



The June issue of *The Japan Society Review* offers a rich selection of reviews spanning art, literature, film, and music. From the refined aesthetics of ukiyo-e to contemporary fiction and jazz, this issue highlights the diversity and depth of Japanese cultural expression.

We begin with *Hiroshige: Artist of the Open Road*, an exhibition that celebrates the iconic landscapes and masterful compositions of Utagawa Hiroshige, inviting viewers to experience the poetic sensibility of travel and nature in Edo-period Japan. A complementary review of *Fashion and the Floating World: Japanese Ukiyo-e Prints* by Anna Jackson and Yamada Masami delves into the representation of style and fashion in woodblock prints, shedding light on the cultural significance of appearance and identity in the pleasure quarters.

Contemporary fiction is featured through *A Hundred Years and a Day*, a collection of 34 short stories by Shibasaki Tomoka, which offers a multifaceted portrait of everyday life in modern Japan—quietly surreal, emotionally resonant, and psychologically acute. *The Night of Baba Yaga* by Otani Akira,

meanwhile, draws readers into a darker, genre-defying narrative that blends elements of mystery and myth in an unsettling and compelling read.

In cinema, *Kubi*, directed by Kitano Takeshi, marks a return the historical epic genre with his signature stylisation and thematic boldness, presenting a violent and visually striking reinterpretation of the events surrounding the Honnō-ji Incident.

We conclude with *A Guide to Jazz in Japan* by Michael Pronko, a lively and insightful introduction to Japan's jazz scene. With a blend of personal experience, cultural commentary, and musical analysis, Pronko captures the enduring and evolving relationship between Japanese audiences, musicians, and the global jazz tradition.

We are grateful to our volunteer reviewers for their thoughtful contributions and continued support of this publication.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

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Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

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Image: *Evening View of the Eight Scenic Spots of Kanazawa in Musashi Province, 1857*, by Utagawa Hiroshige. Collection of Alan Medaugh © Alan Medaugh.



## Exhibition - Hiroshige: Artist of the Open Road

at British Museum  
(1 May – 7 September 2025)

Review by Sanae Inagaki

Today, the name of Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858) is so widely known that some might expect few surprises from his work. Yet the British Museum's *Hiroshige: Artist of the Open Road* — the institution's first-ever solo exhibition dedicated to Hiroshige and the first in London in over 25 years — offers far more than a straightforward retrospective.

Rather, it invites us to reconsider Hiroshige not just as a celebrated printmaker, but as an artist who visually constructed ideas of travel, nature, and place — shaping perceptions within Japan and, eventually, abroad.

Before Hiroshige rose to fame for his landscapes, he explored an impressively diverse range of subjects. Early prints of kabuki actors, included in this exhibition, offer a glimpse into his engagement with the world of popular culture during his formative years.

Naturally, visitors will not be disappointed when encountering the famous *53 Stations of the Tokaido*. The technical precision and compositional ingenuity of these works still leave a powerful impression. Hiroshige's ability to distil scenes from a journey into striking visual moments remains as vivid today as it must have been in his own time.

Yet the true strength of the exhibition lies in its exploration of Hiroshige's broader artistic range — how he responded to the world around him through a variety of themes and formats.

Particularly compelling is the section devoted to the traditional Japanese aesthetic appreciation of nature and the seasons. Set against the backdrop of a feudal society dominated by the samurai class, and influenced by court and shogunate painting traditions, Hiroshige's vivid depictions of pheasants, sparrows, and other creatures on tanzaku — tall, narrow sheets traditionally used for recording tanka poetry — reveal his ability to transform poetic sensitivity into the popular medium of woodblock printing. They exemplify the delicate balance he achieved between refinement and accessibility.

Another highlight is the display of *uchiwa-e*, prints made for hand-held summer fans.

Sold during the summer season, these prints illustrate Hiroshige's remarkable adaptability. Without sacrificing the sophistication of his large-scale landscapes, he tailored his designs to ephemeral, seasonal products, covering a wide range of subjects from landscapes to still lifes.

Through these works, we glimpse both the commercial pragmatism and artistic innovation that



*The Plum Garden at Kameido from 100 Famous Views of Edo*, 1857 By Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858)  
Colour-woodblock print. Collection of Alan Medaugh  
© Alan Medaugh. Photography by Matsuba Ryōko

characterised his career. The exhibition also features a well-curated selection from *100 Famous Views of Edo*. For visitors familiar with contemporary Tokyo, encountering Hiroshige's interpretations of places like Asakusa, Fukagawa, Asuka Hill, and Oji provides a fascinating experience of tracing lingering echoes of the past within today's urban landscape.

The curators have wisely avoided overwhelming the exhibition with Hiroshige's most iconic images alone. Instead, they balance audience expectations with fresh perspectives, expanding the viewer's understanding of Hiroshige's artistic world in a dynamic way.

The exhibition is further enriched by works from the collection of American Hiroshige collector Alan Medaugh, offering a deeper exploration of the artist's legacy beyond mere fame.

In its final section, the exhibition introduces Hiroshige's influence on artists in Japan and the West. Van Gogh and Toulouse-Lautrec are, of course, featured, but so too are works by Kawase Hasui and contemporary figures such as Julian Opie, demonstrating how Hiroshige's visual language

has been continually reinterpreted across different periods and cultural contexts.

That said, this part remains relatively succinct; the complexities of how Hiroshige's works were received and adapted across national and temporal boundaries are only lightly touched upon. Still, the exhibition's primary focus lies in the visual construction of "journey" and "place" in

Edo-period Japan. In that respect, the curators' decision to maintain a tight thematic focus has resulted in a coherent and immersive experience.

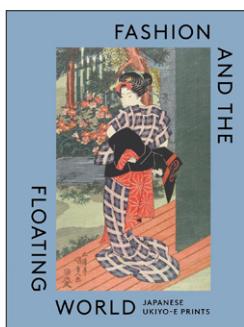
*Hiroshige: Artist of the Open Road* offers visitors — even those already familiar with the artist's renown — a rich and rewarding encounter. §

## Fashion and the Floating World: Japanese Ukiyo-e Prints

by Anna Jackson and Yamada Masami

V & A Publishing (2024)  
ISBN-13: 978-1838510503

Review by Carolin Becke



In *Fashion and the Floating World*, Victoria and Albert Museum's curators Anna Jackson and Yamada Masami present an exploration of Japan's vibrant fashion culture in the Edo-period (1603-1868) through the lens of meticulously curated ukiyo-e woodblock prints. Drawing from the extensive collection of the V&A Museum, the authors delve into how these prints not only mirrored contemporary styles but also influenced and disseminated fashion trends among the urban populace.

From the very first page, ukiyo-e prints are foregrounded, immediately setting the tone for the entire publication. This editorial decision not only leaves no doubt in the reader's mind that the book focuses on visual material, but also subtly trains the viewer to engage with the artworks. As the authors note, 'Prints [...] often carried complex and playful layers of meaning that are not instantly recognizable to modern viewers' (p. 19). In this way, the book helps us "see", to develop a sensitivity to symbolism, stylistic nuances, and cultural references embedded in the artwork.

The visual presentation of the book is exceptional, featuring high-quality reproductions of 170 ukiyo-e prints. Each image is accompanied by insightful commentary that contextualises the artwork within its historical and cultural framework. The authors' expertise ensures that readers not only appreciate the aesthetic qualities of the prints but also understand their broader cultural significance, particularly in relation to fashion, identity, and everyday life in the Edo period.

The introductory essay is especially effective in this regard, offering an accessible overview of Japanese history, society, and the role played by ukiyo-e prints and fashionable dress within Edo-period life. It naturally places

emphasis on Edo culture and society, grounding the reader in the political and economic conditions that shaped the floating world and its aesthetics.

The book is organised into six thematic sections: "Creation and Commerce," "Looking Good," "Style and Seduction," "Patterns of Performance," "Male Flamboyance," and "Fashioning Life". Each of these sections sheds light on different facets of fashion and its societal implications during the Edo period.

"Creation and Commerce" explores the full life cycle of garments for instance, from the production of fabrics through weaving and dyeing, to the display and sale of finished products in bustling Edo shopping streets. It offers a particularly insightful look into the commercial mechanisms of the fashion world, including the development of sales techniques and the emergence of kimono retailers as powerful trendsetters.

"Looking Good" shifts focus to the more intimate, often-overlooked rituals of self-presentation: hair styling, make-up application, dressing, and even laundering and ironing. Particularly valuable is the attention paid to everyday domestic activities, which are rarely foregrounded in academic literature. These images offer a rare glimpse into the labour and routines that underpinned the polished appearances celebrated elsewhere in the prints.

"Patterns of Performance" and "Male Flamboyance" continue the exploration of visual spectacle by focusing on courtesans and kabuki actors, two of the most influential trendsetters in Edo-period culture. These figures often dressed in elaborate ensembles that were both highly theatrical and deeply symbolic. The prints illustrate how their fashion choices filtered down into popular style, with fans and followers emulating their look.

"Fashioning Life," the final section, ties fashion to seasonal customs, rituals, and everyday practices. It includes depictions of culturally specific moments such as the first bath of the New Year or the practice of ferry boat crossings between Edo and Kawasaki, both serving as backdrops to display seasonal garments and social codes. In these scenes, fashion is not only shown as self-expression or status marker, but also as part of a lived, shared experience in the urban environment.

A significant strength of the book lies in its examination of the symbiotic relationship between art and commerce. Ukiyo-e prints often served as advertisements for kimono retailers, textile workshops, and cosmetic brands. For instance, one print features women outside the Daimaruya store, highlighting the commercial aspect of fashion dissemination (pp. 34-5). Others depict the distinctive packaging of Bien Senjoko face whitening powder, illustrating how products were marketed through art (pp. 54-5, 58, 60, 67). These examples underscore the role of ukiyo-e in promoting consumer culture and the commodification of beauty.

Jackson and Yamada also draw parallels to contemporary branding, arguing that kabuki actors and popular courtesans were carefully constructed public figures whose personal style helped sell everything from textiles to toiletries. This adds a modern relevance to the book's historical material, encouraging readers to draw connections between Edo-period celebrity culture and today's influencer economy.

*Fashion and the Floating World* is a compelling fusion of art history and cultural analysis, offering readers an immersive journey into the fashion sensibilities of Edo-

period Japan. Jackson and Yamada's scholarly yet accessible narrative, combined with the book's visual richness, makes it an invaluable resource for those interested in Japanese art, fashion history, and cultural studies. By illuminating the intricate connections between fashion, identity, and society, the book not only enhances our appreciation of ukiyo-e prints but also provides a deeper understanding of the cultural fabric of the time.

Compared with other books on the subject, such as those focusing solely on the art historical aspects of ukiyo-e or on broader fashion histories, *Fashion and the Floating World* strikes a rare balance. It speaks to art historians, dress scholars, and general readers alike. As such, it functions equally well as a stylish coffee table book and as a valuable academic resource. It's quite fun to randomly flip through the pages and focus on a single print, examining its visual details and historical context. Meanwhile, the extensive index and glossary make it a perfect companion for research on Japanese visual and dress culture, assisting both beginners and experts alike. Its interdisciplinary approach, combined with thoughtful design, ensures it will remain relevant and frequently consulted for years to come. [S](#)

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## A Hundred Years and a Day: 34 Stories

by Shibasaki Tomoka  
translated by Polly Barton

MONKEY by Stone Bridge Press (2025)  
ISBN: 979-8988688730

Review by Renae Lucas-Hall



Shibasaki Tomoka's latest collection is a masterful exploration of life's quiet moments, rich with vivid imagery, deep emotional insight, and cultural nuance. As an acclaimed novelist and winner of the Akutagawa Prize for *Spring Garden*, Shibasaki's skilful storytelling shines through every story, beautifully rendered in Polly Barton's precise and evocative translation.

The collection's core themes revolve around family, friends, fleeting encounters, and the ebb and flow of everyday life. Each story, whether brief or layered, captures moments of connection, change, and memory; offering a nuanced portrait of universal human experiences.

From the outset, the writing invites readers into a world of delicate, often understated beauty. In one early story, the image of a bare wisteria branch conjures both fragility and latent splendour: 'It was a wisteria, he said, but it being winter, the plant had neither flowers nor leaves, just a splay of frail-looking branches. It was hard to imagine a plant like

this ever bearing ornate purple clusters of flowers like those that dangled from traditional hairpins.' (p. 22). This elegant imagery resonates beyond the physical, evoking cultural associations with the ephemeral grace of a maiko's blossoms.

In the third story, Shibasaki's affinity with nature is clear, as a summer scene describes trees and vines shielding a hidden cave, framing a quiet meditation on survival and human kindness.

Family and workplace dynamics weave throughout the stories with warmth and insight. One tale humorously sketches a daughter's reflections on a quirky colleague and office life, capturing the subtle absurdities and camaraderie familiar to anyone who has spent time in a modern workplace. Another follows Hoody, a homeless man with quiet determination to save enough money to leave Tokyo and start anew. Through his eyes, the bustling cityscape morphs into a sea of faceless spirits, revealing how isolation and hope coexist amid urban crowds.

Food plays a comforting role, too, grounding memories and cultural identity. The narrator's nostalgic love for daikon, a staple winter vegetable, evokes sensory details of taste and texture, from simmered roots to crunchy *takuan* pickles. These culinary moments enrich the stories with warmth and tangible connection to heritage.

Several stories dwell on places and their passing, blending nostalgia with social change. A ramen shop called



*House of the Future* endures amidst a shifting landscape, a symbol of resilience amid modernization. The patrons' youthful dreams and small triumphs echo the city's vibrant energy, while the shop's steady presence offers a touchstone of continuity.

War and its aftermath are addressed with profound sincerity. One story chronicles the escalating hardships during wartime: the rising prices, scarcity of goods, and quiet anxiety of a family sheltering through it all. The narrative crescendos in vivid, harrowing descriptions of bombings and destruction, culminating in the emotional toll visible on a returning husband's aged face. These scenes are a sobering reminder of conflict's human cost, conveyed with compassion and stark realism.

Japan's unique cultural elements also enrich the collection. The twelfth story anchors itself firmly in place through details like udon noodles on a ferry and the Obon festival, while another traces the fading tradition of naming male children with a shared kanji, reflecting shifting values and the slow disappearance of family-run bathhouses. These glimpses into customs and changing social landscapes deepen the collection's texture.

A charming ghost story stands out, rooted in Japan's rich folklore. A spirit in the form of a long-haired woman appears by a fountain to those who linger too long, weaving an eerie yet touching narrative that circles back to earlier themes of presence and absence. Alongside this, a tale of a young girl evacuated during a typhoon concludes with a mysterious encounter with a kappa, a mythical river creature, blending everyday life with quiet magic.

The author's light touch is evident in stories centred around cats, which will resonate with many readers who appreciate these gentle companions. One such vignette captures the feline's subtle grace with a simple yet vivid image: 'Feeling bad for staring so intently, the tenant looked away and the cat continued walking, as if it had just been on pause and now someone had hit the play button.' (p. 111).

The author's writing at the end of Chapter 19 reads like a haiku as it is simple, vivid, and deeply atmospheric, though free of formal syllable constraints. On page 124, this poetic moment unfolds: 'As the last child was still staring down the passage, a cat ran across the end of the alleyway where the stone steps were. The last child gasped in surprise, and stood up. A cicada flew in through the window, attached itself to the wall, and began to screech.' The scene is quiet yet charged with life, capturing a fleeting moment with lyrical precision.

Shibasaki also revisits the theme of names, their significance, and cultural weight in a story reflecting on the importance of auspicious kanji stroke counts in naming ancestors. This is a quiet meditation on identity and tradition.

The collection does not shy away from the imperfections of everyday life. One story gently challenges the notion of Japan as an immaculate society by portraying a weathered café. 'The building itself was pretty ramshackle... the plastic models of cream soda, pancakes, sandwiches, and so on had faded and acquired a layer of dust... Coffee in a plain cup and saucer, curry and rice with *fukujinzuke* pickles, shaved ice in summer, azuki bean porridge in winter.' (p. 135) This story captures the quiet life cycle of cafés; how they open, evolve, and eventually disappear.

There is a lot in this book about people and their connections as well. Three chapters focus on family trees and three on daughters' tales, exploring belonging, alienation, and the choices families make. These narratives foster a sense of identification, reminding readers of the complex ties that bind siblings, friends, and generations, along with the inevitable arrivals and departures of people and places in our lives.

One unexpected tale features Mako, who becomes the first female astronaut to walk on the moon, an inspiring tale that demonstrates Shibasaki's range and ability to captivate to the very last page. Another tender narrative looks back in time to a great-great-grandfather who, after many years of marriage, discovers the true depth and charm of his wife and begins to finally speak to her with respect and genuine interest, offering a poignant meditation on love and understanding.

The collection also includes stories grounded firmly in place and dialect. A café serving only coffee and buttered toast, visited by a customer with a Kansai accent, gradually expands its offerings to tropical juice and cheesecake. The reader becomes engrossed in small details that evoke regional character and evolving tastes.

The range of stories, from the traditional to the modern, from urban to rural, from the mundane to the mystical, ensures the reader remains engaged throughout. Each chapter offers something fresh and unexpected, making this collection ideal for all readers, especially travellers and nomads who enjoy dipping in and out of a book during travel or quiet moments. Overall, Shibasaki Tomoka's collection is a finely wrought tapestry of life in Japan and abroad, imbued with universal themes of family, memory, resilience, and change. The stories capture moments both fleeting and profound, rendered with precision, warmth, and a gentle but unflinching eye. Polly Barton's translation faithfully preserves the beauty and subtlety of Shibasaki's prose, making this book a rewarding read for anyone interested in nuanced literary fiction, Japanese culture, or simply stories that linger long after the final page. §

## The Night of Baba Yaga

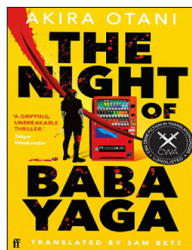
by Otani Akira

translated by Sam Bett

Faber & Faber (2024)

ISBN-13: 978-0571391073

Review by Alex Russell



Otani Akira's explosive *The Night of Baba Yaga*, released in translation in 2024, reflects the author's atypical route into the literary world. Her first published work was in the video game industry, a tie-in novel with the 2010 PlayStation 2 game *The Beastmaster and the Princess*, a far cry from the usual rigidity of the Japanese literary establishment and its accolades, and possibly a reflection of its diminishing influence. Otani herself is very open about her queerness, writing articles about her experience as a lesbian in Japan. In a 2018 article for i-D Japan, she highlighted how attitudes had shifted towards the LGBTQ+ community in Japan in the acceptance she faced from her friends and family, whilst also demonstrating that there remained discrimination, exemplified by LDP MP Sugita Mio's comments labelling gay people as "unproductive". Just as its author defies the norm, *The Night of Baba Yaga* proves to be an undeniably original work that still provides the action and intensity one would expect from a yakuza thriller.

*The Night of Baba Yaga* switches between the perspectives of Shindo and Yoshiko. Shindo, the primary narrator, is a young woman who has been captured by the yakuza, following an escalating brawl with several low-ranking members. She is given the choice between being killed and working for them. She is ultimately set to work as a chauffeur and bodyguard for Shoko, the daughter of ruthless boss Naiki, who employs legions of private detectives to hunt for Shoko's mother, who fled years previously with his right-hand man. Shindo is blunt, confrontational, and used to being shunned by others, on account of her mixed ethnicity, which remains a rarity in Japanese fiction. Yoshiko by contrast is an older woman, living frugally with her partner Masaoka, on the run from some unknown pursuer. They do their best to avoid attracting attention to themselves, moving to a new town every few years. Their anonymous existence is thrown into jeopardy however when they selflessly rush to save the lives of the victims of a car crash, causing their faces to become plastered on local and national news.

Inevitably, these narratives intertwine over the course of the book, though Otani does well to keep the reader guessing how they will do so until the very last moment. It is an undeniably clever conclusion, though it felt a little contrived and underdeveloped, as though Otani decided on the initial predicaments of both Shindo and Yoshiko and the conclusion, and worked out how to connect the two, rather than it developing sequentially.

Even amongst works focusing on the violent world of the yakuza, *The Night of Baba Yaga* is not a work for the faint hearted, with Otani providing viscerally unpleasant descriptions of blood-soaked bone-crunching fights, sadistically cruel yakuza punishments, and sexual assault. While this works to raise the stakes and emphasise the ever-present threat posed by the world Shindo now finds herself thrust into, at times it veers into the excessive and can become quite sickly.

Otani's narrative feels more cinematic than literary, reminiscent of films such as the *John Wick* series or *The Man from Nowhere* and one can easily imagine how this could be turned into an action film. The action sequences are swift and precise, as if choreographing them on screen, while the narrative and exposition is predominantly driven by succinct conversations Shindo has with Shoko and other members of the yakuza. Shindo's reflections on her harsh upbringing by her grandparents and how it shaped her into the solitary fighter she is are the brief flashbacks we see to understand the motivations of our hero, and we are shown a few key incidents to further this understanding, as opposed to building it up through the reader's persistent view into her thoughts. Characters feel fairly one dimensional and flat, and one is never in any doubt over who is good and who is evil. In this respect, *The Night of Baba Yaga* does not tread new ground in the genre, instead sticking to a consistent intensity and uncomplicatedly formulaic structure.

Where *The Night of Baba Yaga* does innovate is in its representation of minority characters. Japan's literature, much like its society more broadly, has consistently been dominated by homogenous characters, with important but limited pockets of representation for queer literature and Zainichi Korean authors and stories. Otani's work, with its ethnically ambiguous protagonist who defies the expectations of women's appearances in Japan, is an important contribution to the increasing diversification of what is published and celebrated in Japan. Shindo's imposed isolation due to her differences from those around her provides a clever foil for Shoko, whose isolation is impressed upon her by her father, despite appearing to be a perfect Showa era (1926-1989) woman. The relationship between the two characters only develops once they dispose of their presuppositions about each other and understand their similarities. In a hypermasculine genre in which women are frequently sidelined or defined in relation to men, it is refreshing to have the relationship between Shindo and Shoko take a central role in the narrative.

*The Night of Baba Yaga* is a compelling and entertaining work that any reader will race through, its easy reading and uncomplicated style coupled with its short length making it a book that will likely be finished in a day or two. The innovation

in the characters and conclusion will ensure it lives longer in memory than the simplistic and formulaic structure would otherwise suggest, and demonstrate the opportunities to bring

new perspectives to the homogenous genre of the yakuza thriller and the expectations we have of it, for better or worse. [S](#)

## Kubi

Directed and written by Kitano Takeshi

Screened at Queer East Film Festival 2025

Review by Mayumi Donovan

I don't think you truly know what *Kubi* means unless you are a Japanese speaker. However, you will likely get the idea as soon as the opening credits roll. *Kubi* literally means "neck," but in the context of the Sengoku period (roughly 1467-1600), it implied the head - specifically, the severed head of an enemy, which served as proof of victory in battle.

*Kubi* is a film by internationally recognised actor and director Kitano Takeshi, who also plays a key role as Hashiba Hideyoshi. It's been six years since his last film, *Outrage Coda* (2017), and *Kubi*, produced in 2023, arrives as a large-scale production featuring major names - including Kitano regulars like Kase Ryo and Asano Tadanobu.

The story is set during the Sengoku period, when Oda Nobunaga (played by Kase Ryo) is the most powerful warlord in Japan. His vassal, Araki Murashige (played by Endo Kenichi), rebels in a failed coup and disappears. Nobunaga's search for Murashige ultimately leads to the infamous *Honno-ji* Incident (1582), a pivotal event in Japanese history where Nobunaga is betrayed by Akechi Mitsuhide (played by Nishijima Hidetoshi). Many theories surround Mitsuhide's motives, and here Kitano offers his own interpretation of the event. Once again, Kitano rewrites the rules of the samurai film with his unique and unconventional style.

From the very beginning, you're warned: this is a film filled with brutal violence and bloodshed - no surprise for those familiar with Kitano's work. His trademarks are all here: male-dominated storytelling, unflinching action, explicit imagery and moments of dark comedy.

The samurai world in *Kubi* can be compared to the yakuza world Kitano has explored in films like *Outrage* (2010), where the relentless pursuit of power leads to violent and tragic consequences - taking over *shima* (territories) from rival families. In *Kubi*, the same struggle plays out over control of *ryodo* (domains).

What sets *Kubi* apart is its ruthlessness. There is no *giri* or *jingi* - no sense of duty or moral integrity. In many samurai films, bushido (the code of honour and loyalty) is central. But in *Kubi*, it's a pure power game, full of betrayal and blood. Even farmers, like Mosuke (played by Nakamura Shido), are driven to betray their friends in hopes of becoming a samurai.



There are no heroes in *Kubi* - only ruthless ambition and betrayal at every level.

What makes *Kubi* unique is its clear portrayal of relationships between men. The film opened this year's Queer East Festival at BFI Southbank - an ideal venue for its premiere. While Kitano has hinted at male-male dynamics in past films, *Kubi* brings this to the forefront. Though same-sex relationships were not uncommon in the Sengoku period, they have rarely been portrayed so explicitly in samurai cinema. One obvious exception is Oshima Nagisa's *Taboo* (1999), where Matsuda Ryuhei plays the dangerously alluring Kano Sozaburo, whose presence destabilises the hyper-masculine Shinsengumi militia. Yet while both films touch on similar themes, their tones couldn't be more different. - *Taboo* is subtle and serious, whereas *Kubi* is direct, provocative, and laced with Kitano's characteristic absurd humour.

Kitano also continues to demonstrate his unique gift for casting. Some choices are surprising - Nishijima Hidetoshi as Akechi Mitsuhide, for instance, delivers a restrained yet impactful performance. He is the most samurai-like character in the film. I especially liked Endo Kenichi as Araki Murashige; he brings humanity, humour, and vulnerability. Kitano regulars also return: Kase Ryo is crazy, violent and unpredictable as Oda Nobunaga, while Asano Tadanobu plays a loyal Kuroda Kanbei, serving Kitano's Hashiba Hideyoshi. It's also surprising to see Kobayashi Kaoru in a very low-key portrayal of Tokugawa Iyasu, who will later become shogun.

*Kubi* is a large-scale, star-studded, and thoroughly entertaining film. Although the script is written in modern language, the costumes and production design fully evoke the Sengoku period. A dynamic soundtrack and striking cinematography further enhance the film's epic atmosphere.

As a lifelong fan of Kitano's work, however, I felt it lacked some of his distinctive edgy sharpness. The typical dark humour, while present, doesn't always land as seamlessly as

in earlier films like *Sonatine* (1993). Still, *Kubi* carries Kitano's unmistakable signature - shocking moments, thrilling

storytelling, and, above all, a final scene in classic Kitano style, so striking it makes you want to watch the film all over again. [S](#)

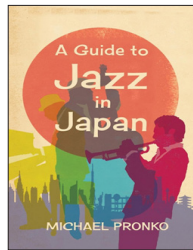
## A Guide to Jazz in Japan

by Michael Pronko

Raked Gravel Press

ISBN-13: 9781942410379

Review by Laurence Green



Japan's jazz journey is a thrilling tale of cultural fusion and reinvention. It kicked off in the 1920s when American jazz first hit Japanese shores via records, dance halls, and visiting bands. Despite censorship during WWII, jazz survived underground, then exploded post-war with U.S. soldiers stationed in Japan fuelling a vibrant scene. By the 1960s, Japanese musicians weren't just copying; they were innovating. Legends like Watanabe Sadao and Akiyoshi Toshiko helped shape a distinct Japanese jazz identity. Today, Japan boasts world-class festivals, smoky Shinjuku clubs, and cutting-edge experimental sounds, making it one of the planet's most passionate and unique jazz hotspots.

Michael Pronko's *A Guide to Jazz in Japan* offers an immersive journey through all this. Blending rich history, cultural depth, and insider travel tips, it's a heartfelt tribute to Japanese jazz, all told with the convivial style of someone who knows the scene like the back of his hand. Having lived in Japan for some twenty years, working as writer for the likes of *The Japan Times* and *Newsweek Japan*, as well as teaching American Literature at Meiji Gakuin University, Pronko blends an accessible, easy-reading journalistic style with the research chops and intellectual depth of academia to ensure this tome is capable of serving multiple potential audiences - from the casually interested music fan to those looking to push the field of music studies within Japan forward.

With detailed reviews of over 40 jazz clubs and 200 musicians, the book shows you where to listen, shop, jam, and soak in the scene. You'll get top tips on jazz scene etiquette, what places serve food (and more importantly, whether it's any good) as well as what kinds of jazz to expect in each venue. Pronko's guide is like that musical best friend who's literally been there, done it all - but remains un-jaded and is only too happy to share their top tips with you.

From tiny alleyway venues (literally no bigger than four square metres, musicians often have to stand up and move to let attendees in through the door) and iconic coffee shops to the country's finest jazz talent, the book delivers practical advice and passionate insights for a truly cultural deep dive. For any who've felt intimidated by Tokyo's famous jazz *kissa* where sometimes it seems like you could literally hear the needle drop on the record player - all hushed dudes sipping

coffees and digging the music - the book demystifies the often arcane, as well as quite simply collecting together in one volume key info you'd no doubt have to scour the internet for otherwise.

That said, while the aforementioned lists of venues and musicians are without a doubt informative and useful, it's arguably the essays, collected toward the back of the book, that are the most engrossing of the content here. The focus here is very much on situating how jazz fits Japanese culture, how that cultural integration happened, and why Jazz resonates so far from its origins in the US of the early 1900s. There's inevitably some repetition in these essays - they were clearly originally designed as standalone content - but if anything this simply serves to drill in the salient facts. The key takeaways are jazz's existence as a medium that adapts to whatever locale it finds itself in; a transnational, transtemporal journey that clearly encompasses a historical dimension (jazz's initial popularity in Japan's port towns, as it was brought in from abroad), but also fascinating trajectories that feel especially honed to the Japanese environment (the emergence of jazz *kissa* as a solution for those that couldn't afford their own record players, and who were worried about disturbing the neighbours in Japan's cramped neighbourhoods).

Lovers of Murakami Haruki's novels will know of the novelist's intense love of jazz, and it's exactly this world of cooler-than-cooler vinyl treats and smoky secret cafes that is captured here too, and that'll have you headed down the rabbit hole in search of your next musical fix. Wherever your journey takes you, the most exciting thing about Japanese jazz is ultimately its bold fusion of precision and creativity; a unique blend of technical mastery, emotional depth, and fearless experimentation. Pronko's book is, of course, best experienced with a well-curated Spotify playlist (or a sizable stack of CDs / vinyl) to hand to while away the hours in intense listening while you flip through the pages soaking it all up.

The picture *A Guide to Jazz in Japan* ultimately paints is one of continual fusion, adaptation and musical morphology. Musicians in Japan deeply respect jazz tradition, but they aren't afraid to push its boundaries, often pairing it with Japanese folk, classical, and avant-garde elements. The result? A sound that's both globally connected and unmistakably local; elegant, unpredictable, and soul-stirring. Whether in a cozy Tokyo basement club or a massive festival stage, Japanese jazz offers a listening experience that's as refined as it is revolutionary. And with Pronko's book as your guide, you'll soon be a convert to this endlessly beguiling world too. [S](#)