

Japanese Literature, or “J-Literature,” in the 1990s

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- 1993** Banana Yoshimoto. *Tokage* (Eng. *Lizard*, 1995). Tokyo. Shinchōsha.
- 1993** Yōko Tawada. *Inu mukoiri* (The bridegroom was a dog). Tokyo. Kōdansha.
- 1993–95** Kenzaburō Ōe. *Moeagaru midori no ki* (The burning green tree). Tokyo. Shinchōsha.
- 1994** Yoriko Shōno. *Resutoresu dorīmu* (Restless dream). Tokyo. Bungei Shunjū.
- 1994–95** Haruki Murakami. *Nejimaki-dori kuronikuru* (Eng. *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, 1997). Tokyo. Shinchōsha.
- 1996** Hiromi Kawakami. *Hebi o fumu* (Tread on a snake). Tokyo. Bungei Shunjū.
- 1996** Kō Machida. *Kussun daikoku* (Weeping Daikoku). Tokyo. Bungei Shunjū.
- 1996** Ryū Murakami. *Rabu & poppu / Topāzu II* (Love & pop / Topaz II). Tokyo. Gentōsha.
- 1997** Kazushige Abe. *Indivijuaru purojekushon* (Individual projection). Tokyo. Shinchōsha.
- 1997** Miri Yū. *Kazoku shinema* (Family cinema). Tokyo. Kōdansha.

THE 1990S ENDED JUST THREE YEARS AGO, yet as I gather my thoughts on Japanese literature in the 1990s, I feel as if I am writing about the remote past. Japanese postwar literature, as with literature elsewhere, continues to lose its readership under the pressure of multiple media—film, television, and comic books—even though some writers in the 1980s successfully established a class of modified “pure” literature. To refer to Japanese literature of the 1990s, the editorial staff of Kawade Shobō’s literary journal *Bungei*, hoping to attract a young readership, created the neologism “J-Literature,” inspired by J-Pop (Japanese popular music) and J-Comic (Japanese comic books). The decade of the 1990s marked a period during which the distinction of two types of Japanese literature—pure literature as serious, elite, and political and popular literature as light, common, and entertaining—became radically blurred. New writers and works, representing diversified styles and themes, surged into literary culture. The list I propose introduces a palette of ten different—as distinguished from *best*—novelists, five men and five women.

The death of the Shōwa emperor Hirohito in 1989 represents a significant marker dividing the decades of the 1980s and 1990s. His passing meant that Japan could no longer interrogate the emperor’s wartime responsibility, and it gave the Japanese people an opportunity to question the existence of the emperor system. Once the emperor’s sickness was reported, the entire nation could participate in the national project of self-restraint, or *jishuku*, canceling festivals and weddings. The decade of the 1990s following his death, with the burst of the economic bubble, was not a particularly joyous period for Japan. Economic and political turmoil continued unabated. Political corruption came to the public’s attention, beginning in the late 1980s with the bribery scandal of the information services company Recruit. The media reported the daily arrests of politicians and bureaucrats who had received bribes from private firms and brokers. Meanwhile, Japan experienced two catastrophes. The Hanshin/Awaji earthquake that struck the Kobe area in January 1995 killed more than five thousand people and damaged highways, railways, and major utility pipelines. In March of the same year, a member of the religious cult Aum Shinrikyō released a nerve gas, sarin, in the subway system of Tokyo. Twelve people were killed and nearly four thousand were injured. In short, Japanese writers were confronted with a groundswell of problems from Japan’s past and present during the era of the 1990s.

TWO MURAKAMIS—Haruki Murakami and Ryū Murakami—and Banana Yoshimoto, the best-selling writers of the 1980s, continued to write throughout the 1990s. **Haruki Murakami** completed three volumes of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* in the mid-1990s. Murakami presents the main character—Tōru—in search of his missing wife, his own identity, and the forgotten

past of the nation, exploiting a variety of styles—surreal, fantastic, mysterious, and hard-boiled. The enigmatic psychic sisters, Malta and Crete, and the mother and son with healing powers, Nutmeg and Cinnamon, aid him in his search. His fatal enemy, Noboru—the vulgar, egoistic, yet talented university professor, postmodern critic, and politician—represents the systems of Japanese society that Murakami has criticized in many works. Tōru regains communication with his wife in an Internet chat and learns that she plans to kill her brother, who had defiled her and her sister.

Tōru makes a quantum leap to wartime Manchuria and uncovers the repressed memory of the war through the voice of an old veteran, Mamiya. He is a survivor of the cruel and meaningless battle of Nomonhan at the Siberia-Manchuria border during World War II. Tōru, caught up in Mamiya’s story about his superior who was skinned alive and his confinement in a dried-up well, inters *himself* in a neighborhood well, where he experiences a spiritual journey to the depths of his consciousness—his own past. Nutmeg, finding the same blue-black stigma that her father has, tells him another war story about her father, who attended the killing of animals and the massacre of Chinese prisoners by Japanese soldiers at the zoo in Manchuria. Tōru, like the wind-up bird that appears in Nutmeg’s story (written by Cinnamon), witnesses the darker side of Japanese society—the corruption of political systems and repeated atrocities of the war years. Murakami successfully “winds up” the chaotic history of postwar Japan, culminating in the present.

The political tenor of **Ryū Murakami**’s novels never receded in the 1990s. *Love & Pop / Topaz II* portrays the phenomenon among high-school girls in the mid-1990s called *enjo kōsai*—having dates or sometimes sexual intercourse with middle-aged men in exchange for expensive brand-name clothes and accessories. Murakami presents the solitude of the girls, who wander through the busy streets of Shibuya in the cold metropolis of Tokyo. Their dialogues intersect with various noises—sounds from television and radio, the voices of strangers, routine dialogues from fast-food restaurants, and loud commercial ads from the stores. In order to write this novel, Murakami visited telephone clubs and “love hotels” (hotels for lovers to have sex), listened to the girls’ messages left on the voice mail of the sex club, and conducted interviews with the girls.



The heroine, Hiromi, is a seventeen-year-old high-school student living in a suburb of Tokyo. Her father is a trading-company employee and her mother an official in an art museum. Hiromi finds an imperial topaz ring at a jewelry store in Shibuya and decides to take part in *enjo kōsai* for the first time to buy the ring, which costs \$1,000. Using a cell phone that her friend has borrowed from a stranger, she chooses two clients from the message box. She helps her first client masturbate inside the convenience store, then goes to a “love hotel” with her second client, Captain EO. Captain EO, who talks to girls with his shabby stuffed Fuzzy Ball carried in his knapsack, is a psychopathic thief who steals the girls’ money. Instead of having sex, Hiromi has a chat with him, and sews up his Fuzzy Ball’s tail. Murakami examines the problems of the social evil of *enjo kōsai* from Hiromi’s perspective. What she misses is contact with other people. She cannot communicate well with her busy parents and feels some hatred toward them. Although she cannot buy the ring, she receives a measure of warmth from her psychopathic client, who criticizes her attempt at prostitution and gives her the secret name of his Fuzzy Ball—“Mr. Love & Pop.”

Banana Yoshimoto, who made her debut with the award-winning short story “Kitchen” in 1987, subsequently created the “Banana” boom in Japan. *Lizard* is a collection of six short stories about lovers facing an uncommon circumstance. Using her elaborate, mysterious lyricism, Yoshimoto portrays the relationships of Japanese couples found in every corner of the

urbanized towns. Lovers in her stories achieve a moment of clarity after solving their emotional struggles regarding the past and present.

The narrator of the first story, “Newlywed” (first serialized on posters on Japan Railway’s commuter trains in Tokyo), heavily drunk, is reluctant to go home to see his newlywed wife. With the help of a homeless man, who transforms himself into an attractive young woman to talk with him, he becomes

aware of his wife’s magical power. The second, eponymous story depicts a man who works as a doctor for autistic children and a lizard-looking woman who works as an acupuncturist. Each confesses to the other the traumatic incidents of childhood, affirming their strong bond and fate of becoming healers for their patients. A writer’s girlfriend in “Helix” is planning to attend a brainwashing seminar to forget the past. Witnessing an explosion on the street together, the couple reaffirm their love, feeling their souls dancing together like the infinite helix



of DNA. A woman in “Dreaming of Kimchee” has an affair with a married man, whom she eventually marries. She now suspects a new affair, but their love is proved real after both have a similar dream of kimchee, a spicy Korean condiment, while sleeping in a room filled with its strong smell. In “Blood and Water,” Chikako flees the religious commune where her parents live and joins Akira, maker of healing amulets. Surrounded by the love of Akira and her father, she learns the true meaning of independence and solitude. In the final story, titled “A Strange Tale from Down by the Big River,” Akemi, a former member of a sex club, plans to marry the son of a rich family. After learning that her mother tried to kill her by throwing her into a river when she was a baby, she becomes aware of her spiritual power to survive and feels hope for a new life with her future husband, overcoming her strange past. All six stories are linked to one another and share similar elements—fear and healing in the present, memories from the past, and hope for the future.

Yoriko Shōno, who made her debut earlier than Yoshimoto, became known to the public in 1991 when she received the Noma Prize for New Writers for her work *I Did Nothing*. *Restless Dream*, published between 1992 and 1994 in four stories—“Restless Dream,” “Restless Game,” “Restless World,” and “Restless End”—depicts the dual world of reality and fantasy, deploying inexhaustible imagination and adventurous word-play—puns, jargon, and nonsensical yet rhythmical dialogues. The first-person narrator relates her Dragon Quest-like nightmare of using the word processor. In the nightmare, she is the cyborg fighter Momoki Tobihebi who lives in Splatter City, the magic town under the control of the male-centered Big Temple. Momoki, fighting against zombies and crow cyborgs, finally reaches the magic mirror, Mandala, and destroys Splatter City.

What Shōno criticizes is the nightmare of fin-de-siècle gender hierarchy in Japan: deploying language and metaphor as her weapons, she fights against the male-centered Japanese society. Momoki, Japanese gender, confronts female zombies and other women in the language of men. The original Cinderella-like plot—with a prince and two sisters, one ugly and the other beautiful, and the marriage of the prince and beautiful sister—is rewritten by Momoki. Unlike the knight in Dragon Quest, who sets off on a journey to save the princess, Shōno’s princess, transforming herself into a snake, devours the prince at the end of the story.

Yoshimoto’s and Shōno’s fantastic style and the motif of transformation are commonly found in the Akutagawa Prize-winning female novelists **Hiromi Kawakami** and Tawada Yōko. Kawakami was a secondary-school science teacher for four years before embarking on her creative-writing career. *Tread on a Snake* presents a contemporary folktale about the erotic supernatural world where the characters live without the ordinary boundary between humans and snakes. The narrator of the story, Hiwako, working at a store selling Pure Land



rosaries, steps on a snake on her way to work. The snake transforms herself into a fifty-ish woman and disappears. When Hiwako returns home, the snake/woman has prepared a dinner and is waiting for her. The woman, claiming she is her mother (although the narrator's mother is still alive somewhere else), knows everything about her private life and begins living in her house. Gradually, Hiwako becomes comfortable eating

dinner with her and finds that all her friends are actually snakes. Rejecting the snake's invitation to their homey world, she accepts the fatal battle with the snake. Snakes in her story, unlike their symbolism of evil in the Judeo-Christian tradition, are very humane and remind us of ancient deities worshipped by Japanese people. Hiwako draws the reader into the mythological, chaotic space where humans and animals used to coexist.

Tawada Yōko moved to Hamburg, Germany, to work for a book export and distribution company in her early twenties. Five years later, she published her first collection of poetry and a novel, *Nur da wo du bist da ist nichts*, in Hamburg. In the 1990s she won many literary awards in both Germany and Japan, including the Förderpreis für Literatur des Freien und Hansestadt Hamburg (1990), the Albert-con-Chamisso Prize (1996),

the Gunzō Prize for New Writers (1991), and the Akutagawa Prize (1993). Tawada, like Kawakami, presents the reader with another supernatural world, employing an absurd, imaginative, and unconventional narrative in both Japanese and German. *The Bridegroom Was a Dog*, inspired by Japanese folktales about human-animal marriages, portrays the bizarre relationship between an eccentric after-school teacher, Mitsuko, and a doglike man,



Taro. Mitsuko, popular among children, tells them bizarre folktales, including a tale about a dog marrying a princess after licking her bottom clean. Like a stray dog, one day Taro suddenly appears and begins to help her with canine devotion. Taro, nervous in the presence of cats and dogs, sniffs her body inexhaustibly and sleeps during the day. Behind this odd inci-

dent, the reader finds Tawada's criticism of the conservative mores of Japanese suburban communities, which reject the outsiders of society. Not only Mitsuko but also his wife, his gay friend Matsubara, and Matsubara's bullied daughter, Fukiko, are different from ordinary people and easily become fodder for the neighborhood gossips. Tawada saves them by sending them off on a meandering trip.

The works by three multitalented authors—former punk rocker Kō Machida, novelist and film critic Kazushige Abe, and former theater director Miri Yū—represent the Japanese style of avant-pop or postpunk novels. Their originality and creative, experimental, yet legitimate approaches shocked readers and critics in the 1990s. **Kō Machida**, who started out as the vocalist and songwriter of a punk-rock group in the 1970s, began writing poems in the early 1990s. His work, strongly influenced by forms in the Japanese oral tradition—especially the comic monologue in Osaka and Tokyo called *rakugo* and storytelling from Osaka called *naniwabushi*—reassembles their rhythms and language techniques in his work. Mixing them with the Osaka dialect and the literary (nonspeaking) language, he creates a melodious, entertaining, and humorous writing style. *Kussun daikoku*, his first novel, is about a man, formerly a musician, who quits his job to assume the lazy life of a drunkard. After his wife leaves him, only a well-balanced statue of the ancient god of wealth and farmers, Daikoku, is left to him. Annoyed by the statue—incessantly smiling even if it falls—Kusunoki wants to throw it away, but he cannot. Observing him lying down on the beach, totally broke, his friend points out that he resembles the statue. Behind the meaningless plot about a nonproductive outsider of the society and his buffoonish attitude toward that society, Machida presents his nihilistic criticism against a contemporary Japan controlled by hyperconsumer capitalism.

Kazushige Abe studied cinema and began making private films while writing fiction in the late 1980s. *Individual Projection*, similar to the Hollywood film *Fight Club*, is a murder mystery written in a diary format. For this work, Abe was recognized as the leader of J-Literature among Japanese literary circles. Onuma, the writer of the diary (a fictional report written for the spy school) as well as one of the kidnapers of the gangster boss, works as a projectionist at the movie theater in Shibuya (where Ryū Murakami's heroine, Hiromi, is negotiating for prostitution with her clients). After experiencing violent fights with gangsters and witnessing murders over the



disappearance of a nuclear explosive during the kidnapping, Onuma begins projecting his alter ego onto his violent and cruel classmate from spy school, Inoue. Abe, exploiting this fictional setting, portrays the empty and callous landscape of noisy Shibuya, flooded by people who are indifferent and cruel to one another.

Korean-Japanese **Miri Yū** formed her own theater group at the age of twenty in 1988. Yū received the Kishida Drama Award for her eighth play, *Festival for the Fish* (1992), then shifted to writing novels. Her parents, both born in South Korea, migrated to Japan during their early childhood, shortly before the outbreak of the Korean War. Her work has no political or critical undertones like other Korean-Japanese works treating



the problems of colonial history and discrimination against Koreans.

Family Cinema is a story about a family similar to Yū's estranged family, which broke up after frequent violent confrontations when she was a teenager. The family, at the filmmaker's request, is making a film about their reunion. The family members, who were separated twenty years ago, reunite for the first time. Whereas the

mother and father are enthusiastic about reenacting the family's old days in front of the camera, their children gradually remember their pain and hatred for the father's violence and their mother's sexual flirtatiousness. They also learn that they are about to lose the only tie for the family, health insurance, because the father is losing his job. While maintaining a humorous tone throughout, the novel depicts the figure of a family whose reality can easily turn fictitious. Their egotistical behaviors and emotional struggles can, in reality, be found within any family. The Korean film director Park Chul-soo created the film version of the novel in 1998, which was coproduced in Korea and Japan. In the film, Yū's sister plays the role of the small sister. Yū received the 116th Akutagawa Award for this work in 1996.

In 1994 **Kenzaburō Ōe** became the second Japanese author to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. *The Burning Green Tree*, written between 1993 and 1995, is a trilogy about atonement and salvation, comprising *Until the "Savior" Gets Socked*, *Vacillating*, and *On the Great Day*. The phrase "burning green tree" derives from a stanza of William Butler Yeats's poem "Vacillation," in which Yeats sings about a tree whose topmost bough is "half all glittering flame and half all green abounding foliage moistened with the dew." Responding to

Yeats's concept, Ōe questions how human beings live by vacillating between two extremities—the body and the soul—and how human beings live and die, relating them to society and the world. Ōe replicates the world of Yeats in the village and forest of his homeland, Shikoku—the smallest of the four major islands in Japan—and its ritual for the spirits of the dead (in which villagers lead the spirit to the forest of the mountain and help it settle at the root of a tree). The tree in the ritual, as a metaphor connecting life and death, symbolizes the cycle of death and rebirth.

The narrator of the story, Sacchan, is an androgyne who has recently undergone a sex-change operation; although she has been reborn as a female, she still has both sexual organs. Sacchan, at the request of Uncle K, is writing a story about Brother Gii. Granny, the dying healer, selects the elite foreign ambassador's American-born son as Brother Gii, the "savior" of the village. He is a survivor of a revolutionary sect from the student movement of the 1960s. Brother Gii reluctantly plays the role of the healer and builds his church, called Burning Green Tree, in the village. Villagers, hostile toward Brother Gii's religious activities, stone him to death. Nevertheless, the story ends in rejoicing, celebrating the rebirth of Brother Gii's spirit.

Although Ōe criticized the subcultural nature and the economic success of such young writers as Haruki Murakami and Banana Yoshimoto in the 1980s, his works joined the list of best-sellers for the first time in his writing career after he received the Nobel Prize. J-Literature in the 1990s may not be what Ōe would term "serious" literature. The tone of the nine works (except for Ōe's work) introduced here overlaps with that of pop-cultural forms. Still, it is also undeniable that many elements consisting of Ōe's experimental spirit can be found in them—attention to the margins of society, the political and social functions of literature, creation of a new "I-novel," and verbal theatrics mixed with fantasy or illusion. Japanese post-war writers still seem to be working on a big project—how to go "beyond Ōe," regardless of the outcome. **WLT**

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