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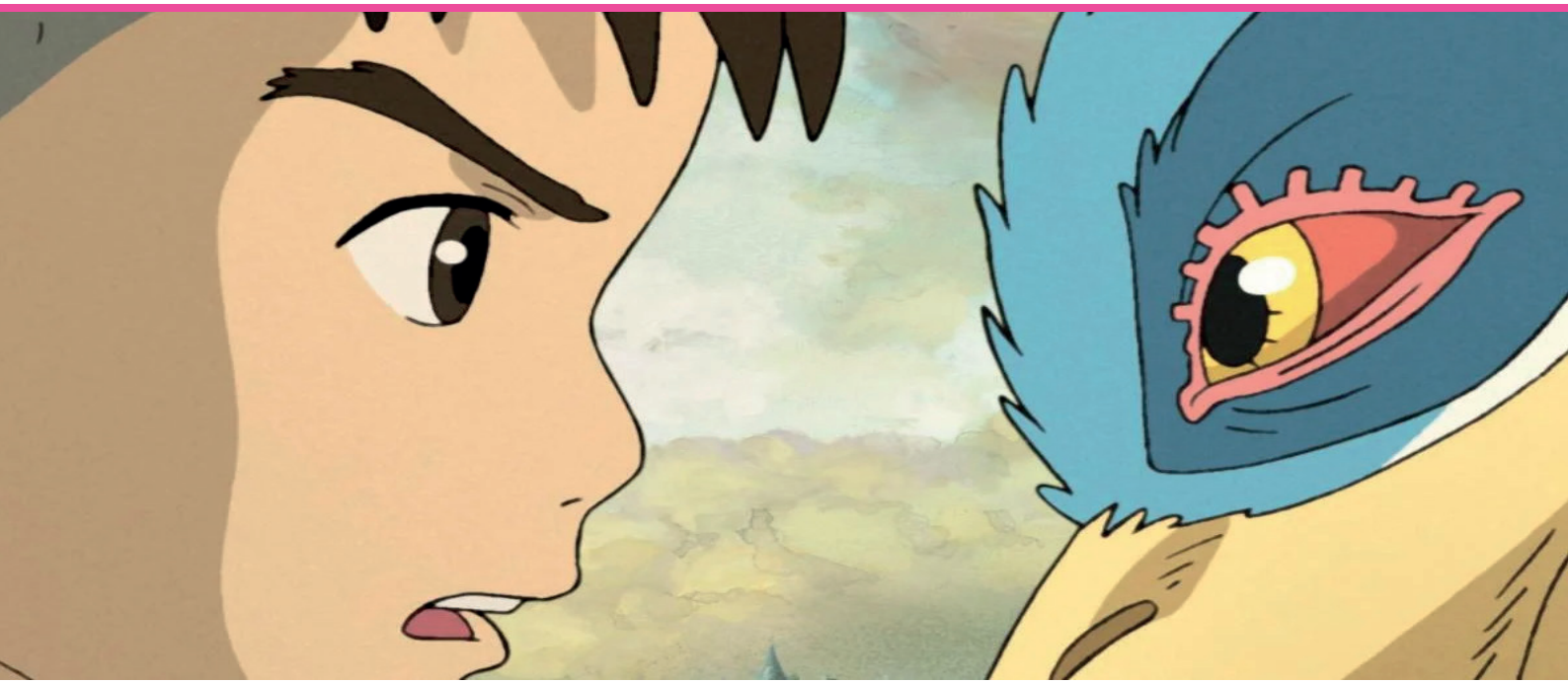

The first quarter of 2024 has brought to the UK an exciting array of books, films and events exploring different aspects of Japan. This new issue of *The Japan Society Review* covers six of them thanks to the fantastic writing our volunteer reviewers.

We open our selection with a review of Abe Naoko's new book, *The Martyr and the Red Kimono*. Following her successful previous work, *'Cherry' Ingram: The Englishman who Saved Japan's Blossoms*, Abe focuses now on the life of Polish monk Maximilian Maria Kolbe examining his connections with Japan through the lives of two individuals, atomic bomb survivor Ozaki Tomei and Asari Masatoshi, a key figure in the historical donations of cherry trees around the world.

Next, Naomi Pollock's *The Japanese House Since 1945* takes us on a captivating journey through the evolution of Japanese residential architecture, offering profound insights into the cultural, social, and architectural forces shaping Japan's domestic landscape.

Written with the insight of an expert on Japanese organised crime, investigative journalist Jake Adelstein presents *The Last Yakuza*, a gripping first-hand account of Japan's notorious underworld, shedding light on the enigmatic world of the yakuza and its enduring impact on Japanese society.

In *100 Tales from the Tokyo Ghost Café* by Julian Sedgwick, with illustrations by manga artist Kutsuwada Chie, readers are transported to the eerie yet captivating realm of Japanese folklore, where ghosts, spirits, and supernatural phenomena intertwine with the modern urban landscape of Tokyo.

On an Endless Road: Ito Noe and the Women Composers of her Time, by composer Francesca Le Lohé offers a compelling exploration of the female composers active in Japan during the life of Ito Noe, a feminist figure of the Meiji era whose story remains untold.

Lastly, we delve into the cinematic realm with Oscar award winner *The Boy and The Heron* directed by Miyazaki Hayao, a masterful animated tale that weaves together themes of friendship, adventure, and environmental stewardship with Miyazaki's trademark storytelling prowess.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

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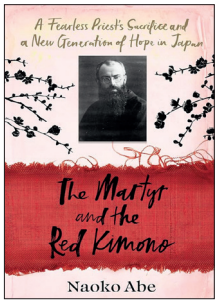
Image from *The Boy and The Heron.*

The Martyr and the Red Kimono

by Abe Naoko

Chatto & Windus (2022)
ISBN-13: 978-1784744533

Review by Laurence Green



It is the 14th of August, 1941. A Polish monk called Maximilian Maria Kolbe has just been killed by lethal injection in Auschwitz, following weeks of starvation. Many years later - he will be canonised as a saint; his death in the Nazi concentration camp standing as the ultimate sacrifice - he gave up his life to save another prisoner.

Kolbe's life and death would go on to have the most striking of reverberations across the world. He had made his name founding a movement of Catholicism and running Poland's largest publishing operation. He would spend a number of years in Japan, ministering to the descendants of the "hidden Christians" that had practised their faith secretly for centuries, away from the prying eyes of the Shogunate. And indeed, it would be this connection to Japan that would see his life inspire two Japanese men; Ozaki Tomei - who was just seventeen when the US dropped an atomic bomb on his home in Nagasaki, and Asari Masatoshi - who worked on a farm in Hokkaido during the war and was haunted by the inhumane treatment of prisoners in a nearby camp. What follows is a kind of biography in triplicate of these three individuals - separate but interlinked in the most surprising of ways.

The Martyr and the Red Kimono is very much the spiritual successor to Abe Naoko's previous book, *'Cherry' Ingram: The Englishman who Saved Japan's Blossoms*, which went on to become a surprise bestseller in the UK, no doubt spurred on by readers raised on a diet of *Gardeners' World* episodes and the enforced isolation of the pandemic years. The cherry tree focus is this time interwoven with the thornier themes of war and religion, resulting in an at-times complex multi-segmented narrative that flits regularly between characters and themes, taking in the entirety of the 20th century as its historical scope.

The book's opening chapters, which detail Kolbe's early life and the significance of his efforts in both Poland and Japan, are in many ways the most difficult going; wrapped up as they are in the twin efforts of Polish nationalism and Christian evangelism that would become drivers for Kolbe's life. Against a backdrop of rising tensions in Europe, Kolbe's fiery patriotism is portrayed in meticulous detail - and becomes easier to grasp once cast against the more familiar narratives of the beginnings of Second World War.

Here, the pace of the book quickens, and the ceaseless momentum with which it proceeds to what we know must be Kolbe's inevitable end is portrayed with a filmic quality that is as gripping as it is emotional. It is the lives of the two Japanese who were to look to his life for inspiration, however, where the book's real heart truly begins. In Ozaki Tomei, and the horrific detail with which the loss of his family in the Nagasaki atomic bombing is detailed - including maps and illustrations - we are in many ways offered the flip side to the 'American' narrative of the bombs so recently depicted on the big screen in *Oppenheimer*. Ozaki's story is a war story on the most human of scales, terrible in its bleakness. To his dying day, he would become a strident, outspoken voice on the horrors of nuclear war.

We come, then, to the third of the book's key figures - Asari Masatoshi - who would end up devoting his life to sending cherry tree saplings around the world as part of peace efforts; including to America and Poland. Controversial donations to China and North Korea in the 1970s and 80s would draw unsettling attention from the Japanese authorities during the height of the Cold War era. As we move toward the present day, Abe herself becomes central to the narrative, as she tries to track down the remnants of Asari's historic cherry tree donations to Catholic convents in Poland - do any of Asari's donations still survive?

It is worth noting that the significance of the titular 'red kimono' is not truly revealed until the very closing pages of the book - and as striking as its appearance might be, it stands as only one strand in a book whose various components will appeal variously to different readers. Is this a pacey military history, teasing out new angles by which to look at the Second World War? An eye-opening personal narrative of the impact of the nuclear bombing on Nagasaki? Or a deep, contemplative reflection on Catholicism and its existence in communities as disparate as Poland and Japan? The book is all these things individually - but also in the sum of its parts, something more - but only if the reader is willing to put the work in and hold fast to the connecting narrative.

Ultimately, the winning charm of Abe's book - as it was with the Cherry Ingram biography - is the epic scale of its historical lens, which draws so much of its power from human subjects that lived through, and

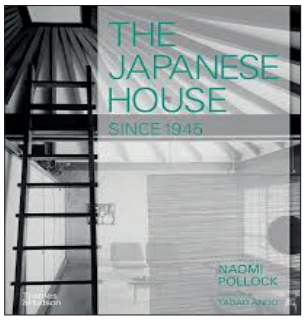
were immersed in, the full panoply of change our all-too fragile world underwent through the 20th century. Figures like Ozaki and Asari - from humble roots to great ambitions - feel like indomitable fighters pushing against the very fabric of history's grand narratives of war and peace; striving ever onward with goals which are both deeply personal and also tied up with the very idea of humanity. Can a single cherry tree, ten, or a hundred even, make a difference in a world still ripped apart by conflict on a daily basis? The answer is ambiguous - but what Abe's book seems to offer up, is that it is from the fight itself, the eternal struggle, that meaning of some sort can be drawn. §

The Japanese House Since 1945

by Naomi Pollock

Thames and Hudson (2023)
ISBN-13: 978-0500343739

Review by David Tonge



In recent years the unique work of Japanese architects has been explored and memorialised in a seemingly endless stream of coffee table books. The conversation in these is invariably reduced to the level of a beauty contest and in providing further evidence of just how "other" Japan is.

Like Instagram they are meant to be flicked through rather than read.

However, *The Japanese House Since 1945* is a large format 400 page book and like its excellent predecessor *Japanese Design Since 1945* is thoroughly researched by Naomi Pollock and beautifully produced by Thames and Hudson.

Pollock takes us on a journey from the 1940s – Rising from the Rubble, to the 2020s – Pandemic Panic. Each of these chapters begins with a brief sketch of the period highlighting key events such as the post-war housing shortage in the 1950s, or the Fukushima earthquake and tsunami in the early 2020s. By explaining the economic, social and political context of these periods she helps us to understand the design of the houses beyond that of the beauty contest.

Where this book is different to others is in Pollock's goal to convey what it's like to live in these houses. To achieve this, the two most interesting aspects, in my opinion, of this book are firstly the 'At home' resident's autobiographical descriptions of day-to-day life in these houses. For example in At Home Tower House, Azuma Rie says:

> 'When our family moved to Tower House, which was designed by my father, Takamitsu Azuma, I was still in elementary school. On the first day, we kept our shoes on because the floor was not yet finished – it was just a rough concrete surface. This was unusual because Japanese people normally take their shoes off at home...' (p. 123)

And secondly the 'Spotlight' sections which describe in detail a specific feature unique to Japanese architecture. For example – The Site, Walls and Doors and Gardens & Courtyards. As we work through the examples from the 1940s to the 2000s, we can see how these features have been integrated and adapted as fashion and howmaterials and design have changed. For example in The Window Pollock says:

> 'Another consideration is placement. Western-style windows are often situated at eye level for those seated on chairs. But in Japan, a country with a long-standing habit of floor-sitting, windows can be located up high as well as down low. Even in rooms with upholstered furnishings, window positions are calculated to edit the view without severing the connection to outdoors.' (p. 219)

I found these insights to be a great way of understanding the building constraints and cultural precedents the architects were trying to navigate while designing homes for their clients and families.

I'll be honest I am not in the habit of reading introductions, but this time I am glad I did as Pollock puts the reasons (not all happy) the Japanese have been able to build such unique houses into context. She explains that the end of the war in 1945, for reasons we all understand, was a point of reset for Japanese society, architecture, and house building. From this time a fundamental re-think of what a house could and should be was both necessary and possible.

In the shadow of Japan's wartime defeat, western models of contemporary living became desirable. All aspects of life were reconsidered, such as the promotion of the nuclear family (parents and children) rather than the traditional multi-generational family, alongside the separation of eating and sleeping which had previously taken place in the same room but was now considered unhygienic.

Before that moment, Japanese architects were being influenced by European modernism, so by the time Japan had seen widespread bombing and devastation of its big cities and new houses were needed, architects were free to create unique expressions of the Japanese home along modernist lines. It was a clean slate for the architects against a sad backdrop for the average Japanese.

Due to Japan's geographic location, the risk of earthquakes, and the fires which inevitably follow, party walls in wooden houses are very rare in Japan. A fire gap is necessary to separate each house, which in turn, allows them to be created like an individual object. In other words, they don't have to relate, visually or in personality, to the house next door. This gives the architect a freedom unimaginable in a city like London. Alongside this visual freedom is the ability and desire to experiment with materials and formats which integrate or not with the environment.

On reading this it makes total sense of my own experiences. On my many nocturnal photographic excursions around Japan's cities and big towns, I have always been fascinated by the freedom Japanese architects have to express themselves with little or no regard for their neighbours. And then, seemingly overnight pull them down and start again.

What I haven't mentioned is the more than sixty incredible houses this book introduces to us.

There are twenty or so that I love! but if I am forced to pick out a few personal favourites, it would be the early modernist houses of the 1940s. Such as the enigmatically named House no.1 (p.32) by Ikebe Kiyoshi, built in 1948. This is a lovely example of a largely wooden (before the blight of concrete houses) paired down home, responding to a shortage of materials and a quest for a new way of living post war.

And then I am drawn to the distinctly contemporary Japanese colour palette of Our House (p. 171) by Hayashi Masako and Hayashi Shoji built in 1978. The red stained walls and wooden eaves of the deeply pitched roof creates a dramatic space which feel at once like a modern and traditional Japanese home. Add to this the huge sliding shoji-style window revealing a stunningly peaceful walled garden, I could move in tomorrow.

If, like me, you spend too much time scrolling through Japanese architecture and design feeds on Instagram, are obsessed with house remodelling programs on TV or have a professional interest in Japan, you will find this book chronicling Japanese house architecture fascinating.

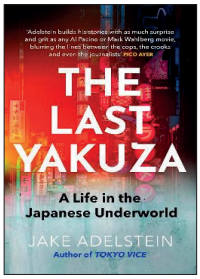
I recommend you buy it and read it, don't just leave on your coffee table. §

The Last Yakuza

by Jake Adelstein

Corsair (2024)
ISBN-13: 978-1472158314

Review by Trevor Skingle



The many yakuza films like Kitano Takeshi's *Outrage* film series (mentioned in the book) along with many others in this genre alongside yakuza themed fanzines and video games ensure that there is no lack of coverage of the yakuza organised crime in the Japanese imagination. There has also been an increasing popular interest in yakuza in the Western imagination in the last decades with the popular Takakura Ken's occasional toe dipping into the neo-noir yakuza "exposés" such as the 1974 film *The Yakuza* (with the late Robert Mitchum), the 1989 film *Black Rain* (with Michael Douglas), the 2018 action-thriller *The Outsider*, and the under-rated 2019 British-Japanese TV crime drama *Giri/Haji*. This crossover of attention to the yakuza in popular culture seems to have reached an apotheosis with Jake Adelstein's 2009 book *Tokyo Vice* and its adaptation into two TV series in 2022 and 2024. However, the subsequent controversy about the accuracy of *Tokyo Vice* seems to have become a talking point which may have, counter-intuitively, worked in Adelstein's favour. As Oscar Wilde pointed out, "There is only one thing in life worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about". So it is with much anticipation that, into this milieu, Adelstein's latest book, *The Last Yakuza: A Life in the Japanese Underworld*, has been published.

Early on the author makes it clear that the book is a history of the yakuza disguised as a biography of an individual called Saigo who is an amalgamation of numerous characteristics drawn from various yakuza. This smoke screen perhaps reflects the opaque ambiguity of life in Japanese society but might leave some speculating on the blurring of boundaries, particularly given the abovementioned controversy.

The book begins in an easy-going conversational style covering Saigo's background, his youth and upbringing, his parents' chaotic relationship, his path

to becoming a bosozoku motor-cycle gang member, and from there to becoming a yakuza. Along the way Adelstein delves into quite some detail on the historical specifics about the yakuza and it's here where the author's knowledge and investigative journalist background as well as his yakuza expertise comes to the fore. This informs his style of writing as it moves, almost as though a switch has been flicked, from biographical narrative into a very knowledgeable, almost academic historical style that leads back into and bolsters the biography. This suits the book very well with the result that it reads like a large set of linked newspaper articles. And there is nothing wrong with that, though, because of the overall narrative framework, it is not a book that sits well with being randomly "dipped into". There are, however, some stand out chapters that cover areas that yakuza afficionados may be particularly interested in. A few of these really stand out; one in depth chapter examines yakuza funerals, another *yubitsume* (finger shortening), whilst for body art enthusiasts there is another especially revealing chapter on yakuza tattoos. These last two chapters being the foremost of the identifying factors of the yakuza in the mind's eye of most Westerners.

One element that is alluded to but does seem a bit lacking in detail is an historical exposé of the plight of ethnic Koreans, Chinese, Taiwanese, and *burakumin* (outcasts) in Japan and the reasons for their involvement with the yakuza. A little of the historical perspective on this regarding ethnic Koreans is alluded to, albeit all too briefly, with a reference to their extreme persecution because of the blame laid at their door for societal ills caused as a result of the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake. There could have been more information about the main elements of discrimination that these groups continue to face in Japan which potentially act as drivers for their alienation from Japanese society in general and their consequent recruitment/enlistment into the yakuza.

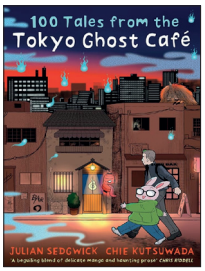
The book has its occasional darkly comedic moments which spring up in the most unexpected places and situations (no spoilers given here); scenes that would be well suited to darkly comedic yakuza movies akin to Kitano Takeshi's *Ryuzo and the Seven Henchmen*.

The book covers the yakuza's entrenchment within Japanese society and its involvement with, to name but a few, politicians, the police, businesses and the entertainment industry alongside the development of legitimate business ventures which, like the exposed strands of a tangled spider's web spun over many years, is laid bare for all to see. It also contains many ironic claims about the yakuza's abstinence from violence and their spurious adherence to a code of ethics which on many occasions are almost immediately followed by descriptions of extreme violence and plenty of examples of excessive criminality. Readers will have to make their own minds up on what they think about these which may be yet another reflection of societal ambiguity in Japan. What does come across strongly is that however much they claim to they do not adhere to a specious code of ethics; Robin Hood and his Merry Men they are not.

Though there are some useful reference lists, for those unfamiliar with the Japanese yakuza specific terms used throughout the book it might have been helpful to have also included a lexicon of the most pivotal yakuza related words and their English equivalents. An update to be included in a future revised edition perhaps?

Saigo's time in prison and his ill treatment there does not take into consideration very recent Government prison reforms. What the yakuza will make of these is anyone's guess. However, in its conclusions the book covers in detail the tighter legal restraints and an aging population as the causes of the substantial decline in the numbers of yakuza. *The Last Yakuza* and its predecessor *Tokyo Vice*, are perhaps a timely, illuminating, knowledgeable yet readable historical record of yakuza "culture" and activities in English language. §

100 Tales from the Tokyo Ghost Café



by Julian Sedgwick
Illustrations by Kutsuwada Chie

Guppy Books (2023)
ISBN-13: 978-1913101886

Review by Hananircia Tchinhenha

The haunting landscape of Japan's north beckons a young Akira who yearns for home. With Julian Sedgwick and Kutsuwada Chie, he embarks on a harrowing journey into a world of spirits and shadows with the mission to collect *yokai* stories. Together, they explore the twilight realm that lies within the bounds of Fear Mountain, where creatures of myth and legend lurk in the darkness.

If this isn't enough of a calling for young horror fans, what is? Authored by Carnegie Medal For Writing Nominee Julian Sedgwick and illustrated by award winning mangaka Kutsuwada Chie, *100 tales from the*

Tokyo Ghost Café is a thrilling adventure that captures the imagination with evocative writing, tied together by exciting and well drawn illustrations. This collaboration was previously seen in the excellent *Tsunami Girl*. *100 tales from the Tokyo Ghost Café* explores the vastness of Japanese mythology and folklore. From the famous *kappa* folk story to the modernised urban legend of the *kuchisake-onna* (Slit-mouthed woman). From start to finish, it is evident that this book is not simply a selection of mythical creatures and folklore stories. *100 tales from the Tokyo Ghost Café* is a compelling story of longing, friendship and bonds.

For young people who admire Japanese culture and would like to make a start on learning the Japanese language, this book is an excellent starting point as it contains a variety of Japanese words and phrases as well as a mini-glossary. This high attention to detail provides an extra layer of authenticity, showing a clear commitment to providing a rich, in-depth storytelling experience whilst ensuring that the reader understands the story. Each character is well-developed and engaging, with strong personalities that drive the plot forward, pulling readers into the action and keeping them turning the pages long into the night as I myself did.

Overall, *100 tales from the Tokyo Ghost Café* is a riveting and thrilling adventure that will captivate readers from the very first page. Its blend of traditional writing and visual elements from the illustrations create a unique and heartwarming story that draws the reader in. It is an unforgettable read that is sure to leave a lasting impression on anyone who picks it up. Whether you're a fan of Japanese folklore, horror, or just a good old-fashioned adventure, *100 tales from the Tokyo Ghost Café* is a must read that has left me with no critique and a thirst for more. §

On an Endless Road: Ito Noe and the Women Composers of her Time

by composer Francesca Le Lohé

with Kubota Akiko (biwa), Komachi Midori (violin) and Zaiki Yura (piano)
Actor's Church, London (5 March 2024)

Review by Cameron Bassindale

On 5 March, London was treated to a Japanese classical music performance of the highest calibre. *On an Endless Road: Itō Noe and the Women Composers of her Time* is an exploration of the female composers active in Japan during the life of Ito Noe, a feminist figure of the Meiji era (1868-1912) whose story remains to this day criminally under told. Composer Francesca Le Lohé, with the support of The Japan Foundation and The Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation, have gone a considerable way to address this, telling a story through various means which certainly left an impression.

Inside the gorgeous Actor's Church, Covent Garden, violinist Komachi Midori and pianist Zaiki Yura begun proceedings with a sonata from Koda Nobu. With a light, joyful depth it was not what I expected; it sounded every bit as European as a Schubert or Faulk. From the start it was clear that the night's performances were going to confound any preconception I might have had about Japanese classical music of the Meiji era. Komachi and Zaiki dovetailed with each other masterfully, in full command of the audience which was some way larger than I had expected. The sonata flowed into itself, coming to a considered and atmospheric finale.

After the performance, Komachi was joined on stage by Irena Hayter, a professor at the University of Leeds, and composer Francesca Le Lohé for a Q&A session about the life and times of Koda. After a musical education in Europe, Koda returned to Japan to debut a great number of European works, bringing them for the first time to a Japanese audience. However, as our panel told us, Koda was the victim of the sexist Meiji period, and despite playing and composing evidently fantastic music was summarily kicked out of her school at The Tokyo University of the Arts and victim of ridicule in the press.

The second performance, a composition by Toyama Michiko, introduced for the first time the distinct and recognisable overtures of classical Japanese music. A sharp, shrieking violin really engendered the feeling of drama and theatre. Despite being composed 50 years *after* Koda Nobu's sonata, it sounded at least 200 years older.

After a brief intermission, our panel from the first Q&A was joined by Kubota Akiko, to give us more context on Ito Noe, and why her story matters. What was striking was the sheer adversity faced by Ito in her lifetime, and the disparagement she suffered from the ruling class for the crime of believing that woman and men are equal and deserve an equal opportunity at education. The Meiji-era police state which governed

tightly the morality of the time sent officers frequently to tail Ito, whose outspoken criticism of the patriarchy she found herself in was enough to ruffle more than a few feathers.

Unperturbed by this spying on her, says Irena Hayter, Ito once turned to the secret police tailing her and asked him if he could make use of himself and carry the diapers for her children. Sadly, our panel explains, in the aftermath and confusion of the 1923 earthquake the state seized the opportunity and killed Ito and her her lover, anarchist author Osugi Sakae, whilst the dust settled on Tokyo. This visceral story, of which only a fraction is reproduced here, set the scene for Kubota Akiko's biwa performance.

With a screen displaying surtitles, Kubota's vocal performance was immediately arresting. Her undulating tones set with the biwa's brash melody were the perfect accompaniment for the story being told. The refrain, "For the new woman, there is a new woman's way" peppered throughout underlined the radically contemporary take on a story a hundred years old, and an art form far older. As Kubota explained before the performance, the biwa was always traditionally a male artform, telling the story of samurai and valour, so even the act of taking this medium and using it to tell the story of one of Japan's most forward-thinking radical felt in many ways counter-cultural.

The performance winds through the life and times of Ito, exalting her outspoken radicalism with what was clearly a world-class performance from Kubota. As it came to end, and the audience filtered out into a brisk London evening, I couldn't help but feel that the cultural landscape in the UK was being enriched if only a little by *On an Endless Road: Itō Noe and the Women Composers of her Time*. §

The Boy and The Heron

directed by Miyazaki Hayao

released in the UK in 2023

Review by Shehrazade Zafar-Arif

The Boy and The Heron is the latest film directed by Miyazaki Hayao. Released in Japan as *How Do You Live?* (*Kimitachi wa do ikiru ka*), the film might not be, as previously speculated, Miyazaki's final film, but it certainly feels like a swan song and an homage to his illustrious career and canon of work.

The setting is 1940s wartime Japan and the protagonist is Mahito (voiced by Santoki Soma in the Japanese version and Luca Padovan in the English dub), whose mother is killed in an airstrike on a hospital in Tokyo. His father (voiced by Kimura Takuya and Christian Bale) remarries Mahito's mother's sister, Natsuko (Kimura Yoshino and Gemma Chan) and relocates them to her remote, sprawling country estate, which is staffed by a group of tobacco-obsessed, crone-like 'grannies'. The grieving, unsettled Mahito finds himself haunted by an eerie talking grey heron (Suda Masaki and Robert Pattinson) who keeps insisting that his 'presence is requested'. When the pregnant Natsuko vanishes into the ruins of a mysterious, bricked-up tower in the woods, Mahito follows the heron into a strange and fantastical world in search of her.

In many ways, this film feels like a spiritual successor to *Spirited Away*, with a troubled young protagonist who is changed by a rescue mission into a supernatural world. But while *Spirited Away* has very clear emotional beats and a linear character arc, *The Boy and the Heron*'s plot feels more meandering and disjointed. The first act, which follows Mahito's arrival at the estate and his attempts to settle into his new life, drags on for slightly too long, so that by the time we get to the action, the scenes in the world within the tower feel rushed and almost like an afterthought. Characters like the Parakeet King (Kunimura Jun and Dave Bautista) and the tower master (Hiho Shohei and Mark Hamill) are introduced late in the film, and key stakes and elements are crammed, in an exposition-heavy manner, into a slightly unwieldy third act, making the story feel cluttered. The hurried pacing also means that the ending feels slightly abrupt. The ambiguities of the story itself are often confusing, and I found I enjoyed the film more when I stopped trying to make too much sense of it.

But perhaps this was the point. This is a story about grieving, and grief is messy and disjointed, especially from the perspective of a traumatised young boy. The film's often haphazard structure embodies this ambiguity, as well as the dream-like logic of the world in the tower, a world that exists outside of space and time. Unlike the spirit world of *Spirited Away*, the setting has no clear rules or contained limits and opens itself up to an infinite range of interpretations - we never learn, for instance, the real origins of the structure that became the tower. This accentuates the story's sense of wistful, whimsical beauty, making it something between a fairy tale and an allegory.

The film's surrealism is emphasised by its lush, gorgeous animation. From the nightmarish, fiery backdrop of war torn Tokyo with its burning sky and blurry figures, to the haunting, eclectic, and vibrantly coloured landscapes of the world in the tower, every frame feels like stepping into a watercolour painting.

Hisaishi Joe complements the dreamy visuals and the tone of the story with a score that is less grand and cinematic than it is melancholic and ponderous.

Particularly within the tower, there is a jarring shift between the stylistic characteristics and motifs of the different locations, from the misty waterways occupied by ghostly boats to the busy and overly saturated home of the giant parrots. The inhabitants of the tower, too, range from the innocent to the grotesque, represented on one end by the smiling, spirit-like warawara and on the other by the giant, carnivorous parrots, who are both cartoonish and menacing, their war-like king calling to mind the militaristic regimes of the era. In the middle of this dichotomy are the pelicans, who go from antagonistic to pitiful as Mahito learns their story. But all the creatures of the tower are tragic in their own ways.

The characters are memorable and larger than life, sometimes bombastic and other times touching - but I wish they'd been given more space and time to shine. We get a clear insight into Mahito, our audience surrogate, on his journey from apathy to defiance, as well as into Natsuko, who is torn between her desire to be his mother and her guilt about not being able to live up to her sister's memory. But others, like the fire-maiden Himi (voiced by Aimyon and Karen Fukuhara), the tough-talking fisherwoman Kiriko (Shibasaki Ko and Florence Pugh), and the mysterious tower master, fall to the wayside slightly. The highlight for me was the titular heron, who evolves from a sinister, otherworldly trickster to a comedic, goblin-like figure, voiced impressively (and unrecognizably) in the English dub by Robert Pattinson.

There is an autobiographical lens through which one can view the film, which sheds light on and reframes its many eccentricities. A lot of the story's elements are inspired by Miyazaki's own childhood, growing up in wartime Japan with a father who manufactured fighter planes, as Mahito's father does. It feels like a very personal film, one which looks back reflectively while also looking ahead with hope and trepidation, as though the 82-year-old Miyazaki is grappling with the end of his career. It's easy to see him in the character of the tower master, who seeks a successor to take ownership of the world he's created and nurtured. Similarly, the tower world itself, full of beauty and horror and absurdity, populated by unusual, inexplicable characters, feels symbolic of Miyazaki's filmography.

Fittingly, then, the film is full of nods to Miyazaki's other works. The anthropomorphised animals, trapped in an unnatural world where they're forced into violence in order to survive represent the struggle between man and the natural world seen in *Princess Mononoke* and *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*. The enchanted tower is reminiscent of Laputa in *Castle in the Sky* or Howl's castle in *Howl's Moving Castle*. The film seems meta-textually aware of these parallels, even in its casting - the voice actors for Mahito's father Shoichi in the original Japanese, English dub, and even Spanish dub all previously voiced Howl in *Howl's Moving Castle*. For viewers like myself, who grew up on Studio Ghibli films, it's strikingly nostalgic and feels like a triumphant culmination of years of storytelling.

The Boy and the Heron is a film that perhaps needs to be watched a second time in order to be fully appreciated, or one that must be allowed to sit in its audiences' mind before its potency is realised. Like the nebulous tower world, it explores a number of themes. Grief is at the heart of it: grief for loss of loved ones, grief for endings, and grief for the fleeting nature of imagined worlds.

In many ways, the Japanese title - taken from a 1937 children's book by Yoshino Genzaburo, which appears in-universe as a gift to Mahito from his mother - more accurately captures the feel of the story than the English one does. While *The Boy and the Heron* emphasises the fantasy adventure elements, *How Do You Live* poses a question to the audience, which the film seeks to answer. §