

Japanese Literature: From Murasaki to Murakami

Marvin Marcus

Association for Asian Studies (September 2015)

Softcover \$12.00 (132pp)

978-0-924304-77-4

Marcus offers sundry lessons and incites a new appreciation for Japan's culture, history, and literature.

“Compared with its ubiquitous commercial products,” Marvin Marcus writes, “the literature of Japan is little known”—thus the impetus for *Japanese Literature: From Murasaki to Murakami*. In only 132 pages, Marcus packs manifold cultural, historical, and literary lessons. With simple, straightforward prose, he showcases the diversity of form and content.

In the introduction, Marcus writes, “Japan may be a study in contrasts—the frenetic, postmodern cities and popular cultures icons on the one hand, and the transcendent ethereal domains of tea ceremony and Zen meditation on the other.” He grounds each literary tradition with historical precedence. A place’s events, traditions, and texts are inextricable, he claims, explaining the influence of Confucianism and Buddhism, and he even doles out a language lesson: “The Chinese roots of this civilization were honored by Japanese elites,” he says, and then proceeds to break down the *kanji*, or the Japanese syllable system.

Marcus is interested in the branches of literature, how one form leads to another and how they might eventually echo or connect back to earlier forms. Sometimes, form emerges from the political structure. During the imperial rule of the 700s, the *Kojiki*, which was “the Japanese version of the biblical Genesis,” was written. Early Japanese writers had a penchant for creating tightly structured poetry; they honored the craft alongside religious tradition. Ninth-century Kyoto poets gravitated toward the *waka*, a thirty-one syllable poem “that would become a way of life—a michi.”

Marcus compresses whole periods, sometimes covering hundreds of years within one paragraph. These moments are well chosen and rarely, if ever, warrant skimming. When describing the *renga* composition, Marcus says, “Its fusion of poetic cultivation, intuitive interaction ... and mastery of complex rules and techniques calls to mind jazz improvisation at a virtuoso level of group performance.”

The editor’s introduction predicts that *Japanese Literature* “will successfully introduce students and instructors in undergraduate survey and honors high school literature courses to one of Asia’s greatest literary traditions.” Even those far beyond said institutions will find plenty to contemplate.

JOSH COOK (Fall 2015)

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