



# International Fiction Book Club

**Yu Miri – *Tokyo Ueno Station***

Monday 21 June 2021, 6.30pm by Zoom

The fourteenth meeting of the Litfest International Fiction Book Club was held by Zoom on Monday 21 June 2021 at 6.30pm.

We discussed *Tokyo Ueno Station* by Yu Miri, translated from the Japanese by Morgan Giles, and published in paperback and as an eBook by Tilted Axis Press.

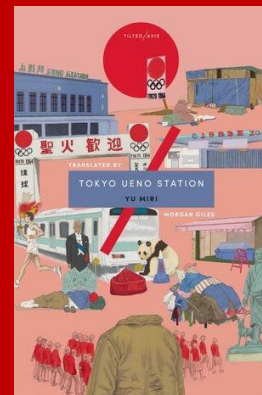
## About the Book

'Kazu's painful past and ghostly present are the subject of ... the latest book by Korean-Japanese author Yu Miri ... It's a relatively slim novel that packs an enormous emotional punch, thanks to Yu's gorgeous, haunting writing and Morgan Giles' wonderful translation'

**Michael Schaub, [npr.org](http://npr.org)**

'How Kazu comes to be homeless, and then to haunt the park, is what keeps us reading, trying to understand the tragedy of this ghostly everyman. Deftly translated by

**Morgan Giles' [Lauren Elkin, Guardian](http://LaurenElkin.com)**



We chose this book for its restrained but powerful portrayal of a homeless man who had worked on building sites for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and now, as preparations for the 2020 games are being made, finds himself one of many living in the park next to the station.

If you haven't read *Tokyo Ueno Station* yet, we hope you will. Time differences between the UK and Australia prevented Tony Malone, whose blog Tony's reading list is essential for anyone interested in what's new in fiction in translation, and who incidentally is the instigator of the Shadow Booker International Prize, from joining us on the day but he kindly answered our questions by email.

**Tony** Thanks for all the interesting questions. I've done my best to respond to them to the best of my abilities, but please bear in mind that I'm not an expert, just a reader with an interest in Japan and Japanese literature, so my views should be taken with a pinch of salt, and certainly not regarded as facts!

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**Bill** The structure of the novel is unusual, with the impoverished lives of the homeless, once working people – like the narrator Kazu – foregrounded, while more prosperous figures are given walk-on parts created by snatches of overheard dialogue, providing often grotesque comic relief, or introducing ideas of beauty (thinking of the two ladies discussing the exhibition of Redouté rose paintings). With this in mind, would it be fair to describe the experience of reading the novel as almost like looking at a frieze, but a frieze animated by a strong sense of social justice rather than, say, a concern for the inner lives of its characters?

**Tony** It's interesting that you mention the roses as I felt that the people caught in passing played a very similar role to them, in that they were merely there for decoration or scenery... This is very much a novel focusing on the wretched (*les misérables?*) of the capital, and beyond, with the more fortunate merely part of the background, and Yu Miri's afterword certainly confirmed this focus on the poorer characters (with an intriguing hint of more to come in subsequent works, albeit in a different direction). As for the frieze idea, there's something to that, but I think the writer also simply wants to show us a number of the people who make their home in the park, and help us to see that they're just as unique as 'normal' folk, rather than lumping them all together as 'the homeless'.

**'This is very much a novel focusing on the wretched (*les misérables?*) of the capital'**

**Sam** Is this the kind of book that could have been written only by an outsider? The social and political critiques (including perhaps an implicit critique of the Japanese monarchy) are acerbic. Are there any politically engaged Japanese authors writing similar works?

**Lisa** Are there other notable works of Japanese fiction, written by Japanese authors that shed light on the 'underbelly' of Japan? And how are they received by Japanese readers?

**Tony** These two questions can perhaps be answered together here. I don't think it takes a complete outsider as such, just someone willing to focus on events away from the centre of Japanese life, and there are many authors who do so. One writer I recall was Kenji Nakagami, whose works (such as *The Cape and Other Stories*: translated by Eve Zimmerman, published by Stone Bridge Press) were mainly set among the *burakumin*, the lower-caste Japanese whose existence is often denied or played down. Another is Teru Miyamoto, and I enjoyed his trilogy of novellas *Rivers* (tr. Ralph F. McCarthy & Roger K. Thomas, Kurodahan Press) that take place in the night economy of Osaka.

In terms of more contemporary writers, it might be best to try some genre fiction (not my area, I'm afraid!), and anything by Natsuo Kirino or Keigo Higashino will show a much bleaker side to Japanese life than you might have experienced before.

**Stephen** What is the place of 'ghosts' and an afterlife in Japanese culture, traditions and belief systems?

**Tony** Just from trying this book, Anglophone readers will immediately see that the dead appear to play a much larger role in everyday life than is the case in our societies. Yu Miri discusses Obon, the festival of the dead, and describes funerals and the days of observances that take place over the forty-nine days after the departed passes away. This idea of the dead still being a part of our lives can also be seen in the way many Japanese homes still have altars and shrines as an integral part of the household, and there's a sense that they're never too far away, looking out for their relatives and descendants (who have a responsibility to keep their memory alive).

**'The dead appear to play a much larger role in everyday life than is the case in our societies'**

One recent literary example of a 'ghost' story (in the non-scary sense) was a tale called 'Kirara's Paper Plane', included in Kyōko Nakajima's collection *Things Remembered and Things Forgotten* (tr. Ian McCullough MacDonald & Ginny Tapley Takemori, Granta Books). The piece features the ghost of a boy who died in 1951 and who returns to life from time to time for no reason. This time around he latches onto a daughter neglected by her mother when he realises the little girl can see him, and wonders if he'll finally be able to rest for good this time when he goes to sleep...

**Kane** Why was it so important for the translator to travel to and build up an understanding of the locations in which the book is set?

**Tony** I completely agree with this idea, and I think most people find it far easier to write about something if you know it and can see it. I'm sure that Morgan Giles would have benefited greatly from seeing first-hand what Yu was writing about, even if it was just little things like the location of the station entrances, how the benches looked or the structure of the makeshift huts. I'm a hobby translator myself (from German, not Japanese!), and when you're not quite sure how best to translate an idea, it's often the case that images will help you find the right word - being able to spend time in the book's setting, then, must be of enormous value to any translator.

**Rebecca** Some of us thought there was a lack of character development/ empathy created – but we also wondered if the very fact of choosing to narrate the story of someone from a less privileged part of society was, in the Japanese context of more restrained emotions, actually very powerful for the original target audience?

**Kim** There was a 'flatness' about the book and the emotional life of the main protagonist which I've noticed before in other Japanese translated books. I was wondering if this is an aspect of the language or an aspect of the culture that is reflected?

**Tony** Again, I'd like to answer these questions together, or rather reflect the questions back at everyone. In speaking of 'lack of empathy' and 'flatness', we're using very loaded words, pushing towards an answer and judging the text on Anglophone terms. We might just as easily ask why the writer's work is so subtle or understated, or wonder why Japanese books aren't as brash or exaggerated as Anglophone fiction. Of course, Japanese culture and literature expresses itself differently to what we might be accustomed to, and judging it by imagined western norms will rarely lead to successful outcomes. Personally, I find the book to be hugely moving, and amping up the emotion would have made it far less successful.

**Margaret** I was very interested in the point about its having been written in dialect. I totally understand why the translator would not attempt that (same as for the train noises), but I do wonder then how much of the style or personality may have been lost. And is there a 'Japanese in translation' style? This might be something Tony, having read so many Japanese novels in translation, could comment on.

**Tony** This is less an issue specific to Japanese than one applicable to all literature in translation. When a writer uses dialect in a novel, it's their choice, and the reader has to accept that they'll be reading dialogue with tinges of Glasgow, Osaka, Busan or Shanghai. However, when a work is brought over into English, any attempt to differentiate this dialect

**'When a work is brought over into English any attempt to differentiate dialect is fraught with difficulty'**

is fraught with difficulty. Now it's the translator's arbitrary choice, and whatever they decide to do, someone (probably most people) will be unhappy. In truth, one of the most important tasks for anyone involved in translation is to find a market, and there has been a tendency recently to move towards a 'mid-Atlantic' norm, where words marked too heavily as American or (especially) British are avoided so that readers aren't put off – but perhaps I should leave this topic to the people who actually know the most about it...

There are several examples of how this does and doesn't work. On several occasions I've seen American translators use a southern drawl as a marker for more 'rustic' Japanese dialects – as someone who grew up in England and now lives in Australia, I just find that annoying. Many of you will have read, or at least have heard of, Mieko Kawakami's *Breasts and Eggs* (Picador), but long before Sam Bett and David Boyd translated it, Louise Heal Kawai had an extract done in Manchester dialect published at *Words Without Borders*. It's a wonderfully bawdy piece, but sadly (with an eye to attracting as wide an international audience as possible), this was never likely to be sustainable over the whole book.

One example of successfully bringing dialect into English can be seen if we move away from Japanese literature. In 2017, Roy Jacobsen's *The Unseen* (MacLehose Press) was shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize (as it was then called), and much of the dialogue was in dialect, reflecting the position of the protagonists, inhabitants of a tiny island off the Norwegian coast. The two translators, Don Bartlett and Don Shaw, created their own dialect, a mixture of Yorkshire and Scots, and it works wonderfully – I'm not sure I'd recommend that every translator do this, though!

**Penny** I'm keen to know of other, approachable, novels that you could recommend as a companion to this book.

**Tony** I'm always happy to suggest J-Lit to try! Here's a short list of titles that those new to Japanese literature might enjoy:

*The Housekeeper and the Professor* by Yoko Ogawa  
(tr. Stephen Snyder: Vintage)

*Strange Weather in Tokyo* by Hiromi Kawakami  
(tr. Allison Markin Powell: Granta Books)

*Convenience Store Woman* by Sayaka Murata  
(tr. Ginny Tapley Takemori: Granta Books)

*The Little House* by Kyoko Nakajima  
(tr. Ginny Tapley Takemori: Darf Publishers)

*Ms Ice Sandwich* by Mieko Kawakami  
(tr. Louise Heal Kawai: Pushkin Press)

*The Hunting Gun* by Yasushi Inoue  
(tr. Michael Emmerich: Pushkin Press)

*Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami  
(tr. Jay Rubin: Vintage)

*69* by Ryu Murakami  
(tr. Ralph McCarthy: Pushkin Press)

*Kitchen* by Banana Yoshimoto  
(tr. Megan Backus: Faber & Faber)

*Shipwrecks* by Akira Yoshimura  
(tr. Mark Ealey: Canongate Books)

**Tony Malone** is an occasional ESL teacher and full-time reader who has been publishing his thoughts on literature in translation at the *Tony's Reading List* blog (<https://tonysreadinglist.wordpress.com>) for just over 12 years now. Although he occasionally translates from German, his main literary interests lie in Asia, with a keen focus on Korean and, especially, Japanese fiction.

**Bill Swainson** is a freelance editor and literary consultant and co-convenor, with Sam O'Donoghue, Lecturer in Spanish at Lancaster University, of the *Litfest International Fiction Book Club*.

## Next Meeting

The next book to be discussed at the Litfest International Fiction Book Club on **Monday 19 July at 6.30pm** will be Fernando Melchor's *Hurricane Season*, translated from the Spanish by Sophie Hughes, and published in paperback and eBook by Fitzcarraldo Editions.

'This is the Mexico of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* or Roberto Bolaño's *2666*, where the extremes of evil create a pummelling, hyper-realistic effect'  
**Sam Sacks, Wall Street Journal**

'A tremendously vital piece of work. Searing and urgent and cut through with pain ... Fernanda Melchor and Sophie Hughes have achieved something remarkable here'  
**Jon McGregor, author of Reservoir 13**

HURRICANE  
SEASON

FERNANDA MELCHOR

Fitzcarraldo Editions