

BOOK REVIEWS

Ash

A Novel

BY HOLLY THOMPSON

BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA: STONE BRIDGE PRESS, 2001

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“Join the JET Programme and discover Japan,” advertises the Web site of the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program, www.mofa.go.jp/j_info/visit/jet/. Established in 1987, this government program, bringing recent college graduates from overseas to teach English in Japan, now boasts more than 30,000 past and present participants.

Holly Thompson, in her novel *Ash*, set in the Kyushu city of Kagoshima in 1985, traces the discoveries made by one such young American teacher in Japan. Caitlan, the protagonist, has an assignment in the similar but smaller scale program that preceded JET, the MEF, or Monbusho English Fellows. Although her teaching experience forms one strand of the story, readers gradually learn that what has really brought Caitlan to Japan is a quest to understand and come to terms with the death of a childhood friend in Kyoto fifteen years earlier. Daughter of an American scholar of Japanese religion who

had brought his family to Japan for a year of research, Caitlan and her entire family had been devastated by the death of her Japanese playmate in a drowning accident. While Caitlan’s search is essentially individual and subjective, only tangentially linked to her teaching position, her discoveries about guilt, religion, and family support come through the wisdom and compassion of Japanese characters in the novel—the family of her childhood friend, the elderly widow of a Zen priest, a high school girl of both American and Japanese parentage, and Caitlan’s Japanese boyfriend. In her final reconciliation, Caitlan does, in fact, “discover Japan.”

Readers, likewise, will be drawn into Caitlan’s world, sharing her exploration of the events from fifteen years earlier. Backed by meticulous research, Thompson’s novel introduces a variety of topics that can be usefully pursued by high school or college level students studying contemporary Japan: details of geography and daily life, the role of O-Bon and beliefs about death, the challenges faced by bicultural and bilingual children growing up in Japan, and the double vision developed by expatriate Caitlan herself.

Thompson has avoided the overworked topics of geisha and samurai that find ready audiences in the West, instead presenting daily life in this ash-showered city. An intriguing phenomenon in itself, the ash produced by Sakurajima’s volcanic activity also provides a metaphor for the stifling miasma that descends on Caitlan each summer as the anniversary of the accident approaches.

The Kyoto to which Caitlan is inexorably drawn is today’s essentially middle class city. Between 1970 and 1985, for example, the dates of Caitlan’s childhood stay in Kyoto and her return, the former neighborhood had been fully rebuilt, the old wooden houses that lacked plumbing replaced by modern two-story dwellings. Familiar families and friends remain, although the new home of the Oide family, who welcome Caitlan after her fifteen-year absence, now contains a *butsudan*, household shrine, adorned with a picture of her seven-year-old friend Mie, frozen in childhood.

Caitlan’s conversations with members of this family, with an elderly widow of a priest who remembers the accident, and with her Japanese boyfriend Hiroshi, are a strength of this novel. Inclusion of dialogue by speakers of another language presents a writer with several choices: in an approach that may celebrate difference, but that also risks condescension or even mockery, the non-native speaker’s lines can be rendered verbatim, replete with nonstandard grammar and unidiomatic expressions; in a more common solution, the lines can be modified to retain just a few “exotic” expressions reminding readers of the speaker’s original language, or, in a linguistic leap, language barriers can be ignored altogether. Thompson has solved the problem by making Caitlan a fluent speaker of Japanese, who, in Kagoshima, lives almost entirely within the Japanese community. Indeed, her early friendship with Mie in Kyoto had been completely through the medium of Japanese, and we are told that she had studied Japanese in college. Consequently, readers are led to assume that, outside of her teaching duties, nearly all of Caitlan’s interactions with Japanese characters in the novel are conducted in Japanese, as signaled by use of italics. While the flavor of individual speech patterns disappears in this solution, readers are led to focus on the content rather than form of language, as the Japanese characters speak in natural, fluent, and articulate cadences. “*But you mustn’t be crippled by guilt. Learn to hold onto some thoughts, but let others, like guilt and*

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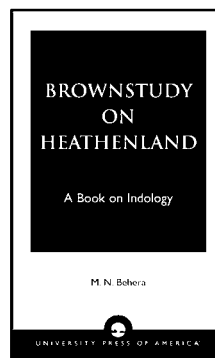
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regret, pass on," advises the priest's widow, recalling the traumatized Caitlan she had seen at the scene of the accident.

Caitlan's talks with troubled fourteen-year-old Naomi, whose father is American and mother Japanese, however, are entirely in English, as signaled by the lack of italics and by bilingual Naomi's very occasional slips in diction. Aside from Caitlan herself, Naomi is the most fully-drawn character of the novel. Distraught by the belief that in spite of her prowess in Japanese school and in the *shōdō* or calligraphy club, she will "never be Japanese in *their* eyes," and despairing that the citizenship law will require her at age twenty to choose between "Jap or ugly American," Naomi has written a suicide note when Caitlan first meets her by chance at a mountain park. Naomi's self absorption mirrors Caitlan's own less articulate distress. Like Caitlan, Naomi punishes herself for the wish to retain duality. Convinced that leaving her home in Kagoshima in favor of education at an international school in Kyoto will allow her to develop both of her cultures more fully, Naomi has puzzlingly dropped out of the *shōdō* circle at her Japanese school. While relatives see this as symptomatic of either depression or lack of commitment, Naomi later explains to Caitlan that she needs to test herself to discover whether she is truly interested in *shōdō* as an art, or whether she simply enjoys proving her mastery of a skill so traditionally Japanese. With an expatriate's longing, Caitlan sometimes pictures in detail the large house and lawn of her childhood home in Pittsburgh. Naomi faces a parallel type of homesickness in her own country, as she struggles with the decision to enroll in a school that she believes will estrange her from Japan, but prepare her more fully for life outside. Somewhat unwillingly, Caitlan responds to Naomi's appeal for help, and her grudging acceptance of this responsibility ultimately helps Caitlan to overcome the legacy of guilt over Mie's death that has troubled her since childhood.

The novel's satisfying conclusion ties together past and present, as well as the important subplots, and although readers are left to speculate on the young women's futures, both Caitlan and Naomi are healthier and stronger. If there is a weakness in the novel, it may be Thompson's tendency to romanticize the major Japanese characters, notably the Oide family and Caitlan's boyfriend Hiroshi, whose compassion and patience approach saintliness. Such portraits, however, provide a welcome antidote to frequent negative stereotypes; moreover, not all of the Japanese characters are saintly. Caitlan's encounters with unmotivated students, obtrusive neighbors, and male chauvinism remind us that the novel is based on real-world observations of life in contemporary Japan. Its elements of mystery, romance, friendship, and healing assure that the novel will appeal to readers of varying experience and age. The Web site for *Ash*, www.stonebridge.com/ash/WorldOfAsh.html, is an attractive supplement to the novel, including numerous links to Japan-related sites, photos from Kagoshima, an interview with the author, and possible study questions for reading circles. ■

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Contents: List of Illustrations; Foreword; Prefatory Note; Acknowledgments; Introduction; **Part I:** The Landscape; Life; Soul; God & Cosmos; Prayer; Fate; Sin; Justice; Law; Religion; Government; **Part II:** Salvation; Spirit; Death; Entertainments; Idolatry; Priestcraft; Casteism; **Part III:** Pillage & Ravages; The Horror-spell; The Redeemer; **Part IV:** The Aftermath; The Reformation Hike; Corruption; The Spiritual Charter; Restoratives; Hypnotic Feats; Glossary of New Words; Bibliography; About the Author.

M. N. Behera, a Retired Government Officer, India, possesses expertise in English, Sanskrit, Bengali, Hindi and Oriya languages. He has conducted more than sixty years of study and research on heathenish culture, history, and character and on all religions of the world. He is a first class first Honours Degree holder in Economics & Political Science with Distinction, having History and English literature as subsidiary subjects.

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