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Autobiography & Memoir

Modern Girls, Shining Stars, the Skies of Tokyo: Five Japanese Women
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Columbia University Press
978-0-231-11356-4
(February 15, 1999)

In a successful compilation, even a mini-biographical sketch can have the effect of eliciting energized interest in the subject with a wish to pursue reading. And Birnbaum delivers five such sketches in *Modern Girls, Shining Stars, The Skies of Tokyo: Five Japanese Women*. She surprises the reader with her portraits of five twentieth century Japanese women, all artists in varying genres, all irreverent and unreflective of the customs of their day, all isolated by their individualism, and all at present dead. She has brought ample research to each essay, frequently quoting the women themselves or writings about them found in contemporary books and newspapers.

Hardly subtle in depicting these five strong women-and discussing their lives with wit and humor-Birnbaum begins her essays with Matsui Sumako. “On the list of women who have single-handedly wrecked the lives of Japanese literati, Matsui Sumako has been given a prominent place.” Many reminiscences and biographies have been written about this Japanese actress, implying her responsibility for a lover’s fever, his “financial dilemmas, (and) the lonely look in his eye.” Sumako specialized onstage in portraying-with great skill-Western-style women, including images evoked from Ibsen’s Nora, and from Salome and Carmen. While raving about her hypnotic and seductive performances, the press also castigated her treatment of her husband, whom she met while he was an already married, weak-willed man with several children.

Next in the line of essays are Takamura Chieko and Yanagiwara Byakuren. Chieko was a painter who, being very shy and overpowered by her sculptor/poet husband, never quite became promising enough for recognition. Her chief claim to fame was the book of poems he wrote about their seemingly idyllic life. Unlike Chieko, writer Byakuren did not remain in the position of subservient wife. Living during a time where the old Japanese custom of the men determining the fate of the women in the family was being replaced by women becoming

independent and taking charge of their own lives, she was married at sixteen to an oaf who had been sexually abusing her for years, and forced again to marry a crude millionaire whose children and mistress lived with them. Byakuren finally broke free and went into hiding with an editor with leftist ideas and, after a while, they lived openly together, had a child, and finally announced her divorce from her husband in the newspapers.

The other modern girls mentioned are Uno Chiyo and Takamine Hideko. Chiyo, a beautiful journalist, had "made her mark early by publishing stormy love stories based on her own entanglements. While other women writers of her generation wrote of social issues such as the excess of militarists and hunger on city streets, she stuck to the smaller world of personal heartbreak" in which she became famous for her passionate descriptions. Hideko, an actress, became a famous Japanese movie star.

Birnbaum, in her preface notes that "these five women are perhaps connected only by their taste for independence, their talent and my affinity for them," but there is more than that that connects them: it is the humor and insight Birnbaum brings to her interpretation of their lives. These women, caught between centuries-old views of marriage (the "proper" place of women) and the slowly emerging concept of women who, self-determining in their life choices, were unfortunately still caught in the web of ancient traditional thinking. They are, however, still inspirational and are viewed with wonderful ironic touches by Birnbaum.

Hannah Merker