



Welcome to a new issue of The Japan Society Review. We present here a small selection of thoughtful reviews and reading suggestions to accompany readers into the autumn season. The unexpected news of the resignation of Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo has shaken the scene of Japanese politics. Japan Society Chairman Bill Emmott reviews the timely published biography of Abe by American analyst Tobias S. Harris who presented his view of the politician and his legacy in our webinar series at the beginning of September (the video of the webinar is available in our YouTube channel – just look for JapanSocietyLondon on YouTube!).

Jumping back to the 18th century, the volume by Sato Hiroaki explores the most famous vendetta in Japanese history, that of the forty-seven ronin avenging the death of their master Asano Naganori in the Ako incident in 1702 and committing seppuku afterwards. For our reviewer Trevor Skingle this is a readable and engaging account which includes the most important facts and narratives surrounding this historic episode.

The captivating and colourful work of Japanese artist Ito Jakuchu (1716-1800) is covered in the recently published English translation *The World of Ito Jakuchu - Classical Japanese Painter of All Things Great and Small in Nature* by Sato Yasuhiro.

Following exhibitions and a re-discovered appreciation of Ito in Western and Japanese museums and art institutions, Sato's book offers a high-quality publication of special interest to Japanese art lovers.

Our suggestion on Japanese literature is *Breasts and Eggs*, an unorthodox novel by Kawakami Mieko. It focuses on the experiences of three working-class women in Osaka. Full of digressions and nimble experiments with a variety of different styles, Kawakami uses her characters as a powerful voice, representing different generations of women in contemporary Japan.

The last review of the August issue is dedicated to *Flight Paths*, a digital, interactive production based on a stage version developed by theatre company Extant in 2019 and performed entirely by visually-impaired artists. Combining animation, photographs and video, plus sound-related effects, integrated captioning and audio description, this online performance updates the original narrative but keeps its focus on the story of the goze, visually-impaired female shamisen players who travelled around Japan playing music and retelling epic tales.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

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Editor

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

Reviewers

Bill Emmott, Laurence Green, Susan Meehan and Trevor Skingle.

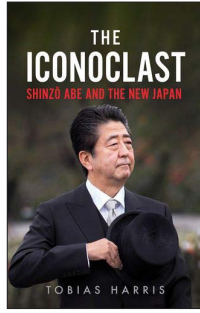
Image: Detail from *Roosters and cactus*. Saifuku-ji temple fusuma (sliding doors) painting (Ito Jakuchu, source: wikipedia).

The Iconoclast: Shinzo Abe and the New Japan

by Tobias S. Harris

Hurst & Company (2020)
ISBN-13: 978-1787383104

Review by Bill Emmott



With Abe Shinzo's sudden resignation as prime minister, again on health grounds as after his first short period in office in 2007, it is right to ask what historians will think of him. For few can doubt that he will be seen as having been a more significant prime minister than most. In September 2012 he achieved the rare feat of returning to the Liberal Democratic Party's leadership for a second time and a few months later the even rarer one of returning for a second bout as prime minister after defeating the incumbent Democratic Party of Japan in a general election. Before his announcement he had just become the country's longest-serving prime minister, having won in total three Lower House elections and three Upper House elections, and had become one of the few Japanese leaders in recent decades to have become well known on the world stage.

Yet longevity and recognition alone tell us little. Historians will also want to know what made Abe Shinzo tick, what he stood for, what he achieved while in office and what was his legacy. This comprehensive and clearly written biography, by an American who is now the Japan analyst in Washington, DC, for Teneo Intelligence, a consultancy firm, but who also worked in a Diet member's office in 2006-2007 and thereby got to know the inner workings of Japanese politics, is the first book in English to offer answers.

Harris makes four main things especially clear. First, that Abe's talent and energy became noted and recognised in particular during the prime ministership of Koizumi Junichiro in 2001-2006, including taking a prominent position over the North Korean abductions issue, as a result of which he rose to high office at a young age by Japanese standards and succeeded Koizumi at the age of just 52. That youth and inexperience, combined with his illness, may explain his poor and short first term. Second, that as well as his own talent he rose thanks to being a central figure in a political movement in the LDP that Harris calls 'the new conservatives', who stand for a strong state, strong leadership, revisionist views on Japan's colonialist history and for creating more policy autonomy for Japan in foreign affairs and defence.

Third, however, that while Abe succeeded in implementing some of that conservative agenda he failed at what he has himself described as his biggest ambition, namely the revision of the 1947 constitution. And fourth, that his most lasting contribution looks like being his establishment of a higher profile and more independent foreign policy than his predecessors, even while staying close to Japan's key post-1945 ally, the United States. His domestic achievements are less distinctive and arguably will look strikingly meagre to historians given his longevity in office and those recurrent election victories.

Ever since his return to office in 2012, the notion of constitutional revision, with the removal or rewriting of the pacifist Article 9 that was imposed by the American occupying forces, has been constantly under discussion in the LDP. For much of that time, Abe's government has commanded the 'super-majority' of two-thirds of both houses of the Diet that is required to pass a constitutional revision. Yet no formal proposal for a revision has been presented, even by this arch "new conservative" whose first political memories are of his maternal grandfather, Kishi Nobusuke, battling as prime minister in 1957-1960 to win Diet agreement to a reformed and renewed US-Japan Security Treaty and whose own dearest wish had been to revise Article 9. When Kishi was forced to resign, his grandson was only six years old, but Harris reports that the whole episode ended up seared on Abe's memory.

An easy explanation for his lack of progress on this might be that you can't eat constitutional revisions: reviving economic growth had to take priority if Japan's strength was to be restored. Another is that although Abe's government has commanded super-majorities in the Diet, a constitutional revision also requires a simple majority in a national referendum, and convincing a public in which pacifism remains strong would be tough, absent a clear and present danger to Japan's safety that current arrangements could not cope with. Both of those answers must be true, but still feel insufficient. What also has to be added is that Abe's position as prime minister has never been as strong and dominant as his longevity in office might imply.

A significant clue to this, which is given insufficient attention by Harris, is the presence in the governing coalition ever since 2012 of Komeito, the centrist party associated with the huge Soka Gakkai Buddhist organisation. One of the interesting questions about Japanese politics in recent times has been that of why an increasingly conservative LDP has chosen to tie

itself to this smaller centre-right party even when it has not been necessary for its majority in the Diet. It may have helped with the super-majority, but Komeito, a nominally pacifist party, was never likely to favour the abolition of Article 9. To which one might add, why has Komeito lent its support to the LDP?

The answer has to be that each has something to offer the other: for the LDP, Komeito has the crucial ability to rally voters to support LDP candidates in constituencies where the party does not itself expect to win. Although in Abe's election victories the LDP fared well in numbers of seats, it has not succeeded in generating great enthusiasm among voters, with turnout declining. In return Komeito, while itself being quite conservative on social and economic issues, has served to moderate the "new conservatives" in the LDP, supporting modest reforms on defence but not full constitutional revision, and has won some economic benefits for its own voters.

Similar points about the seemingly strong Abe government's surprising weakness can also be applied to domestic policy. As Harris explains, Abe successfully furthered the process of strengthening the prime minister's office that had been begun by Koizumi and other predecessors. He and his team established a strong grip over the bureaucracy and over public agencies, including crucially the Bank of Japan. Yet despite all the fanfare about "Abenomics" and many years of strong Diet majorities, his economic achievements have been surprisingly modest.

All sorts of reform initiatives have been talked about but either not executed or just in a half-hearted way: faster wage growth has been called for but has not transpired; poorly paid "non-regular" workers remain nearly 40% of the workforce despite promises to get rid of the distinction between "regular" and "non-regular"; structural reforms to boost competition and reduce regulatory barriers have been tentative

at best; Abe has pledged to make Japan a country in which "women can shine" but Japan has fallen further behind others on measures of gender equality. There has been success in introducing new corporate governance codes, and in introducing new rules to limit the sort of excessive overtime considered to cause *karoshi* or death by overwork, although the permitted overtime hours remain high. Japan did enjoy slightly faster economic growth from 2012 until the COVID-19 pandemic, but this was largely due to the absence in that time of major disasters, such as the 2008 global financial crisis or the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. Abenomics helped the stockmarket, thanks to more aggressive monetary expansion by the Bank of Japan, but it has had little lasting impact on the economy itself.

Either Abe and his cabinet did not feel truly committed to the sort of domestic reforms he often talked about in his speeches or the reforms were blocked or watered down by vested interests. Most likely it was a bit of both: big companies, which have long been the LDP's key backers, certainly did not want higher minimum wages, fewer "non-regular" workers, tight overtime restrictions or tougher antitrust enforcement.

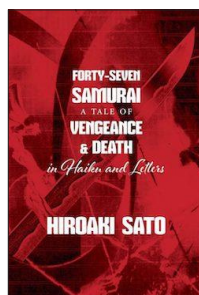
It is always problematic to write biographies of politicians while they are still in office, but Harris nevertheless has done a good and pretty compelling job, which looks even timelier now that Abe is retiring. This reviewer's one quibble would be about the title: it feels odd to describe as an "Iconoclast" someone who is both a conservative figure who wants to defend traditional beliefs and whose record is in the end so mixed. As Harris writes: 'But while he made some significant reforms by patiently deploying the power he had accumulated, he was unable to reverse the underlying causes of national decline'. The definition of an icon is, I suppose, in the eye of the beholder. §

Forty-Seven Samurai. A Tale of Vengeance & Death in Haiku and Letters

by Sato Hiroaki

Stonebridge Press (2019)
ISBN-13: 978-1611720549

Review by Trevor Skingle



The most famous vendetta in Japanese history has led to many publications, most in Japanese. The majority

of English publications are either fictional adventure novels or in depth academic studies. Until now there has been a dearth of material which focuses on the personal narratives of the protagonists. However, this deficiency seems to have been addressed with this eminently readable and engaging account in the English language by the skilful Japanese commentator Sato Hiroaki.

The first chapter sets the context leading up to the Ako Incident (1702) when the retired court protocol expert Kira Yoshinaka was decapitated by the daimyo

Asano Naginori's retainers. This was after Naganori had attacked Kira with a sword within the precincts of Edo (former Tokyo) castle for which he was sentenced to death by seppuku. The chapter includes profiles of the key participants involved in the initial attack on Kira, as well as that of the 'dog' shogun Tokugawa Tsunayoshi who was responsible for the eventual handing down of the sentence of seppuku on Naganori. There is also a discussion of the enlightened Genroku period with achievements in learning that seem commensurate with that of the opening of Japan at the end of Sakoku (national isolation) in the 1850s. What is interesting is the inclusion of facts that are probably otherwise not particularly well known outside of academic and Japanese circles. For instance that Ako castle was built by Naganori's grandfather which would explain the violent rhetoric and the initial almost unshakeable reticence of Naganori's retainers to surrender it to the shogunate. Given the relative paucity of information like this in English language publications it is facts like these that make this narrative particularly engaging. These relatively unknown events also include a fascinating discussion about the ironic predilection of the shogun for the death penalty for human beings in spite of his 'Pitying the Sentient Edicts'. Such facts and discussions make this narrative so much more accessible than some of the more academic accounts that are currently available.

In the second chapter the build up to the fatal attack on Kira is covered and begins with the tense debates between the two main factions of the Ako retainers, the 'radicals' and the others, about the handing over of the Ako castle to the shogun's forces. The intimate personal testimony and exchanges that it uncovers, including those between Ako retainers in both Edo and Ako, make this much more readable than many other third person academic narratives. The letters also expose the vehement feelings of the Ako retainers about the unequal treatment afforded Kira by the shogunate. What is very interesting, given current debates about the use of social media, is how some of the poetic forms that were written and shared at the time are so evocative of and almost mirror the modern use of social media, including subtle forms of 'trolling'. For instance, the approbation that followed when Oishi Kuranosuke and a few other retainers didn't act on their initial avowed intent to commit seppuku in order to follow their lord in death. There are a number of incidents and testimonies that cover gay relationships and issues amongst some of the Ako retainers. A charming inclusion amongst these is

the testimony that Oishi's son Chikara gave about his relationship with a male kabuki actor called Aiyama Konosuke who was also an *iroko* (prostitute). Except for one online article in English all other mention of this appears only in very brief online posts in Japanese. What the book neglects to mention is that after Chikara's seppuku, Konosuke became a Buddhist monk to pray for the repose of Chikara's soul. Oishi Kuranosuke's lyricism also comes to the fore towards the end of the chapter where, interspersed with his poetic and dramatic texts, the perception by others of his perceived predilection for licentiousness during the period before the revenge attack is discussed.

The third quite substantial chapter covers the development of the essential components that were set up in preparation for the raid on Kira's mansion, the attack itself, and briefly the aftermath. The chapter begins with an examination of the 1697 travelogue by Otaka Gengo who was considered, as well as a number of other Ako vassals, a haiku master. This chapter focuses more on haiku than any of the others with some fascinating personal accounts expressed in part by prose and in part by verse. For instance, one haiku in particular alludes to a potential reason for Asano's attack on Kira. There is also some discussion, based on a letter from the haiku master Kikaku, which seems, at first, to lay to rest the uncertain origin of Otaka Gengo's vendetta related haiku inscribed on a public monument in Ryogoku bridge children's park: 'Sun's bounty swiftly shatters the thick ice' (*hi no on ya tachimachi kudaku atsugori*). With plenty of personal testimonies and haiku, this chapter is one of those that makes what at first was a good book an excellent one and makes it hard to put down.

Though there is very little about the seppuku of the retainers the other elements of the aftermath to the incident are covered briefly in the fourth chapter through a review of the popularity of the vendetta in the public eye in opposition to the censure of the authorities. The chapter covers its public exposure by means of 'camouflaged' bunraku (puppet) and kabuki theatre adaptations, the many adaptations of the story abroad, and subsequent bans post WWII through to its resurgent popularity in later years, particularly on film. However as regards the first kabuki performance, there only was a first generation kabuki actor called Miyazaki Denshichi; there never was a second generation actor by that name. And he and the first generation Nakamura Shichisaburo didn't abandon the play, which was actually called *Akebono Soga yoichi* (Night Attack by the Soga Brothers). It was in fact banned

after three days by the authorities for 'political reasons' when it was performed at the Nakamura kabuki theatre in the second lunar month of 1702.

In the fifth chapter, the issue of the 'disloyal' retainers is covered with a succinct look at the motivations and direction some of them took with a few third person accounts and some other imagined 'dramatic monologues' including what happened to Kajikawa Yosube, the person who prevented Asano Naganori from killing Kira in the *matsu no o-roka* (Great Pine Corridor) of Edo castle.

One of the most fascinating parts of the book is the final chapter. It is highly likely that this English translation of Akutagawa Ryunosuke's short story 'Aruhi no Oishi Kuranosuke' (One Day in the Life of Oishi Kuranosuke) of Oishi's reflections on his life and his involvement with the campaign is the first time this has been available in translation. It cannot be better summarised than with the critic and author Kato Shuichi's words that the story 'turns Oishi's selfless heroism on its head by presenting the image of a lone protagonist reflecting on how future generations will look upon his actions... Akutagawa's new interpretation goes beyond conventional form and probes the inner world of his hero'.

The afterword covers the history of revenge in Japan and looks further at the friction between subjective interpretive Confucian philosophy and explicit shogunate governance regarding the act of

vengeance, a debate that continues to this day. Only the salient points are covered, so for those interested in exploring this particular aspect in detail, it has been covered in much greater detail in other academic publications. This section also looks at the equivalence in punishments for the attacker and the attacked which for witnesses of the vendetta and its aftermath at the time seemed somewhat lacking in justice; an interesting debate. There is also a discussion about what may be a little known legislative procedure at the time, that of revenge registration, which permitted revenge to be legally carried out.

There are no illustrations other than the inclusion of several crests associated with the various factions involved in the saga at the beginning of each chapter and a couple elsewhere. Though the book does cover a lot of what has until now not been readily available in English other than in academic papers, it still leaves some of the main perennial questions unanswered, those which will probably remain unanswered in perpetuity. In summary this is wonderfully fascinating book written in a non-academic style which covers the Ako Incident in a way that comes up with facts and narratives that other academic books have neglected which is what makes it so engaging. Though there are a few odd transliterations, the use of Japan bridge instead of the generally accepted name of Nihonbashi for instance, and some occasionally strange syntax, this is thoroughly recommended reading. §

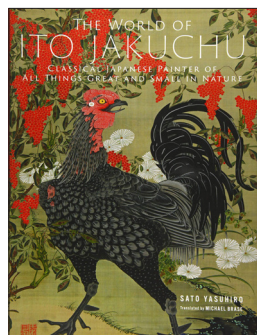
The World of Ito Jakuchu - Classical Japanese Painter of All Things Great and Small in Nature

by Sato Yasuhiro
translated by Michael Brase

Japan Publishing Industry
Foundation for Culture (2020)
ISBN-13: 978-4866581354

Review by Laurence Green

For those beyond the cloistered world of Japanese art history, the concept of "Japanese art" in and of itself remains unavoidably dominated by a preponderance toward the big names. With the likes of Hokusai and his eternally famous *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* more popular now than ever before, what hope for the considerable wealth of great historic talent that is largely unknown amongst non-expert crowds outside of Japan's borders?



This timely volume, originally released in 2006 in Japan but only now translated into English, sets forth the case for Edo-era painter Ito Jakuchu (1716-1800), with author Sato Yasuhiro - a longtime expert on Japanese fine art and former Professor at the University of Tokyo - beginning proceedings with an impassioned preface that speaks of Jakuchu's 'thousand year' wait for recognition. It is a wait that, slowly but surely, has been rewarded. Standout showcases in New York and Los Angeles in 1989-90 marked a first for Japan's Agency of Cultural Affairs - never before had they sponsored the exhibition of an individual Japanese artist abroad. The success of these exhibitions would eventually prompt a re-appraisal of Jakuchu's work - long dismissed as eccentric in style - amongst domestic audiences in Japan too.

The eldest son of a vegetable wholesaler in central Kyoto, Jakuchu's grounding within the world of natural produce as part of hectic market that exists in the city to this day would give him a firm foundation

for the kind of precise observation of nature's many bounties that would come to define his artworks. Sato's overview of Jakuchu's life and works - ably and sensitively translated by Michael Brase - is warmly cordial; acting as a relaxing, knowledgeable guide to the paintings. While there is absolutely the detail here for an academic audience too (the closing essay included at the end of this volume will be of particular interest, locating Jakuchu's work within broader discussions of Edo-era art), for the most part the writing is refreshing in its comforting casualness, and is just as easily accessible to newcomers to the subject.

Early on, we get a taste of the full majesty Jakuchu was capable of conjuring up within his favoured colour-on-silk medium in *Peonies and Lilies*. The finesse and attention to detail in this capturing of verdant flora is self-evident in its appeal to the senses. The detailed realism and rich colours would become trademarks of Jakuchu's style, extending to remarkable depictions of birds in particular (but also including dogs, fish, monkeys, insects and lizards). From chickens to cranes, Jakuchu's ability to capture the delicacy and intricacy of feathers and dramatic body shapes is a sheer delight to behold.

For all this microscopic detail though, the claims of eccentricity may have something to them - there is a barely restrained wildness to Jakuchu's style that feels almost psychedelic at times. Colours collide and mingle with abandon, and for all their obvious beauty, these artworks never allow the viewer to forget that they are observing nature in its most primal, untameable form. In *Phoenixes and the Rising Sun* - a powerful diversion into the fantastical - we are served a particularly strong illustration of this. Jakuchu's command of colour is such that even predominantly white paintings - snowy scenes, or meticulous depictions of plum blossom - glow with an almost ethereal beauty. It is not just the blank non-colour of 'white' we observe but something richer and somehow more effervescent. In all cases, Jakuchu imbues colour with a palpable life force, a cramming full of the very stuff of nature itself. Tree branches and waves seem to almost push out of the paintings and extend their tendrils toward the viewer.

Much of the book is naturally devoted to Jakuchu's masterwork - *Colourful Realm of Living Beings* (*Doshoku sai-e*) - a thirty scroll sequence donated by the artist to Kyoto's Shokokuji temple in 1765. By this point in his career, Jakuchu very much saw himself as an authority within his field, and the sheer accomplishment of this collection is undoubtedly impressive. His beloved birds naturally dominate yet again, the roosters here looking more ecstatic than

ever. A particular standout from the series sees a mass of swallows descending, hordlike, to feast on fields of autumn millet. A lone white bird punctuates the press of predominantly brown bodies. The book notes, with some humour, the inadvertent Hitchcockian flavour of the composition.

Casting Jakuchu's output as part of a far wider tradition of East Asian bird-and-flower painting, with a particularly strong Chinese influence, the book's middle pages take us closer to the finer details of his work. Here, we observe in microscopic detail the exact finesse of individual brush marks; Jakuchu's technical capability laid plain in a kind of 'this is how he did it!' expose. Close up, many of the strokes have the feel of optical illusions, abstract and Escher-like in their clustered formations. It is only when we zoom back out that we can marvel at how these very same details infuse the paintings with such life. The latter portions of the book broaden the field - we are shown how Jakuchu also worked within the mediums of ink painting and woodblock prints. While these works may lack some of the vibrancy and instant visual appeal of the earlier, more colourful compositions, they are a testament to the artist's versatility. One striking example - only recently discovered - done in ink and composed when Jakuchu was in his eighties, shows a monstrous white elephant facing off against a whale. The effect is terrifying in its stark, monochrome surreality.

For those now thoroughly convinced of the wonders of Jakuchu's work, a handy index at the rear of the book usefully details those museums - both in Japan and abroad - that hold Jakuchu material in their collections. As an aside, casting a cursory eye over this list, the reader is offered a glimpse of the fascinating disparities in museum curatorial culture present between Japan and international institutions. For all that Jakuchu is a Japanese artist, his works are invariably flagged as being, at best, 'sometimes on display' in many of the Japanese institutions listed - an elusiveness at odds with the seeming permanency of many Western art collections.

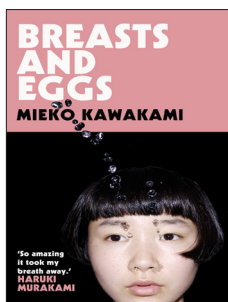
That said, it is worth noting that befitting a Japanese publisher, the production quality of this book is of a very high standard; printed on luxurious-feeling paper that allows the colours to quite literally pop from every page. For a tome dedicated to the creator of *Colourful Realm of Living Beings*, this feels quite appropriate. Done up in a handsomely glossy hardcover finish, this book would no doubt make a welcome gift to any aficionado of Japanese art, and to the animal lovers among them, even more so. §

Breasts and Eggs

by Kawakami Mieko
translated by Sam Bett and David
Boyd

Picador (2020)
ISBN-13: 978-1509898206

Review by Susan Meehan



Kawakami Mieko's epic novel zooms in on the experience of women, in particular working-class women from Osaka - the kind whose voices are not heard. Makiko, the family head, is a single mother who makes ends meet by working long hours as a hostess in a bar in Osaka. Natsuko, her younger sister by nine years, moved to Tokyo aged 20 to blog and write, and 12-year-old Midoriko is Makiko's only child.

Midoriko's outlook, largely informed by her mother's testing life, is initially only gleaned from her diary entries which include weary realisations such as, 'Life is hard enough with just one body, why would anyone ever want to make another one?' Finding the overpopulation of the world to be totally irresponsible she brands being child free as a positive, responsible action, and declares she will never have children. Kawakami uses her as a powerful voice, representing a generation critical – contemptuous even – of their elders.

The novel begins in 2008, ten years on from Natsuko's move to Tokyo. Book one shines a light on the history and sometimes tense relationships between Natsuko, Makiko and Midoriko. References to the Beijing Olympics of 2008, the 2011 earthquake and tsunami which devastated Northeast Japan, and the election of President Trump help the reader pinpoint the novel in time.

While book one focuses on ageing Makiko's preoccupation with breasts, and culminates in Makiko, Midoriko and Natsuko briefly reuniting in Tokyo, book two focuses on Natsuko's own dilemmas and the

trauma of life. Beginning in 2014, it brings us right up to 2019 when Natsuko is in her early 40s.

Natsuko's life is a one of rumination. She shares her struggles, as well as her wide-ranging and random everyday thoughts with the reader. The novel showcases Natsuko's often very funny, free associations running riot, as well as affecting stories from her childhood. The latter allow a glimpse into the poverty experienced by the sisters - which may surprise those unfamiliar with this aspect of contemporary Japan.

Natsuko's life in Tokyo sounds like a real grind, yet at the same time she can't believe her luck, wondering in disbelief, 'How did I wind up getting paid to read and write?' But will she regret not having a baby?

There is a melancholy beauty at the root of Kawakami's discourse on life and more than a few signals to suggest autobiographical elements. Hers is an unvarnished take on domestic life, presenting it as generally miserable, dangerous or steeped in poverty. Though not confined to women, Kawakami's empathy is overwhelmingly with her female characters. It is no surprise that she has become a feminist icon in Japan.

The novel is hefty, full of asides, digressions and embellishments, and nimbly experiments with a variety of different styles. It uses Osaka-ben and a chatty style bold, teeming with intimate, sometimes outrageous, never prude conversations between women. Often raw, on occasion the narrative swings into realistic streams of consciousness and film or dream sequences. One memorable scene in the hot baths, unfolds into a dreamscape masterfully echoing, I thought, Sawa Hiraki's fantasy-filled videos.

With difficulty I forced myself to pause before reading the last chapter, as I dared hope that the novel might end on a promising note. While not a conventionally happy ending, it is positive in that Natsuko remains undeterred in living a good life and one directed by herself. What a wonderful message to end on, and what a generous yet often sad book it is. **S**

Flight Paths

digital production by Extant

Flight Paths can currently be watched online on the Flight Paths website: <https://flightpaths.extant.org.uk/>

Review by Susan Meehan

Extant, the leading performing arts company and charity in the UK managed for and by visually impaired professional arts practitioners, has recently launched an online digital production of *Flight Paths*, an interactive reworking of

the 2019 theatre production. As well as filmed segments from last year's performance, the online experience also includes fabulous animation, photographs, binaural sound, integrated captioning and audio description, making it a truly accessible production.

Until I watched the stage version at Stratford Circus last year, I had never seen a theatre production performed entirely by visually-impaired artists. The skill of all the artists involved is simply staggering and the experience was transformative.



Flight Path website

Key to the narrative are the *goze*, visually-impaired female shamisen players who would travel around Japan playing music and retelling epic tales. These performers were first referred to in 15th-century Japanese literature, according to Professor Kojiro Hirose, an expert in *goze* studies. The peripatetic *goze* would often travel for about 300 days of the year.

Taki, a Japanese *goze* guide wearing a purple kimono and carrying a shamisen, meets audience members as they log on to the online production. She waits for them at a crossroads or runway and prompts the audience to choose their first path, at the push of an arrow, be it North, East, South or West. Believe me, you can't go wrong whichever path you take, so do not agonise over the decision. I tested it countless times!

Taki provides plenty of context throughout and often relies on her teacher, Sugimoto Kikue, to add a number of short, informative lessons about the *goze* and their craft. Each section takes about 15 minutes and the whole experience lasts about an hour.

I began with West, which took me to 'where old meets new'. On stage were Amelia and Sarah – global citizens – both with rucksacks and holding walking canes. Close to them were two aerial silks rigged from the ceiling, each silk consisting of two lengths of fabric. Amelia and Sarah are incredibly down to earth, opinionated, funny, able storytellers and, as it turns out, enviably supple. They are virtually impaired female artists on the move – contemporary *goze*.

They are joined on stage by Kikuchi Takashi, a visually impaired viola player, and Victoria Oruwari, a visually impaired soprano singer. Takashi and Victoria are not on stage themselves, but we hear their voices, and occasionally see videos of these very talented musicians. Takashi's presence is captivating even though he is not physically on stage. Victoria considers herself to be six years old – the last age at which she could see. She sings beautifully. Stories are brilliantly melded together and move between the different characters, so one has to stay alert. The stories are personal and contemporary.

On the silks, Sarah learns some spectacularly hair-raising moves from Amelia through repetition and muscle memory. I was on the edge of my seat. The

learning from repetition is similar to how the *goze* would learn their craft, though their training lasted five years.

I suddenly hear the clash of metal and samurai, as I'm plunged into the magical story of Hōichi – a blind and earless biwa or lute player – as retold by Lafcadio Hearn, another restless traveller of Greek and Irish heritage who ended up in Japan in the late 19th century. Hōichi – voiced by Takashi – helps bring to life the Tale of the Heike, an account of the 12th century struggle between the Heike and Genji families for control of Japan. The sea rages and the ghostly fires of the dead Heike burn all around.

Meanwhile, Sarah and Amelia continue to entertain. They pull themselves up on the silks, tip themselves upside down, do the splits, pull off a sideways pose, a plank, a figurehead and more. The repertoire is fast and breath-taking too. A series of shamisen jingles can be heard in the background.

These two modern-day *goze* have bags of energy and, I imagine, lots of travelling, living and sharing of stories to fulfil! As the spectacle comes to an end, Taki moves from the flight path back to the crossroads, where it all begins again. Did I mention that she is an animated character? Nakamura Aya as Taki is the perfect guide: soothing, entertaining, encouraging and informative – a good balance to the didactic teacher. The animation is utterly beguiling, and something that the Artistic Director of Extant, Maria Oshodi had wanted to include in the 2019 stage version. The illustrations for this online version were drawn by manga artist Inko Ai Takita, and the animator is Dave Packer. The shamisen music by the talented Ichikawa Hibiki – who collaborated with Dario Marianelli on the soundtrack of the film 'Kubo and the Two Strings' makes for a beautiful soundtrack. Nic Sandiland, as Editor and Producer, worked tirelessly to seamlessly pull everything together and Tim Jukes, the Web Consultant and Designer, cannot go unmentioned for all his online and digital work.

This is an exhilarating update of the *goze* story and timely. In these times of Covid, the precarious lives of these talented modern *goze* is even more affecting, as entertainment venues from theatres to music venues have been closed, and freelance artists continue to struggle as events and exhibitions have been cancelled or postponed.

As more events are being shared online, the timing of this digital experience of *Flight Paths* is impeccable. I hope that as venues begin to reopen, events will also continue to be shared online and within reach of those with access needs, and that Extant will continue to thrive as it promotes theatre for and by the visually impaired. [S](#)