

Japanese Postwar Fiction in English Translation

BY JESSICA TEISCH



Of course, you may already know of Haruki Murakami, Yukio Mishima, and maybe even Natsuo Kirino or Banana Yoshimoto (who is *not*, by the way, a strange type of Japanese fruit).

If you're not familiar with all of these names, you're in for a treat. With the global rise of Japanese culture, scores of noteworthy Japanese writers have recently been translated into English. These authors tell stories that transcend stereotypes of Japan, proving that Japanese fiction is far more complex than tales involving samurai and swords.

The literature of postwar Japan is particularly multifaceted—and *weird*. After the empire's defeat in World War II, writers struggled to cope with their country's loss of honor and duty. Their literature, some of it disturbingly existentialist, reflects their country's disaffection, evolving sense of identity, and moral purpose, as they wrote deeply about war and religion.

More recently—in the following decades of economic prosperity, the “bubble economy” and its crash, and the ensuing Lost Decade of the mid-1990s—Japanese writers have rejected the more traditional stories of war and religion. Instead, they delve into the emotional, often dark moral boundaries their characters—urban dwellers, sexual miscreants, and newly empowered women—face as they dive headlong into the roiling waters beneath their nation's placid surface.

We present some classic postwar fiction, as well as more recent literature, which ranges from the weird to the downright insane. Where available, the dates in parentheses refer to the original publication date and the date of the English translation, respectively. Enjoy!

POSTWAR NIHILISM

Yukio Mishima (1925–1970)

Profiled in our Sept/Oct 2005 issue, Mishima is of the most widely acclaimed and translated Japanese authors of the 20th century. He penned more than 100 works, including novels, short stories, poetry, essays, screenplays, and modern, Kabuki, and Noh dramas. His spectacularly staged ritual suicide (seppuku, or hara-kiri) in front of the Japanese army in 1970 dramatized his life's leitmotif: his

protest against modern Japan's materialistic, spiritually barren core. With a varied style marked by beautiful, elusive prose, Mishima's works opened up understanding of Japanese culture to the West. Start with his masterpiece, *The Sea of Fertility Tetralogy* (*Spring Snow* [1969; 1972], *Runaway Horses* [1969; 1973], *The Temple of Dawn* [1970; 1973], and *The Decay of the Angel* [1971; 1974]), which recounts the tumultuous Japanese experience between 1912 and 1970 through a different reincarnation of the same soul.



THE EXISTENTIALIST APPROACH

Kōbō Abe (1924–1993)

Considered the Japanese Franz Kafka for his surreal, feverish exploration of modern-day individuals, Abe grew up

in Manchuria. In his first successful novel, the award-winning *The Woman in the Dunes* (1962; 1964), a Tokyo entomologist visits a fishing village stuck in quicksand, enters a house that can be reached only by ladder, and becomes trapped inside for life—existentialism at its most disturbing. In *The Face of Another* (1964; 1966), which is told through philosophical monologues, a scientist accidentally burns his face and fashions a mask to re-create himself over and over again. In the bizarre *The Box Man* (1973; 1974), a man who lives life wearing a box gives up the self. The spatially, temporally, and emotionally disorienting *The Ruined Map* (1967; 1969) features a detective hired to find a missing husband, with strange clues to guide him. And in the dreamlike *The Ark Sakura* (1984; 1988), a recluse who believes in imminent nuclear holocaust sells tickets to his “ark”—an abandoned mine—to those he deems worth saving.



Kenzaburō Ōe (1935–)

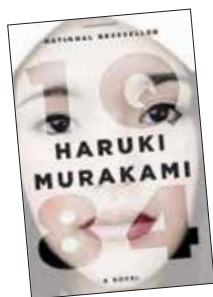
Ōe, born in a village in the forests of Shikoku, won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1994 for his “imagined world, where life and myth condense to form a disconcerting picture of the human predicament today.” Influenced by American and French existentialist literature, Ōe has written on many topics, from his eldest son’s mental disability (*Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness* [1969; 1977]; *A Personal Matter* [1964; 1994]) to his country’s occupation by foreigners to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In all of his works, however, he addresses the dignity of humans and timely socio-political issues, particularly nonconformism and the violent fringes of society. *The Changeling* (2000; 2010), Ōe’s newest novel in translation and the first in a trilogy, explores the relationship between two friends after one commits suicide; it also considers postwar identity, nationalism, and art.



THE GENRE-DEFYING MURAKAMI

Haruki Murakami (1949–)

With his books translated into more than 50 languages, Murakami—a writer strongly influenced by Western pop culture—has become an internationally celebrated author. Born in Kyoto, he meshes cyberpunk, science fiction, gumshoe detective fiction, and



social satire in novels that offer surreal, fatalistic explorations of the boundaries between reality and imagination. He first gained acclaim for *Norwegian Wood* (1987; 2000), about an alienated college student and his love affair. In *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1995; 1997), a man loses his cat, his wife, and a job as Murakami reflects on the nature of evil, contemporary politics, and the legacy of World War II. His latest novel, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage* (2013; ★★★★★ Nov/Dec 2014), features a man searching for a difficult truth years after a break with friends. See also *1Q84* (2009–2010; ★★★★★ Jan/Feb 2012), a lengthy love story, mystery, fantasy, and coming-of-age novel that follows a young woman who enters a parallel existence.

GENDER, SEXUAL, AND CULTURAL STEREOTYPES OVERTURNED

Banana Yoshimoto (1964–)

The pen name of Yoshimoto Mahoko, Yoshimoto, who came of age as a writer during Japan’s bubble economy, represents Gen X Japan. Born in Tokyo, she writes, in a warm and disarming style, about the adrift, troubled 20-something generation trapped between reality and fantasy. Inspired by Stephen King’s nonhorror stories, as well as by Truman Capote and Isaac Bashevis Singer, Yoshimoto started her writing career while working at a golf club in the mid-1980s. *Kitchen* (1988; 1993), which sold millions of copies worldwide and inspired two films, features a lonely young Japanese woman who, after the death of her beloved grandmother, grows close to a young man and his glamorous transsexual “mother” and finds solace in the kitchen. *The Lake* (2005; 2010 ♦ MAN ASIAN LITERARY PRIZE LONG LIST), Yoshimoto’s 13th work of fiction, similarly involves a young woman in mourning who gravitates to a mysterious man with a haunted past. See also the surreal *Hardboiled & Hard Luck* (1999; 2005).



Ryū Murakami (1952–)

The “other” Murakami—a novelist, essayist, filmmaker, and short story writer from Nagasaki who grew up in a U.S. Army base town—explores dark themes in his work, from drug use, murder, war, and sadomasochism to social disillusionment. His first novel, the semiautobiographical *Almost Transparent Blue* (1976; 1977), explores a bisexual Ryū and his friends burned out by sex, drugs, and rock ’n roll during the mid 1970s, near an American army base. In perhaps his best-known work,



Coin Locker Babies (1980; 1995)—which combines dark comedy, philosophy, noir, and cyberpunk—two troubled, nihilistic boys abandoned in lockers as infants come of age in a chemical disaster wasteland cut off from Tokyo, where they embark on violent searches for their birth mothers. (There's also a love interest with a pet alligator.) *In the Miso Soup* (1997; 2003), a psychological thriller, features a young Japanese “nightlife” guide who accompanies a disturbed American man around Tokyo’s red-light district.

Mitsuyo Kakuta (1967–)

Born near Tokyo, Kakuta, who depicts the everyday lives and struggles of women of her generation while criticizing a cold, Western-influenced Japanese society, is one of the most popular novelists writing in Japan today. Among her dozen-plus novels, *Woman on the Other Shore* (2004; 2007, ♦ NAOKI PRIZE, JAPAN'S MOST PRESTIGIOUS PRIZE FOR POPULAR FICTION), which explores the friendship between two women in their 30s—one a homemaker, the other a single career woman who suffered bullying in high school, both examining their life choices—was her first book to be translated into English. *The Eighth Day* (2007; 2010, ♦ CHŪŌ KŌRON LITERARY PRIZE), which views motherhood and family through the lens of a woman who kidnaps her lover’s infant and raises her in an all-female religious commune, sold more than a million copies and was adapted into an acclaimed film in Japan.

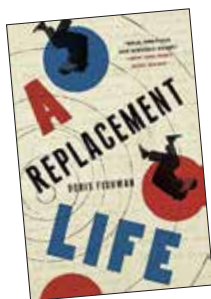


Yōko Ogawa (1962–)

The prize-winning Ogawa has written more than 40 works of fiction and non-fiction, but only a handful have been translated into English. In *The Diving Pool: Three Novellas* (1998; 2008 ♦ SHIRLEY JACKSON AWARD) three emotionally distant young women narrate tales of alienation from their families and society. *Hotel Iris* (1996; 2010), short-listed for the Man Asian Literary Prize, explores the desire both to allure and destroy when an emotionally damaged teenage girl becomes involved with a sadomasochistic, middle-aged man. Ogawa was awarded the 2003 Yomiuri Prize for Literature for *The Housekeeper and the Professor* (2003; ★★★★★



SELECTION May/June 2009), which sold more than 2.5 million copies in Japan and was made into a movie. A touching story of a devoted friendship, the novel features a former mathematics professor who cannot form memories; his housekeeper; and his housekeeper’s young son. More recently, *Revenge: Eleven Dark Tales* (1998; 2013) offers a



set of spooky, surreal, and interconnected tales about anger, murder, alienation, obsession, and revenge.

Amy Yamada (1959–)

Like many of her contemporaries, Yamada writes about subjects that were, until recently, taboo in Japan: sex, racism, xenophobia, and interracial relationships. With an interest in African American music and novels, Yamada wrote the prize-winning novella *Bedtime Eyes* (1985; 2006). Epitomizing the Gen X spirit, the work delves into the destructive relationship between a Japanese woman and a black American man; the American edition also contains two other novellas, including *The Piano Player’s Fingers* and *Jesse*, which similarly complicate racial, cultural, and sexual stereotypes. *Trash* (1991; 1996), the first of Yamada’s novels to be translated into English, depicts a Japanese woman in New York City who tries to cope with her black live-in lover’s child from another relationship.



VOICES FROM THE NEWEST GENERATION

Risa Wataya (1984–)

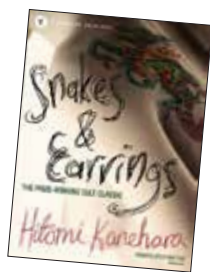
The youngest on our list, Wataya writes about the pressure of being young and the strain to conform in Japan. She wrote her first novella, *Install* (2001; 2006)—about the high school experience in Japan, adapted into a film just three years later—when she was just 17, and rose to fame in 2003 with the short novel *I Want to Kick You in the Back* (2003; 2015), which earned Wataya the distinction of becoming the youngest author ever to receive the prestigious Akutagawa Prize. A novel of self-awareness and ambivalent relationships, *I Want to Kick You in the Back* features a high school girl misfit who becomes interested in a solitary boy obsessed with a fashion model. But instead of developing feelings of attraction or love toward him, she instead wishes to . . . kick him in the back. In 2012, Wataya’s novel *Isn’t It a Pity?*, which explores the tensions between friendship and marriage, won the Kenzaburō Ōe Prize; it will soon be translated into English.



Hitomi Kanehara (1983–)

Kanehara, who left school at age 11, writes about teenage and 20-something life in Japan. Along with Risa Wataya, she was the youngest ever to win the Akutagawa Prize—in 2003 for *Snakes and Earrings* (2003; 2005). Considered a short masterpiece of the subgenre of rebellious youth stories that take place in the postbubble generation, this

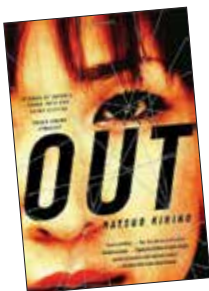
gritty novel explores the relationship between the degenerate, fork-tongued Ama and the club-going, hard-drinking, disaffected Lui—and the violence that encompasses their relationship. *Autofiction* (2006; 2008), a postmodern novel written in a first person stream-of-consciousness style, involves a recently married young woman who offers insight, backwards, into the origins of her mad obsessions, jealousies, and dark thoughts. “Hitomi Kanehara is one of international fiction’s most startling new voices,” the *Independent UK* noted of this novel.



SOME CRIME, FANTASY, AND SCIENCE FICTION WRITERS

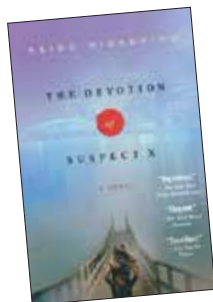
Natsuo Kirino (1951–)

One of the leading figures of detective fiction—“feminist noir” in particular—Kirino (the pen name of Mariko Hashioka) offers an unsanitized version of Japanese culture, in which materialism has corrupted modern family life and gender warfare prevails. Although she started out as a romance writer, Kirino rose to fame with *Out* (1997; 2004 ♦ EDGAR AWARD FINALIST). In it, four female friends working the graveyard shift in a *bento* (lunch-box) factory become involved in a murder after one of the young mothers in the group strangles her philandering, gambling husband. In an interview with IndieBound.org, Kirino admits that men felt threatened by the novel and that the most shocking part of *Out* “is that it’s written by a married woman who has a family and a child.” She’s no less scandalous in her other novels: *Grotesque* (2003; 2007) involves the dark underworld of prostitution and the social pressures facing women, while *Real World* (2003; ★★★ Nov/Dec 2008) explores teenage life in a Tokyo suburb via a boy accused of murdering his mother and his four young accessories.



Keigo Higashino (1958–)

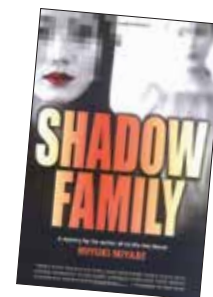
President of Mystery Writers of Japan between 2009 and 2013, Higashino is one of Japan’s most widely read and prolific crime writers, with dozens of books under his belt. *The Devotion of Suspect X* (2005; ★★★ May/June 2011), the third in the Detective Galileo series and Higashino’s acclaimed American debut, concerns a killing and a cover-up that seeks to fit murder into mathematical



principles; three novels follow. In the Police Detective Kaga series, *Malice* (1996; 2014) features a best-selling novelist’s murder—but murder is only the first layer in this intricately constructed mystery. And in *Journey Under the Midnight Sun* (1999; 2015), a stand-alone mystery, the death of a pawnshop owner in Osaka decades ago leads to an ongoing cycle of violence.

Miyuki Miyabe (1960–)

Born in Tokyo, Miyabe is one of the country’s most prominent and prolific fantasy, young adult, crime, and science fiction writers. The crime novel *All She Was Worth* (1993; 1999) takes place in early 1990s Tokyo; it involves the disappearance of a banker’s corrupt fiancée and explores the negative effects of the Japanese asset bubble on ordinary people’s lives.



Crossfire (1998; 2006) features a girl with pyrokinesis (the psychic ability to create and control fire with her mind) who kills criminals to improve the world. *Shadow Family* (2001; 2006) offers dark insight into the online world, where a murdered family man had a cyber “family.” For anime fans, the fantasy novel *Brave Story* (2003; 2007), adapted into an animated film, features a boy who sets out to change his destiny, only to face untold moral obstacles.

Hiroshi Sakurazaka (1970–)

Many readers might have seen the major film *Edge of Tomorrow*, starring Tom Cruise and Emily Blunt, but fewer may know that the 2014 film was based on Sakurazaka’s breakthrough novel *All You Need Is Kill* (2004; 2009)—a rare feat for a Japanese novelist. The Japanese military science fiction light novel, targeting a young adult demographic, concerns a soldier who, after perishing in a battle with extraterrestrials, becomes caught in a time loop that allows him to live the same day again and again as he tries to change his fate. See also *Slum Online* (2005; 2010), about a young man who becomes the greatest virtual karate fighter in an online game. Not surprisingly, Sakurazaka had a previous career in information technology.



Kōji Suzuki (1957–)

Suzuki—a best-selling horror writer often called the Stephen King of Japan—is the author of the Ring novels, a trilogy including *Ring* (1991; 2003), *Spiral* (1995; 2004), and *Loop* (1998; 2006) that have been adapted into a manga series and films in both Japan and Hollywood. The first, *Ring*, involves a mysterious videotape threatening the

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