



In the Province of the Gods

Kenny Fries

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Beneath the restrained tones, there's also elation.

In the Province of the Gods is a delicately wrought memoir that chronicles shifts in self-perception. Kenny Fries examines spiritual, historical, and cultural facets of Japan while simultaneously mourning the end of a relationship and braving HIV.

Born disabled, Jewish, gay—used to being an outsider in America—the author realizes, to his surprise, that in Japan, none of these identities holds as much significance as being a gaijin. Foreignness becomes a complex privilege that removes barriers, while anxieties about disability recede in the presence of people who regard it as a “physical fact.”

Through encounters with Japanese friends and meditative forays through gardens, butoh, Tokyo’s neon districts, Lafcadio Hearn’s writings, Hiroshima Maidens, and Japanese icons, Fries comes to regard mortality in new ways. A return to the United States at the end of the fellowship and second trip back on a Fulbright reaffirms the profound impact that being abroad has had on his outlook.

Chapters effectively depict the struggles of a scholar who tracks leads for his research, occasionally fails in seeing the wider picture, and who learns that the project he’d initially imagined has shifted. The process of absorbing facts and lore turns out to be more important than making sense of the material.

Midway, the story morphs into the far more intimate account of a man learning to be at home no matter the circumstances. The concept of *mono no aware*—being moved by and perceiving the impermanence of things—informs events that come to include an unexpected diagnosis as well as newfound love in Sapporo.

Acknowledging that a foreign point of view can lead, on occasion, to Orientalism—a passing worry when the author finds himself composing imagistic poems in response to Japanese gardens—Fries nevertheless dives headlong into the opportunity given to him. Beneath the restrained tones, there’s also elation. Especially moving sections detail responses to live performances. Other noteworthy sections highlight the effects of distance and time on the author’s ideas on differences, both real and imagined.

This unusual blend of travelogue and introspection manages elegance and rawness in the same breath.

KAREN RIGBY (University Press 2017)

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