

Four Brief Reviews of Japanese Fiction

KATSUNO'S REVENGE and Other Tales of the Samurai



ASATARO MIYAMORI

by Armando Simón

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This is a collection of fascinating Japanese stories compiled around 1920. They were originally told by story tellers and the topics are about the samurai way of life and death. Loyalty is the sole focus, and tenacious loyalty is glorified in these stories. The stories are very engaging, and they give Westerners a glimpse of the Bushido philosophy—sanitized of course. The best one, and the longest, is *Katsuno's Revenge*, Katsuno being a betrothed maiden whose single minded determination to avenge the murder of her samurai betrothed is successful. And inspiring. Even to Westerners.

The Japanese scholar who gathered these stories together made the observation at the time that although Japan had, at the time, modernized and Westernized to a large degree, the spirit found in those stories still thrived. Since the samurai mythology is still adhered to in Japan even in the 21st century, the stories will help a Westerner understand the modern day culture.

Battle Royale: The Novel by Koushun Takami

In a future Japanese dystopia, a group of teenage students are taken to an isolated island by the government and forced to kill each other until there is only one left alive, a yearly ritual (sound familiar?). Each individual is given one random weapon, a small loaf of bread and a couple of bottles of water, all in a knapsack, then sent out to fend for himself/herself. Although the aim of the contest is for each person to kill every other person, alliances form, always by the relatively inoffensive participants who help each other out and who are simply trying to avoid being killed; two of the students are out and out psychopaths (the female Mitsuko

and the male Kazuo), actively participating in the game all the while enjoying the carnage that they inflict.

Takami shifts the point of view from character to character throughout the book. It's a big novel with a lot of characters background and development, so that you get a good feel for them, although it could be said that it would have been better to just focus on a handful of the participants. The violence is very graphic, and this is a contrast to Collins' *The Hunger Games*; the former is written by a man, and men would be more interested in the mechanics of the battles and the specifics of the injuries. I do have one criticism, which consists in that although several of the characters sustain injuries, they nevertheless undertake physical activity which would be strenuous in normal circumstances.

The fact that the "game" has no rational basis for the government to undertake is brought up by some of the characters themselves, thereby undercutting a criticism that could be made of the book.

The obvious similarity between the two books has led to some grumbling that Collins borrowed/stole the plot from *Battle Royale*.

A Pale View of Hills by Kazuo Ishiguro

This thin book is plotless, focusing instead on character and friction down through the generations when mores were changing. I don't mean this in a derogatory way, since I found the characters interesting. There are a lot of flashbacks to the story. It begins with a visit by Nikki to her mother, Etsuko. There is barely any apparent affection by Nikki towards her mother and Nikki is evasive. Etsuko suggests that marrying and having a family is something that Nikki should consider, but the latter thinks the whole idea odious. At the end of the book, Nikki returns to London and Etsuko is once

again alone (her second husband, a Brit, having died).

However, the bulk of the book is concerned with her flashbacks in Nagasaki, Japan, where Etsuko lived and was previously married. Her father-in-law, Ogata-san, is visiting them but his son, Jiro finds him a nuisance, so there is a lot of evasiveness on his part. Ogata-san wants to play chess and discuss chess with Jiro. The latter pleads tiredness and overwork. Then, Ogata-san reads a newspaper article where a former pupil of his condemns the entire previous malignant educational system as producing robots; the father wants to demand an apology from the writer. Jiro is uninterested in doing so and secretly agrees with the writer. All of this friction is played out in a very Japanese manner, which is through subtle (and not so subtle) hinting and never being confrontational. Throughout, Etsuko is being a mediator between them.

Another pair of characters is Sachiko and her daughter Mariko. Sachiko is neurotic and the epitome of a bad mother; in fact, a painful episode towards the end makes me think of her as being truly evil. At any rate, Mariko does not obey her mother and runs wild instead of going to school. She ignores the adults. When the three go out to a tourist spot, they meet a mother and son ("tubby"), the latter being as ill-mannered as Mariko.

Some have criticized this book as leaving the reader hanging, which is true if one is reading the story from a plot-centered perspective.

I Am A Cat by Natsume Soseko

This book is the cat's pajamas. It is a gem, about a cat that enters the home of a teacher who is a mediocrity and makes himself at home. There is no real plot to the thick book, but instead a continual commentary on human beings from the cat's

perspective. A number of eccentric characters, either visitors, neighbors, or family members add spice to the commentary, from a Zen master to a neglected wife, to a college student who takes hours to tell a story about his buying a violin.

As with some Western writers (Charles Dickens, Ayn Rand, Sinclair Lewis), Soseki gives odd names to some of the characters; instead of leaving the names in the original Japanese, their names are translated (e.g., Mr. Coldmoon).

I realized that, while reading it, there were a lot of things that went over my head because of cultural differences, so there was a lot of humor that I missed. For example, in the original Japanese the way "I am a cat" is written is in a pompous, self-important tone. Nonetheless, when I wasn't smiling about the cat's comments, or thinking about them, I was laughing my head off. This is at least one Japanese book that Westerners should definitely read.

Armando Simón is the author of *Wichita Women* and *This That and the Other*.