

I was seduced in the Selkirk College Library by the cover of a displayed book. Pink and purple background with a fetching photo of the author in the fore. Her name is Banana Yoshimoto and the book's title is NP.

I have a weakness for English translations of Japanese literature. Twenty years ago I was a graduate student in the Forest Chemistry Lab at the University of Tokyo on a Rotary Foundation Scholarship. I spent much time on subways and like other commuters, I read.

Japan boasts the world's highest literacy rate. In a capitalist context, this creates a publisher's dream. North American publishers would kill for an equivalent chance at such high volume sales with such short distance distribution costs. With a domestic gold mine, Japanese publishers rarely bother with niche markets like translating books for the rest of the world. This reticence is often justified with the self-effacing comment that foreigners won't understand Japanese culture.

In truth, their literary isolation occludes Japanese perspectives in global discussion to the mutual disadvantage of the Japanese and the rest of the world. The Japanese economy is one of the big three, comparable to the US and the European Union. We swim in American writing, most of us can wade uneasily through literature in some other European language, but we metaphorically drown in illiteracy at the sight of a Japanese coffee shop menu.

While in Tokyo, I frequented Jimbocho, a quarter filled with used bookstores and discount cinema. Remarkably, in Jimbocho, I attended a retrospective of Quebecois films that I'd never seen in Canada. I also started to collect and read Japanese novels translated into English. Some of what I discovered are *A Fool's Love* by Tanizaki Junichiro; *Lemon* by Kajii Motojiri; *The Izu Dancer* by Kawabata Yasunari; *The Hundred Views of Fuji* by Dazai Osamu; *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* by Mishima Yukio and *Silence* by Endo Shusaku.

Japanese novels, like Japan itself, were unlike anything I had experienced previously. They varied as much as the work of Margaret Atwood, Stephen Leacock, and W.O. Mitchell, but in their aggregate, I started to hear voices of Japan. Because I was living in Japan, some of the cultural and geographical references began to make sense. I found myself visiting temples, shrines, neighbourhoods and other locations, and trying food or attending events described in the novels.

Well, NP is an awful book. I read it in a few hours and I felt cheated that I had forfeited that bit of my life to such tripe. It's the inane story, or non-story, of a handful of narcissistic youth wandering through a generic mall culture and fretting over trivialities. There are no insights, no humour, no poetry in NP. It isn't even a satisfying escape. So why was it published at all and then translated into English?

NP is billed as Banana Yoshimoto's second novel although more likely it's doodles from old shopping lists. It was presumably rushed to the presses to reap further the success of her first novel, *Kitchen*.

*Kitchen* was on the Japanese best-seller list for over a year and sold by the millions. I found *Kitchen* in the Castlegar Library. *Kitchen* is a delightful novel or in fact two novellas. *Kitchen* fills the first two thirds of the book, while *Moonlight Shadows* occupies the last third. Both stories are whimsically romantically tragic. I was thoughtfully engaged and chuckling happily by these entertaining spins on universally human, not just Japanese, experiences.

In *Kitchen*, Yoshimoto speaks through a veil of Japanese culture, sharing an after dinner tale of global appeal.