out (p. 314) 'Japanese politicians continue to debate legal minutiae in a manner that indicates an inability to come to terms with the BC class war crimes trials.' Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in response to questions in the Diet demonstrated in this context that he is a master of obfuscation and avoiding responding to a direct question.

Kushner has no doubt (p.63) that while 'egregious legal errors in trials did occur and should not be ignored, imperial Japanese soldiers did commit grievous acts of random violence, especially in China.'

Chapter 2 'Devil in the Details' outlines Chinese policies on Japan's war crimes. The Chinese had much to learn about international law, but their responses were complicated not only by the extent of Chinese collaboration with the Japanese in China but also by the extent to which the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) government were dependent on Japanese help in pursuing their civil war with the communists. Kushner notes (p. 103) that 'some war criminals... were pawns in the realignment of power during the immediate aftermath of the war.'

The situation in Taiwan, which Kushner scrutinizes in his third chapter, headed 'Flexible Imperial Identity', was even more complicated than in mainland China, as the island had been under Japanese administration for over half a century when the war ended. Taiwanese had been recruited into the Japanese forces. Some of them had served as guards at POW camps and together with Koreans and Japanese were accused of maltreatment of POWs.

In Chapter 4 Kushner discusses KMT (*Kuomintang*/*Guomindang* = 国民党) trials of Japanese war criminals. He points out (p.153) in commenting on the notorious Nanjing massacre that 'there were actually many imperial Japanese military massacres on the way to the city. Nanjing was not an isolated incident.' As General Iwane Matsui, who was regarded as having the main responsibility for the massacre, was indicted before the IMTFE in Tokyo, the KMT concentrated on trying Hisao Tani, another Japanese general. One charge among many (p.160) was that he had commanded 'a platoon that murdered 122 souls, wounded 334, bayoneted 14, and assassinated and raped numerous others.' Tani who denied all the charges was found guilty and executed.

Another example of a senior Japanese officer indicted in 1948 was that of General Yasuji Okamura, commander of the China Expeditionary Army, which adopted a policy (p.70) termed by the Chinese the 'three alls' policy of 'kill all, burn all and loot all.' He

was tried by a Chinese Nationalist Military Tribunal, but on 26 January 1949 despite convincing evidence against him was found 'not guilty.' The court had been 'advised' to come to this conclusion because Okamura and his fellow conspirators in the 'White Group' were thought too valuable in helping the KMT in their struggle against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

In another trial of an ordinary soldier, Kiyoshi Sakakura (p.64) confessed that he had taken part in one operation in which women and children were rounded up with bayonets and killed.

A further case, which Kushner discusses in some detail, is that of 'The 100-man Killing Contest,' involving two junior officers Toshiaki Mukai and Tsuyoshi Noda. The Japan Advertiser on 7 December 1937 (p.167) reported this horrifying incident under the headline 'Sub-Lieutenants in Race to Fell 100 Chinese Running Close.' Whatever the truth about the details of this crime it is a gruesome story.

The KMT trials despite some flaws seem to have been reasonably well-conducted and Japanese war criminals were not made the objects of revenge.

Kushner deals in his chapter 7, 'Socialist Magnanimity', with the trials of Japanese war criminals by the CCP. Many of these came into their hands after internment in the Soviet Far East. The 'vast majority of Japanese prisoners (p.259) were released after extensive investigation of their crimes where the government chose not to indict, either on grounds of benevolence or because the prisoners had sufficiently recanted and "learned" from their time during incarceration.' In the CCP trials every single Japanese admitted their crimes. 'Unlike the KMT's goal of merely seeking justice, Communist China's aim for its Japanese prisoners... was to make war criminals reflect on their crimes, and to turn them from "devils back into men.'" The CCP were expert at brainwashing.

This book is an important contribution to the history of the years immediately following the end of the war in East Asia. It is full of interesting and valid comments and reminds readers of facts which tend to be overlooked not least by Chinese and Japanese historians. §

Japan and the Shackles of the Past

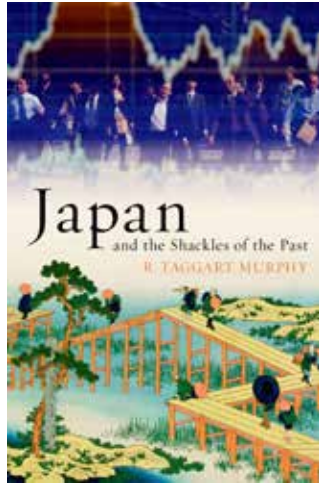
by R. Taggart Murphy

Oxford University Press,
New York (2014)

472 pages,

ISBN 978-0-19-984598-9

Review by Richard Coxford



In *Japan and the Shackles of the Past*, Tsukuba University

Professor for the MBA program Richard Taggart Murphy brings to bear a customarily wide-ranging and charismatic argument to the conundrum of modern Japanese History. Murphy's emotional investment in his subject is on par with any author on Japan, having first visited Japan around 1967-68, drawing on both his vast business (and more recently teaching) experience, alongside reflections from a father who served in the Pacific theatre and ultimately reconciled with Japan. Where he perhaps errs is in writing too explicitly for an American audience who he imagines will be mostly ignorant of Japan, and going beyond the scope of his strong economic back-catalogue to attempt catch-all History.

The chronology traverses from before the Heian era (794-1185) to the present day. Those cramped 'pre-Edo' and nineteenth century chapters are all over the place structurally, but gamely illustrate the author's views on Japanese national character by criss-crossing Buddhism, Christianity, Chinese cultural appropriation, early literature, the Emperor, Feudalism, the appearance of Europe, and *shunga* (erotic art). Also thrown in are some culinary, linguistic, and musical tidbits. Problems abound, but glaring ones include the exclusion of Westerners besides the VOC (Dutch East India Company) meaning total Japanese ignorance of the world, either eschewing or unaware of the annual questionnaires the VOC answered on the outside world. One which is equally entrenched in the American literature on which Murphy relies is the minimisation of Britain's impact. Crediting Perry with the 'scramble' for Japan, he cites the 1776 and 1789 revolutions, Russian incursions, the Opium Wars and internal unrest for the Bakufu's fall, but belittles Britain's significant contributions. In reality, Britain pushed back Russian entry to a number of outlying islands, British trading communities galvanised the push to negotiate with Japan, and the Royal Navy catalysed the Satsuma-Choshu rebellion and its ultimate success with the

1863 Anglo-Satsuma war, but in this narrative Britain is relegated to at best an incidental actor. Murphy concedes that this grew out of a 'quick and dirty general survey' and the lack of bibliography suggests it has not evolved much since. Further compromising its validity and displaying the lack of academic depth is the fact that even the 'recommended reading' is insanely brief for anyone trying to write a History of Japan that goes beyond tourist vacation fodder. Historical oversimplifications seem to be derived from synthesising just some of the prevailing American literature rather than delving further afield, so more pedantic readers might be pained by the brevity adopted. As a rejoinder to this book's overwhelming reliance on American debates, and for sustenance beyond the Index's cursory summaries of Meiji era (1868-1912) figures in particular, I recommend Ian Nish, Par Kristoffer Cassel, Peter Lowe and Ishii Takashi.

Tracts of Murphy's economic and gender history however could be repackaged into excellent articles. Instead they are held captive within the shaky generalisation of a Japanese national narrative, but Murphy ranges with ease over the economic 'miracle', employment practices, the growing tax intake problem in restructuring Japan, and most interestingly gender economy. An explicit discussion of career routes historically available to Japanese women conforms to the book's sensationalism by overemphasizing a paucity of options outside the hostess or sex trade; but he takes a good stab at analysing gender affairs. Murphy is very subtle in describing present circumstances not as 'Japanese feminism' but a broadening of possibilities where much remains to be done; namely, backing up buzzwords like 'Womonomics' with mechanisms for (for one) women to get fair treatment after marriage and childbirth. Murphy delights in reeling off economic-political scandals, sustaining that Japanese businesses' opacity undermines their being a 'proper' capitalist economy, and questioning Abenomics as a poor stopgap solution to the growing clarion call for a 'revolution in Japanese internal business practices'. Clearly a sublime business analyst, his diatribe on current Japanese politics misses the mark by unfortunately pandering to the lowest common denominator of contradictory Japanese pacifism, condemning collective self-defence as unconstitutional backwards steps to pre-war Japan, while simultaneously awaiting the removal of US bases and the demise of the present American alliance.

The key to his overarching argument is the leitmotif of Japan as a well-worn tragic tale, that since the Bakumatsu period (1854-68) Japan is an exploited, culturally usurped nation and not much has changed because the tribal system of patronage is called 'feudal'.

On which note, if repetition easily sways you, then you will also acquire some slang. One phrase in particular, used unashamedly often, undercuts the significance of even his finer political points, as he describes PM Abe as 'KY' (*kuki ga yomenai*, or 'can't read the mood'). Peculiarly, pop culture analogies run the gamut from *Lord of the Rings* to Islamic extremism. Murphy's argument can be enthralling, but he has an alarmist, even conspiracy theorist, tendency to adopt overly succinct teleological interpretations and to exaggerate his case. One sentence certainties proclaim that Toyotomi Hideyoshi's Korea campaign caused the overextension and collapse of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), that Japanese short-sightedness is to blame for Mao winning the Chinese Civil War, and that all Japanese foreign policy since the occupation has been trying to keep up with and desperately understand the wishes of the USA. This latter point is quite pernicious, because it overplays Japan's understandably important American alliance into a character assassination of post-war Japan. Murphy unknowingly reinstates what Michael Auslin dispelled about 19th Century Japanese diplomacy, that Japan is essentially a weaker power doing whatever it can to appease and survive its superiors. There is no small irony in the way Murphy says Westerners still invent Japans to suit their own purposes when he himself invents this feudalistic vassal of America.

It is actually surprising that Murphy does not cite the unannounced movements of American nuclear material into Japanese territory that occurred sporadically in the Cold War, given it fits his style and method of denigrating both America and Japan. US basing is an appropriate source of ire, as the average servicemen of any nation find it hard living up to the diplomatic billing of the country they represent, but to an extent he lets his scorn for the treatment of Okinawa (a 'sacrificial offering' from Tokyo) poison his whole argument. The American-Japanese relationship is far from perfect, but even the fact that Japan gets the entire umbrella of American support without any reciprocal obligations to defend America is somehow portrayed as servitude. In light of errors, such as describing Japanese schoolchildren cleaning their own school in the past tense and as evidence of 'Spartan schools' created by GHQ/SCAP, and cites as

historical evidence works by the great writer Mishima Yukio without acknowledging that brilliant writer's political extremity and self-wrought demise, it can be hard to trust his judgement.

The more current affairs in his polemic cover the modern Japanese diaspora, Japan's self-defence forces, the American security relationship, and a four page mini-essay on how Japanese baseball defines the mental world of the salaryman. From World War Two onwards his book is all about America, with no time for EEC/EU or British relations. Murphy juxtaposes the good nature and ethics of the Japanese people, and the Japanese political leaderships that manifest, while arguing that those leaders have gradually declined in intelligence and competence reaching a nadir with PM Abe. He produces a very spirited and thought-provoking defence of the DPJ's 2009-12 time in office, cursing the treatment of Hatoyama Yukio by American civil servants with institutional linkages to the LDP, and puffs up former leader Ozawa Ichiro into the political maneuverer who could have saved Japan. America allegedly 'destroyed' the best Japanese government that wasn't, by pushing the DPJ out of power, as PM Abe drags Japan backwards to the '*kokuta*' (national body politics, even Imperial devotion).

Murphy's argument comes down in favour of a rigid interpretation of Article 9, claiming that the military is unconstitutional, yet he mocks the passive and indeed compromising position of Japanese peacekeepers, where in Iraq they were only allowed to defend themselves and only if fired on. Murphy sees no problem in simultaneously querying the existence, and the efficacy of Japan's strained self-defence forces. Plus, he seems unaware of lesser-announced non-combat operations successfully executed by Japan to support her international allies, from the minesweeping of Japan before the peace treaty aboard USS Missouri and Korea 1950-3, to efforts assisting counter-piracy. Overall Murphy might wish to expand his reading material before pontificating on security. Although he perennially overplays the idea that Japan is a mere extension of America operating under some illusion of independence, one good analytical point is that unlike other close US allies there is no Japanese-American pressure group motivating caution in American treatment of Japan.

This is the wrong book for anyone wanting to nourish their love of Japanese history, just as readers of the *Japan Society Review* are the wrong audience. *Shackles of the Past* is decidedly aimed at Americans with little knowledge of Japan. In spite of this, readers

could sift out the economic chapters covering the miracle, the high-speed growth, employment practices, working hours and so forth, and gain some standout economic history. Reading cover to cover will

just serve to show how an argument's strength can be buried underneath the weight of history, if history is not managed diligently. §

Death by Water

By Ōe Kenzaburō

Atlantic Books (2015)

ISBN-10: 0857895451

Review by Charlotte Goff

In a small, forest-shrouded settlement in rural Shikoku, it is conventional wisdom that as a person dies, he or she goes 'up into the forest.' Returning to this, his childhood home, is Ōe Kenzaburō's protagonist and recurring literary alter-ego, celebrated author Choko Kogito. In *Death by Water*, translated into English by Deborah Boliver Boehm, Choko both revisits his past and contemplates his own approaching path into the forest.

For the past six decades Choko has been haunted by memories of the untimely death of his father and the uncomfortable question: could his childhood-self have done something to prevent it? Choko plans to fictionalise the episode, which saw his father set off in a small boat during a torrential storm, to produce a masterpiece: a 'drowning novel' that will redefine his canon and bring closure to the doubts which have chased him across the years.

Unable to reconcile memories of his adored late father with hazy half-recollections of things overheard but not understood – his father's meetings with local soldiers and alcohol-infused schemes against the Emperor – Choko is convinced that the key to his father's doomed voyage lies in the red, leather trunk that his mother has until now refused to surrender. Rather than providing illumination, however, the trunk's contents render the surface still more opaque. Choko becomes an author who cannot write and so he lends his creative power to the *avant-garde* theatre troupe that take residence at his 'Forest House'.

Choko is not the only one facing up to past experiences; Unaiko, a dynamic young member of the troupe, uses theatre to confront her own traumas. Her unique brand of performance art incorporates audience participation, debate and 'dog-tossing'. The pelting of stuffed-toy dogs as a new and subversive theatre form, along with its nomenclature, loses none of its surrealism as the book progresses.



Ōe received the 1994 Nobel Prize in Literature for creating 'with poetic force... an imagined world, where life and myth condense to form a disconcerting picture of the human predicament today'. In *Death by Water*, what begins as the struggle of one author slowly unfurls into a drama concerning his family, the troupe of young actors, a small settlement in Shikoku and eventually Japanese society as a whole. It is the human predicament, again, that proves to be at the heart of this novel.

How do we define the spirit of an age and do we, simply by virtue of living in that age, belong to it? How do we come to understand and process traumas in our past? These questions resonate in the latter half of the book, and the answer to the second is a resounding 'through art.' Ōe reminds us that beliefs, relationships and memories built over decades can be fractured through the utterance of a single word, as we see firsthand in the disintegration of the relationship between Choko and – in another self-referential nod – his disabled son, Akari. Reading this, one is reminded that it is our perception of events that shapes our reactions and future courses while what 'actually happened' rarely comes into it; much of what Choko learns about his father comes not from red leather trunks but memories revisited and reassessed.

Through Choko Kogito we see, or think we see, something of Ōe. Strip away the surrounding characters and you are left with the story of an acclaimed author whom the younger generation increasingly find irrelevant and who, looking back on a literary career now in its late stages, wonders whether he could have done differently, or better?

In one scene, a dog-tossing dramatic performance of Soseki Natsume's *Kokoro*, an audience member stands up and references Choko's recent bouts of vertigo. These are, he says, 'completely understandable, since whenever we try to read his [Choko's] convoluted sentences I think we all start to feel a bit dizzy, too'. Reading this, I nod. There is a limit to my patience, which comes close to being reached during pages of confused memories, stilted correspondence and swathes of reported speech. In this beautifully reflective and thought-provoking tale, which progresses for the most part at an almost imperceptible, meandering pace, I found that I wished for a stronger narrative current. §