

BOOK REVIEWS

From My Grandmother's Bedside

Sketches of Postwar Tokyo

By Norma Field

BERKELEY: UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS, 1997
204 PAGES

In her 1991 book *In the Realm of a Dying Emperor: Japan at Century's End*, Norma Field offered an elegant analysis of modern Japanese society, through portraits of three individuals perceived as dissenters in that society. Her latest book, *From My Grandmother's Bedside: Sketches of Postwar Tokyo*, similarly composes a broad view of Japanese life in a montage style, the individual vignettes comprising the book centering this time around the author's family and, in particular, her grandmother. Understandably, given its autobiographical focus, *From My Grandmother's Bedside* is a more personal and at times impressionistic text.

In the summer of 1995, Field, daughter of an American Occupation GI father and a Japanese mother, returned home to Tokyo to care for her grandmother, bedridden and mostly speechless follow-

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ing the second of two strokes. In the book, Field describes her involvement, along with her mother, in the daily rhythms of care giving, at the same time reflecting upon larger themes of family, aging, and death. Field's homecoming also coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Pacific War, the reinstatement of French nuclear testing and, slightly later, the rape of an Okinawan schoolgirl by American GIs: events provoking reflection on the broader issues of war responsibility and "victim consciousness."

As in her earlier book, Field is most effective in her evocative observations of the minutiae of everyday life. An indictment of postwar prosperity is suggested, for example, through an elegant reading of an artificially scented fresh flower. In the longest sections of the book, Field expresses her simultaneous admiration and discomfort in the face of a Domon Ken photographic exhibit, with its formalism put to work for the self-conscious evocation and celebration of enduring "Japaneseness."

Woven throughout the text, recurring in its large circular rhythms, is the theme of linkages. As in her previous book, Field explores the connections between the living and the dead: those forged through war (institutionalized remembrances of kamikaze pilots, for example), and also through tragedy (the anniversary of the 1985 Japan Airlines crash, still marked by grieving relatives). Even more important, though, are the linkages between the living and the living: the author's deteriorating grandmother, in particular, but also other family members such as mother and aunts, and indeed even unfamiliar "grandmas" in the neighborhood whom Field comes to think of as her own. Motifs of history, memory, and language are also explored here, as the ways in which they are implemented serve to mold those linkages Field is describing.

This book, like its predecessor, is very accessible and would be valuable in stimulating classroom discussions on postwar Japanese society. Though similar in style, the two books might open up different topics: *In the Realm of a Dying Emperor* would lend itself to politically oriented discussions of war and memory, while *From My Grandmother's Bedside* might, on the whole, be more useful for examinations of the family, community, and the phenomenon of the individual straddling two cultures. ■

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