



American Fuji

A Novel

BY SARA BACKER

HARDCOVER: G.P. PUTNAM'S SONS, MARCH 2001

373 PAGES. ISBN 0-399-14691-1

PAPERBACK: BERKELEY PUBLISHING GROUP, MARCH 2002

416 PAGES. ISBN 0-425-18336-X

Sara Backer's first book, *American Fuji*, can be read on three overlapping levels. First, it is an enjoyable, often humorous mystery novel tinged with romantic tension. Second, it is a witty, even erudite social commentary on Japanese society, expatriate life, and intercultural relations. Third, *American Fuji* is conceptually about human nature, especially the ability and adaptability of people who are categorized as outside the mainstream to find their niche in society—and for some to find themselves.

The story line revolves around two protagonists, Gabriella Stanton and Alexander Thorn, and takes place mostly in Shizuoka, with Mt. Fuji as a constant background presence.¹ Gabriella (Gaby), still bitter over being fired from her position as an English professor at Shizuyama University nearly a year earlier, sells fantasy funerals for a company called *Gone With The Wind*, or *Cone Whizzer Window*, as pronounced by Gaby's co-worker, Rie. Originally from Portland, Oregon, Gaby has lived in Japan for five years and prefers to remain despite the hassles of being a *gaijin* ("outside person") and a single woman in a paternalistic society.² She also has ulcerative colitis, a chronic, "shameful" illness she tries to conceal from others.³ Alexander Thorn, psychologist, author of a self-help book titled *Why Love Fails*, and divorced, is visiting Japan for the first time. His son Cody, a student at Shizuyama University, died in a motorcycle accident one year earlier, and Alex is on an emotional quest to uncover more information about his son's tragic death. As mysterious connections emerge between Alex's quest and Gaby's former and current employers, the two hesitatingly begin to work together to find the answers.

The book's other notable characters are: Mr. Eguchi, Gaby's Beatles'-lyrics-loving boss at *Gone With The Wind*; English Professor and Zen priest Marubatsu, Gaby's former boss and constant obstacle in Alex's search for answers; Lester Hollingsworth, a

Brit, part-time English teacher and full-time imbecile; Michael McKenzie, a naïve but nice Aussie who replaced Gaby at Shizuyama University; Mr. Aoshima, Gaby's customer with a transplanted heart who buys a "Moon Package" fantasy funeral so he can fly to Nirvana in style; and Rie, Gaby's female co-worker who revels in detective work and walks with a permanent limp because of a malformed foot. At some point, the reader realizes that none of the characters in *American Fuji* fit the stereotype of tea-serving office ladies, geisha, stressed-out salarymen, exhausted factory workers, or elderly rice farmers with ungrateful children—all of whom normally populate the fictional and non-fictional worlds of postwar Japan. There aren't even any American businessmen complaining about getting screwed by Japan Inc.

In one or more ways, the significant characters in *American Fuji* are, like Gaby, people typically categorized as inhabiting the margins of Japanese society. Consciously or not, they are misfits, outsiders, and nonconformists. Gaby realizes this when Mr. Eguchi asks her if she might return to the United States:

Ironically, in a country where conformity is crucial, she'd been let off the hook. As a *gaijin*, she was expected not to fit in and her illness was—at last!—irrelevant. And while she attracted too much attention, a lot of it unpleasant, she also attracted Japanese nonconformists. The refreshing, buoyant spirit of Eguchi, Rie, or Aoshima—she had never found people like them in America.⁴

Backer's nonconformist characters are often exaggerated, and paradoxically, quite believable. Their personal traits, thoughts, conversations, and even the way Japanese pronounce English words are often uncannily real to any Westerner who has spent time living in Japan.

The one major exception is Alexander Thorn. For a non-fiction American psychologist, author of a book, and grieving parent, Japanese in the real world would roll out the red carpet every step of his way. In the fictional world of *American Fuji*, however,

ESSAY BOOK REVIEWS

Japan and Japanese are often the target of Backer's critical wit and humor, and there's no doubt some Japanese will take offense and may even regard American Fuji as a "Japan bashing" novel. This would be a mistake.

Thorn is constantly confronted by inconsiderate and shabby treatment from his Japanese hosts. Thorn himself concocts one ridiculous conspiracy theory after another, and has more (mis)adventures within a few days than any non-fiction American would have after living in Japan for several years. Thorn has his moments of revelation and poignancy, including in the book's final scene. Yet his character seems overwrought.

The characters in *American Fuji* are the central story and theme of the book, not the mystery of Cody Thorn's death. All major characters are nonconformists alienated in one or more ways from what is typically thought of as "mainstream" Japanese society. Their nonconformist status in a society that traditionally values harmony, homogeneity, and hierarchy reveals them to be individuals searching for their place in society. They are pieces of a human nature puzzle that, as assembled by Backer, reveals to us a portrait of modern Japan, a portrait that questions the stereotyped image of Japan. Moreover, the nonconformists and misfits brought to life in Shizuoka are not exclusive to Japan; they are integral to every society.

Additional themes are woven into the mystery story line. One of these is gender. Backer continually exposes the double standard that exists in the ways women and men are treated in Japan—and in many other societies. Another theme is illness and health care.

Gaby's relatively easy access to health care in Japan is one reason she remains in the country. Some Americans who have lived in Japan might scoff at this rationale. The variable quality of health care and interminable waits in the *sensei's* office can actually conjure up a brief, favorable memory of one's HMO back in the states. Gaby herself runs into a significant problem with Japan's health care system. Yet, there is substantial validity to the message that Japan has a workable national health care system for the whole country, while the United States has a confusing morass of expensive private health care systems that leave tens of millions of people with inadequate health care.⁵

American Fuji discusses several elements of modern Japanese society with keen wit. For example, describing Alexander Thorn's initial brush with the mentality of Japanese uniqueness, Backer writes, "In only three days, Alex had heard so many speeches starting 'In Japan, we' or 'We Japanese'" that the words angered him, those little red flags of superiority, recitations of the Great Japanese Myth of Uniqueness."⁶ And dozens of examples of wit and humor describe the mundane smells, sights, and textures of everyday life in Japan. The extreme ritual challenge of moral and gastronomic acceptance for any Westerner in Japan, for example, is to eat a bowl of *natto*. Backer describes *natto* with unimpeachable precision as "a fermented bean specialty that

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smelled like athlete's foot."⁷ Her knowledge of what Japanese think about Americans is skillfully demonstrated in many passages, including Eguchi paying the "ultimate compliment" to Alexander Thorn. Alex, Eguchi told Gaby, wasn't "a typical American."⁸ Backer is also cognizant that many Japanese do not like Americans because "they required so much baby-sitting and never repaid the debt they incurred."⁹

Japan and Japanese are often the target of Backer's critical wit and humor, and there's no doubt some Japanese will take offense and may even regard *American Fuji* as a "Japan bashing" novel. This would be a mistake. Bashing Japan is certainly not among the purposes of this novel—which is, after all, a fictional story. Nor is there any implication in the book that "the American way" (whatever that is) is better than "the Japanese way" (ditto). The critical wit and humor in *American Fuji* is carefully aimed at the stereotypical image of Japan as a society where everyone is allegedly devoted to harmony, homogeneity, and hierarchy. And this image has been promoted just as often by Westerners as it has by Japanese themselves.

On the surface, *American Fuji* is a mystery novel set in "exotic" cultural terrain, and veers into some odd twists and turns before concluding in empathy and self-revelation. On a deeper level, this carefully crafted work explores social issues of modern Japan, intercultural relations, and human nature as revealed by nonconformists. These issues are thought-provoking, and can be discussed and debated in humanities and social sciences courses on Japan-United States relations, modern Japan, sociology, and modern literature. Despite a few *faux pas*, Sara Backer has written an enjoyable and perceptive novel. ■

NOTES

1. Shizuoka is approximately halfway between Tokyo and Kyoto on the Pacific Ocean side of Honshu Island. Compared to Japan's biggest cities of Tokyo, Yokohama, and Osaka, Shizuoka is a relatively conservative city.
2. After graduating from Oregon State University and then from the creative writing program at University of California, Davis, Sara Backer spent three years as a visiting English professor at Shizuoka University. She has also published poems and short stories.
3. One of the illnesses classified as inflammatory bowel disease, or IBD.
4. *American Fuji*, paperback edition, p. 366.
5. Ironically, it was General Douglas MacArthur and American Occupation officials who forced an unwilling Japanese government to create a national health care system in the late 1940s, even though the United States did not (and does not) have its own comprehensive national health care system.
6. *American Fuji*, paperback edition, p. 35.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 214.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 374–75.

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distributed by University of Hawaii Press
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