

Japanese Literature

From Murasaki to Murakami

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By Marvin Marcus



In recent years, interest in Japan has focused on the nation's post-Fukushima social and economic circumstances, dire demographic forecasts, and the often-strained relations with its East Asian neighbors. In strong contrast is the powerful allure of Japanese entertainment—media such as manga, anime, J-pop, and video games—that has been a dominant presence on the global pop culture marketplace. “Traditional Japan,” too, is alive and well, thanks to the staying power of its familiar icons—samurai; geisha; kabuki; sumō; Buddhist temples; Zen meditation; and the products of potters, printmakers, calligraphers, kimono designers, and the like.

What, then, of Japanese literature? Some may be familiar with the classic *Tale of Genji* and its author, Lady Murasaki. Many more are devoted

readers of Murakami Haruki, Japan's best-known contemporary writer. The aim of *Japanese Literature: From Murasaki to Murakami* is to fill in the blanks between these two figures, who constitute the “alpha” and “omega” of a literature that has generated a rich and enduring legacy over the centuries. It is a legacy well worth preserving and appreciating.

Seeking to provide a concise and accessible introduction to Japan's long and impressively varied literature, the book is arranged chronologically, with its six chapters covering the sequence of historical epochs. A central theme is the intersection of “local” factors that mark the distinctive Japanese social and cultural context and the “universal” concerns that underscore the shared human experience that this literature embodies.

Each chapter introduces major works, authors, and genres of the period in question, with a selection of representative literary excerpts that reinforce key themes and styles.


The first chapter traces Japan's civilizational origins as an amalgam of borrowings from China (Buddhism, Confucianism, the imperial system, ideographic writing) and the native Shinto belief system that promoted a sense of shared identity. Chapter 2 concerns the “golden age” of the Heian period (800–1200), centered in modern-day Kyōto, and its emblematic codes of aristocratic elegance, courtly refinement, and poetic sensitivity. The world of the Heian court is famously epitomized in the thousand-year-old *Tale of Genji*.

The topic of chapter 3 is medieval Japan (1200–1600) and a literature that reflects both the rise of the *bushi* warrior class and the profound influence of Buddhist notions of ephemerality and transience. Paralleling *Genji* in importance is the early thirteenth-century *Tale of the Heike*, which has come to represent the warrior ethos and the Buddhist-inspired medieval aesthetic. Chapter 4 concerns the literature of the Tokugawa period (1600–1868), whose unique culture reflects the shogunal policy of national isolation. The period gave rise to a distinctive literature depicting the lives of *chōnin* (merchant townsmen) and their pursuit of worldly pleasures. It also gave rise to the iconic haiku poetry of Bashō.

Chapter 5 turns to Japanese literature of the prewar era (1868–1945), which witnessed Japan's rise as a modern imperialist state. Works by authors such as Ogai, Sōseki, Akutagawa, and Tanizaki reflect the complex interplay of Western influences, a Tokyo-based urban society, and a traditionalist value system and ideology. With chapter 6, the book traces the literary renaissance that followed the Pacific War and the nation's cataclysmic defeat. The work of Abe, Mishima, Kawabata, and Ōe reflects the unlikely course of Japan's rebirth and miraculous growth in the postwar period. It concludes with Murakami, whose “postmodern” literature epitomizes the look and feel of contemporary Japan.

Intended for a broad readership across the spectrum of higher education in literature and the humanities, *Japanese Literature: From Murasaki to Murakami* promises to be a useful and instructive guide to a great national literature. But it will truly serve its purpose to the extent that its readers will be moved to actually read some works they find appealing, and to derive both pleasure and insight in the process. ■

Key Issues in Asian Studies



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**JAPANESE LITERATURE:
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by Marvin Marcus

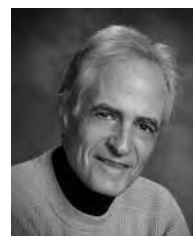
“Japanese Literature: From Murasaki to Murakami provides a concise introduction to the literature of Japan that traces its origins in the seventh century and explores a literary legacy — and its cultural contexts — marked by the intersection of aristocratic elegance and warrior austerity. Coverage extends to the present day with a focus on the complex twists and turns that mark Japan's literature in the modern period.

Marcus's compelling interpretations of significant works of Japanese literature and their historical moments complement carefully selected passages of literary prose, poetry, and images from Japan's long literary and cultural history. This small gem of a book is essential for students, teachers, and general audiences interested in Japan and its long literary traditions.”

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