

JAPANESE FICTION – 20th Century

Marvin Marcus, Ph.D.

Overview: Japanese Society and Culture in the Twentieth Century

Japan in the twentieth century experienced a degree of dramatic— and traumatic— change virtually unparalleled in world history. Ushering in the century as a newly-minted imperial power under the aegis of a 'divine' Emperor Meiji, Japan ending the century as an established post-imperial, post-industrial power. But the nation's modernization agenda, forged during the Meiji period (1868-1912) took a dramatic turn in mid-century, in the form of an imperial expansionism that ended in war and cataclysmic defeat. Yet this very defeat eventuated in an extraordinary postwar reconstruction and renaissance that was set in motion by the American victors, under the aegis of their Occupation regime (1945-52).

In other words, twentieth-century Japanese history is conveniently reducible to a pre-war, imperialist component; a postwar, 'de-imperialized' component; and the intervening war, which began in China and ended with the nation's unconditional surrender in August 1945, in the wake of two atomic bombings. Prior to the militarist regime of the 1930s, however, Japanese society and culture were surprisingly open and vibrant. This was especially true during the Taishō period (1912-26), which was marked by unfettered creativity in the arts and a free and open society. 'Tokyo chic' was all the rage, as evidenced by the thriving popular media (including film and radio) and consumer marketplace. Notwithstanding the official rhetoric of imperial divinity and Japanese exceptionalism, Japan was a seemingly 'normal' nation, with a secure place in the global order.

The war put an end to all of this. And so it was that nearly a century following Japan's first encounter with the United States— and Commodore Perry's ultimatum to the Shogunal regime— Japan found itself subject to the Occupation authority of General Douglas MacArthur. Its cities had been destroyed, its economic and social infrastructure was in ruins, and its fate hung in the balance. In order to ensure the end of a virulent Japanese militarism, a new Constitution was put in place in 1947, which sought to establish an egalitarian and peaceful society— women were accorded equal rights, under a modern political and social order, and the nation renounced the use of military force. No longer a Shinto divinity, Emperor Hirohito was 'repurposed' as Japan's patriarchal figurehead and the imperial system was allowed to remain.

Japan's economic resurgence, as of the 1960s, is well known, as is its dominance on the world economic stage in the 1980s— the 'Japan as Number One' era. There was a corresponding resurgence on the cultural level, with an outpouring of literature, art, and film that has earned international recognition since the 1950s. And Japanese pop culture products have long been at the center of the global marketplace.

Japan's exuberant national pride, though, has diminished in the interim, with a relatively stagnant economy as of the 1990s and looming problems that offer no easy solution— for instance, the demographic 'time-bomb' that forecasts steady population decline and raises the question of the nation's viability. Then there is Japan's role in East Asia— the fraught relationship with China, for instance, and the existential threat posed by a nuclear-armed North Korea.

What, then, of Japan in the twenty-first century? What of the perennial identity question, and the paradoxical status of Japan as both perpetrator and victim of the Pacific War? Then there is the nuclear question— and the specter of Hiroshima and Nagasaki recently revisited in the wake of the 2001 Fukushima catastrophe. One thing is certain: We can look to Japan's writers, artists, and performers to grapple with these questions in their respective ways.

The Rise of Fiction in Late-Meiji Japan

A key literary development of the late Meiji period was the emergence of prose fiction (*shōsetsu*) as the preëminent literary genre, essentially displacing poetry. Initially emulating exemplary Western models— notably the fiction of Britain, France, Germany, and Russia— writers developed a new, standardized

literary language that enabled their work to reach a broad audience. A first generation of modern Japanese fiction writers— spearheaded by pioneering figures such as Mori Ōgai, Natsume Sōseki, and Shimazaki Tôson— produced works that centered on plot, character development, and the challenges of modern urban life and social interaction. The protagonists were typically ineffectual men whose pained interiority and confusion came to dominate the narrative. Other more popular genres of fiction emerged as well— romances, mysteries, even science fiction— and in the process a number of distinct readerships developed. Overall, writers published initially in serialized periodical form, which meant that the rapidly-expanding print media made it possible for their work to gain a broad national readership.

The Taishō Era and Pre-war Fiction

Taishō(1912-26) fiction would be built upon the accomplishments of Meiji authors. A so-called 'pure literature' centering on fiction with clear autobiographical elements and a strong confessional voice appealed to some readers, but an expanding array of literary options would be available as well. A younger generation of fiction writers would give voice to Japan's increasingly urban society— with Tokyo as its virtually obligatory site— and to the burgeoning consumer economy and a new spirit of freedom and self-indulgence that marked the Taishō social scene. A Hollywood-inspired youth culture, symbolized by fashionable *moga* and *mobo*— stylish 'modern girls' and 'modern boys.'— provided a strong contrast to the draconian state-sponsored moralism and political correctness. Leisure pursuits, hedonism, and erotic display figured prominently in the fiction of the day. Themes such as desire, madness, and the irreducible subjectivity of human experience loomed large in the work of writers such as Tanizaki Jun'ichirō (1886-1965) and Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892-1927). The latter is known as author of *Rashōmon*, the story that inspired the award-winning film by Kurosawa. Overall, Taishō readers were challenged with having to figure out the credibility of unreliable narrators, competing claims to truth, and nettling questions about our capacity to comprehend the world, those around us, and— most pointedly— our own selves.

For his part, the writer Nagai Kafū (1879-1959), a native of Tokyo who lamented the city's transformation into an ersatz Western-style capital, sought to counter the dystopian fiction that told of urban alienation and melancholy. Kafū produced a fictional world that nostalgically evoked early-Meiji Tokyo— its geisha, artisans, and ordinary folk, together with the city's labyrinth of quaint side streets and byways. A noteworthy example is *The River Sumida* (1909), a bittersweet tale of personal longing and familial responsibility set in the neighborhoods of 'old Tokyo,' adjacent to the river that runs through it.

An elite literary group, the White Birch Society (*Shirakaba-ha*), fostered fiction that promoted a socially-progressive humanist agenda. Its leading figure, Shiga Naoya (1883-1971), is known for fiction— short stories, chiefly— seen as expressing the author's deepest interiority, with a minimum of artifice. Stories such as 'At Kinosaki' (*Kinosaki nite*, 1917) have been praised for their lyrical and spiritual depth— prose haiku, in effect. This distinctive category of personal fiction became known as 'I-novel' (*shishōsetsu*). It has remained a prominent— if somewhat nebulous— Japanese literary genre.

Japan's liberal political climate of the Twenties gave rise to a so-called proletarian literary movement, which espoused a range of Marxist and socialist fiction that reflected the Russian and Soviet political scene. With the 1930s, though, a new militarist regime would curtail leftist expression and impose strict censorship in the lead-up to hostilities on the Asian mainland. Japan's leaders resurrected the nationalist discourse of uniqueness and cultural superiority, known as *kokutai*, and silenced the more 'individualist' and politically-subversive writers and intellectuals. This would be the finale of Japan's imperialist venture.

Postwar Fiction and Japan's Literary Renaissance

The Pacific War and the cataclysmic end to Japan's imperial adventure yielded a rich literary harvest in the postwar period, notwithstanding the vast destruction and dislocation that marked the outset of the American Occupation (1945-52). A genre of war literature (*sensō bungaku*) centering on fiction that reflected upon the horrors of war and the burden of defeat and survival. The work of Ōoka Shōhei (1909-88) is especially noteworthy— in particular, his moving novel, *Fires on the Plain* (1951). A subgenre of 'atomic literature' (*genbaku bungaku*) would seek to make sense of the unimaginable. Here, the novel

Black Rain (1966) by Ibuse Masuji (1898-1984) deserves mention. The film adaptations of these two works are widely admired.

Postwar writers, with their newfound freedom of expression facilitated by the Occupation authorities, produced a broad range of fiction set in the late Forties and early Fifties. Reflecting the dislocation and privation of the postwar years, this work evokes both the desperate circumstances of ordinary people and the renewed hope of a better life that was enshrined in the nation's new constitution, promulgated in 1947. In particular, the novels and stories of Dazai Osamu (1909-48), Yasuoka Shôtârô (1920-2013), and Kojima Nobuo (1915-2006) are representative of this transitional period. Their work is marked by the distinctive personal signature associated with the 'I-novel' (*shishôsetsu*) genre. Representative of the darkly comic treatment of postwar privation and the struggle to survive is Yasuoka's *Prized Possessions* (1952). The story tells of a father's obsession to raise rabbits for the fur market, and his gradual transformation into a pathetic human rabbit.

Postwar Literary Landmarks

Following the Occupation, Japan went on to achieve a stable political and economic footing. With the Fifties and Sixties, the postwar climate of freedom and individualism helped inspire a renaissance of the arts, visual media, and culture. In the realm of fiction, Abe Kôbô (1924-93) wrote brilliantly of Japan's rootless, alienating urban jungle in a number of novels, the best-known being *Woman in the Dunes* (1962). The 1964 film adaptation by Teshigahara is a classic of Japanese cinema. Shônô Junzô (1921-2009) wrote of the troubling undercurrents of postwar domesticity that marked the urban middle-class nuclear family. Tanizaki, among modern Japan's greatest fiction writers, re-emerged on the postwar scene and produced some of his most memorable work— *The Makioka Sisters* (1948), *The Bridge of Dreams* (1959), and *The Diary of a Mad Old Man* (1961), among others.

Kawabata and Mishima

Arguably the two most prominent postwar novelists are Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972) and Mishima Yukio (1925-70). Kawabata's 'traditionalist' novels— *Snow Country* (1947) and *Sound of the Mountain* (1954), among others— constitute a lyrical elegy for a lost Japan. His brilliant evocation of Japan's 'beauty and sadness' earned him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1968— the first for a Japanese author. For his part, Mishima earned a reputation for striking works of fiction that mixed nihilism, Buddhism, and a critique of the vacuity of postwar Japan. Novels such as *Confessions of a Mask* and *Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, which achieved an international readership, established Mishima as Japan's best-known writer. Yet he would become better known as a political reactionary and leader of a cultish paramilitary organization. Decrying the emptiness of 'post-imperial' Japan, and positioning himself as a latter-day samurai savior of a troubled nation, Mishima ended his life in an astonishing ritual suicide in November, 1970.

Historical Fiction

Historical fiction (*rekishi shôsetsu*) looms large as a genre that explores Japan's modern circumstance from the perspective of its legendary and historical past. Here the fiction of Inoue Yasushi (1907-91), Endô Shûsaku (1923-96), and Shiba Ryôtârô (1923-96)— inspired by the pioneering work of Ôgai, Akutagawa, and Tanizaki— stands out. Inoue's work is noteworthy for its focus on the broad sweep of Asian history— the Silk Road, in particular, and Japan's embrace of Buddhism, which was painstakingly introduced from China and Korea. His acclaimed novel *The Roof Tile of Tempyô* (1975) brilliantly captures this key development in Japan's early history. Endô is best known for his fictional exploration of Japan's century-long encounter with Christianity in the 16th and 17th century. Himself a Christian, Endô questioned— through masterful novels such as *Silence* (1966)— the quality of faith of Japan's Christian converts and the horrendous martyrdom that many experienced at the hands of samurai overlords. Shiba, among modern Japan's most prolific— and enduringly popular— authors, was especially fascinated with the transition from Tokugawa feudalism to the Meiji era and Japan's emergence as a modern nation. His monumental, multi-volume *Clouds Above the Hill* (1972) is the finest literary depiction of Japan's war with Russia (1904-05).

In contrast with these more 'serious' writers, there emerged in the prewar period a popular genre of period fiction (*jidai shōsetsu*) that featured, among others, the exploits of legendary samurai warriors. Here the best-selling novels of Yoshikawa Eiji (1892-1962)— for instance, *Miyamoto Musashi* (1935), based on the legendary accounts of Japan's iconic swordsman— deserve mention. The market for such accounts of legendary figures has expanded dramatically, owing to adaptations for *manga*, *anime*, and other popular media.

The Sixties and Beyond

With the Sixties, which witnessed the dawn of Japan's social and economic renaissance, a group of women writers emerged on the literary stage. This in part reflected— and in turn reinforced— a new discourse of women's rights and the advent of women's participation on the political and cultural scene. Of particular note are ground-breaking authors such as Enchi Fumiko (1905-86) and Kōno Taeko. Through moving novels such as *The Waiting Years* (1957) and *Masks* (1958), Enchi probed the circumstance of women subjected to male power and privilege. Kōno is known for her unsettling depiction of female sexuality and psychological complexity in stories such as *Toddler Hunting* (1961). Overall, the challenge posed by the growing cohort of *joryū sakka*— women authors— to traditional gender roles and norms did much to transform the long-accepted male dominance in the literary realm. Henceforth women would assume a prominent place in Japanese literature and the arts.

Japanese Literature in the Late 20th Century

Japan's 'miraculous' economic expansionism of the 1970s coincided with the emergence of fictional and other writing that had arguably lost its distinctive 'Japanese' qualities of subtlety, sensitivity, and lyrical depth. Indeed, the language itself and the themes that inspired writers had undergone changes that brought writers in line with their counterparts in the developed world. In short, a globalization trend— more obvious in the domain of popular culture and mass media— was set in motion, and it has dramatically accelerated in recent years.

One author concerned about Japan's insular identity in the late 20th century is Ōe Kenzaburō (1935-). Ōe emerged on the literary scene in the Sixties as spokesperson for a new generation of postwar Japanese youth, through his groundbreaking novel, *A Personal Matter* (1964). He would go on to explore the qualities of Japanese national character and its mythic roots while spearheading Japan's anti-nuclear movement. Ōe's deeply principled and morally-centered fiction earned for him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1994— Japan's second awardee.

The late-20th century literary scene was notably diverse. Women writers such as Tsushima Yūko (1947-2016) and Yoshimoto Banana (1964-) have been at the vanguard of Japanese fiction, and they were no longer demeaningly categorized as 'woman writers.' Yoshimoto's best-selling novel, *Kitchen* (1988), explores the complexity of 'non-traditional' families and the journey of self-discovery. Younger writers such as Kanehara Hitomi (1983-) have ventured into the once-taboo zone of drug use, body modification, and deviant youth subculture; her 2003 novel *Snakes and Earrings* is representative of this new wave.

The Murakami Phenomenon

Arguably the best-known and most widely-admired Japanese writer is Murakami Haruki (1949-), whose work has been translated into some fifty languages. Murakami's novels— most notably, *A Wild Sheep Chase* (1989), *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1997), and *Kafka on the Shore* (2005)— have become part and parcel of 'world literature,' and the author's extraordinary capacity to merge reality and fantasy, dream and drudgery, past and present has been widely discussed and studied.

Murakami's work is typically branded as 'postmodern'— a curiously elusive term that conjures up the 'whatever-ness' of life and the fluid, happenstance quality of our existence. But the fact remains that the man is a brilliant storyteller, and the casual and candid voice of his first-person *boku* protagonist resonates powerfully with his readers. Murakami is all but guaranteed to be awarded a Nobel Prize, and many of his fans are indignant about the delay. His day shall come.

Conclusion

Given Japan's modern history, its literature— fiction and otherwise— understandably reduces to a pre-war versus post-war binary divide. This of course belies the complex trajectory of the nation's 20th-century history, which began with vestiges of the Tokugawa past and ended with the pervasive and globalized media-scape with which we are all familiar.

The concerns of writers, the themes that inspired them, the very language at their disposal— these have shifted dramatically. One index of this change is the steadily increasing prominence of Japan's women writers, who are now at the very pinnacle of the nation's literary edifice.

One cannot overstate the influence of the visual and graphic media— television, film, the internet, and the image- and consumer-centered popular culture. Japanese literature in the 21st century has a 'local' audience, to be sure, but its ties to global entertainment and marketing are most evident.

What is more, social networking, blogging, texting, and tweeting have opened up literary expression to new avenues, centering on a powerful graphic element. How, then, to conceive of 'fiction' in such a context? The demise of the 'literary novel' has been widely noted by critics and pundits in the West. How Japanese writers choose to express themselves through fictional narrative is an open question, subject to diverse points of view. One can hardly imagine what the shape of this literature will be when the 21st century draws to a close.

Sources

Goossen, Theodore (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Japanese Short Stories* (Oxford, 1997)

Hibbett, Howard (ed.), *Contemporary Japanese Literature: An Anthology of Fiction, Film, and Other Writing Since 1945* (Knopf, 1977)

Keene, Donald, *Dawn to the West*, volume 1 (Holt, 1984)

Orbaugh, Sharalyn, *Japanese Fiction of the Allied Occupation* (Brill, 2007)

Rimer, J. Thomas and Van Gessel (eds.), *Columbia Anthology of Modern Japanese Literature*, two volumes (Columbia, 2005, 2007)

Suzuki, Tomi, *Narrating the Self: Fictions of Japanese Modernity* (Stanford, 1996)

Treat, John, *Writing Ground Zero: Japanese Literature and the Atomic Bomb* (Chicago, 1995)

Washburn, Dennis, *The Dilemma of the Modern in Japanese Fiction* (Yale, 1995)

Discussion Questions and Topics

What is 'traditional' about 20th-century Japanese fiction? How to distinguish this from the modernization that has presumably encroached upon the 'bastion' of traditionalism? In what sense can 'traditionalism' be seen as a strategy of combatting the forces of modernity— isolation, insulation, and anxiety?

What can be said in favor of— and against— the pre-war (imperial) and post-war binary of 20th-century Japanese fiction? Can Japan's modern fiction be read without regard to its contexts and instead be appreciated entirely on its own?

How are we to assess the impact of new media and social networking on fiction writing— in Japan and elsewhere? Would you favor the work of 'serious' writers as a bulwark against what can be seen as the adulterating impact of the new media?

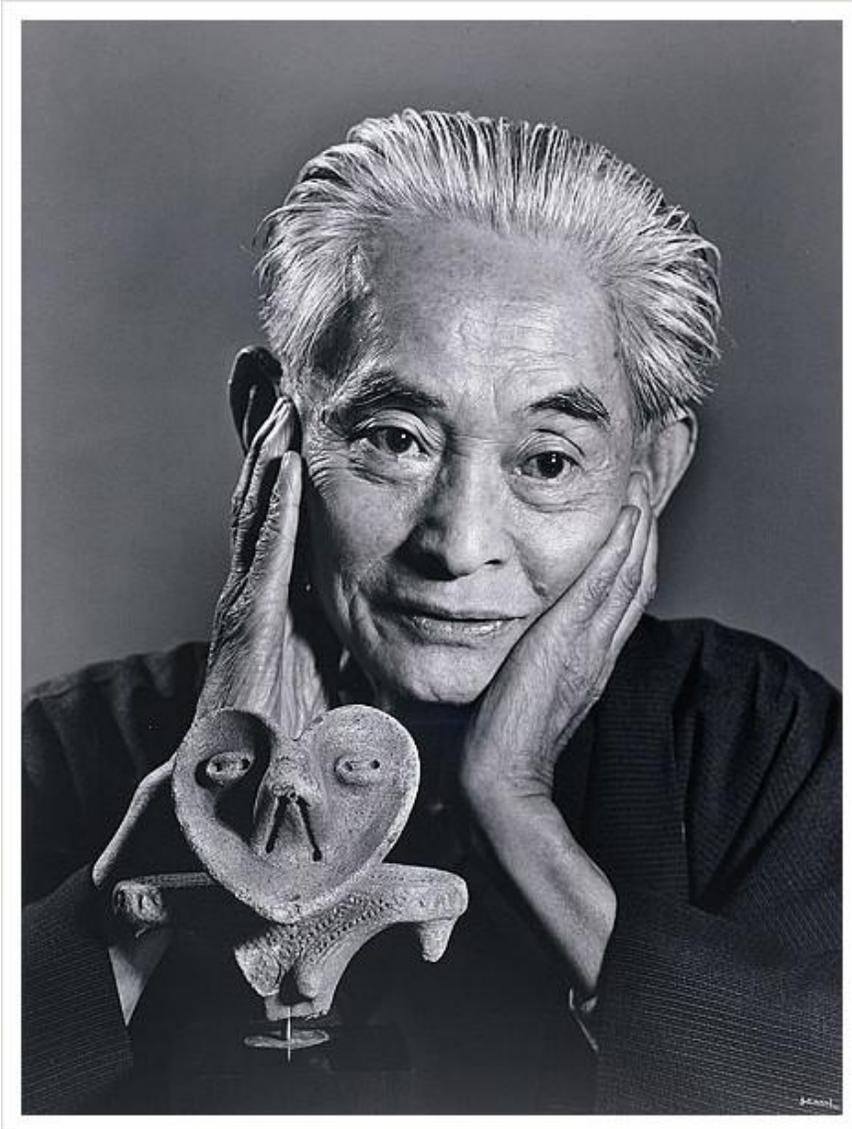
Images



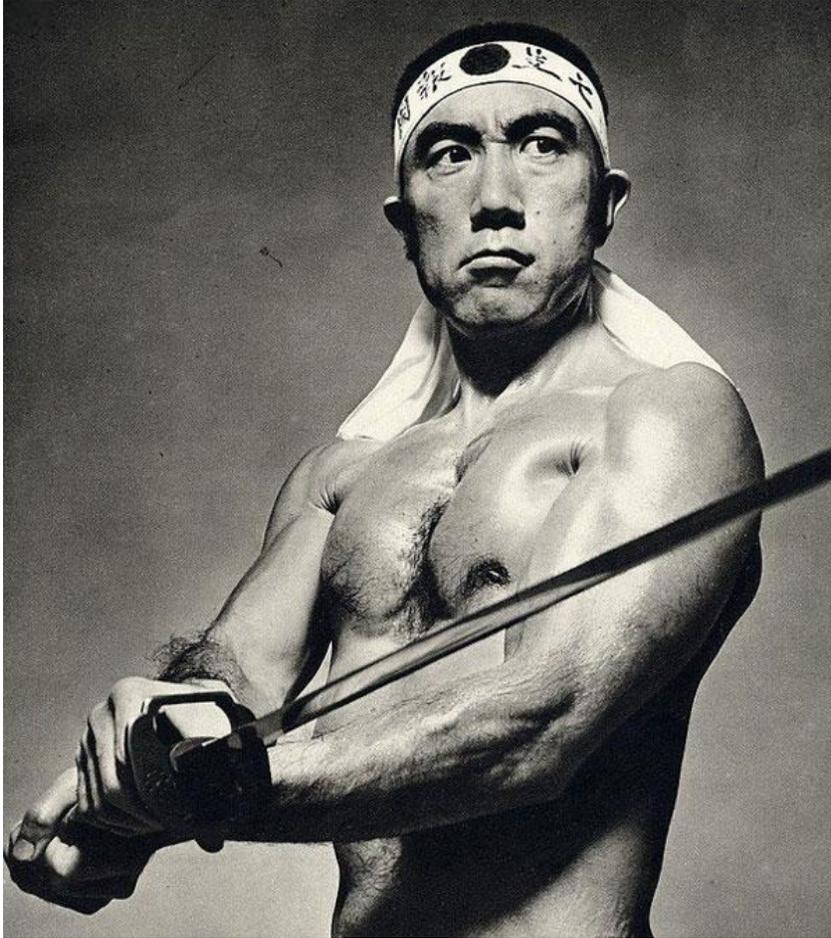
Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892-1927)



Tanizaki Jun'ichirô (1886-1965)



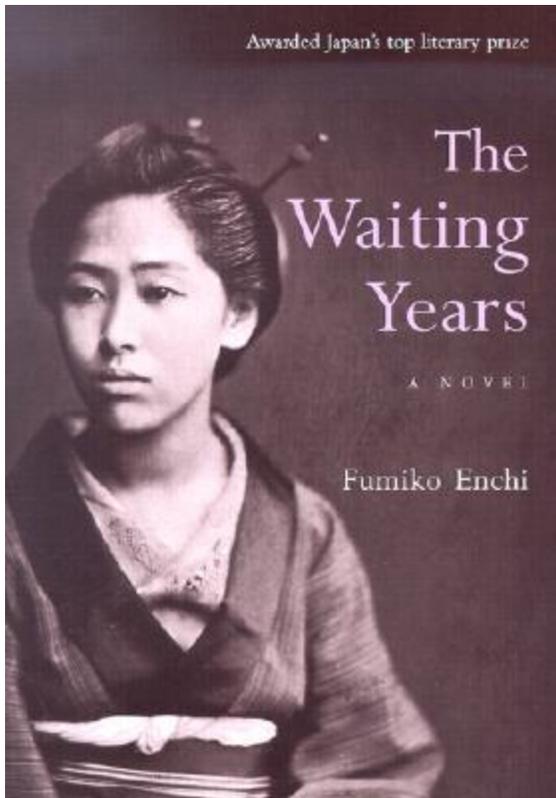
Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972) (Source: Pinterest)



Mishima Yukio (1925-1970) (Source: Open Culture)



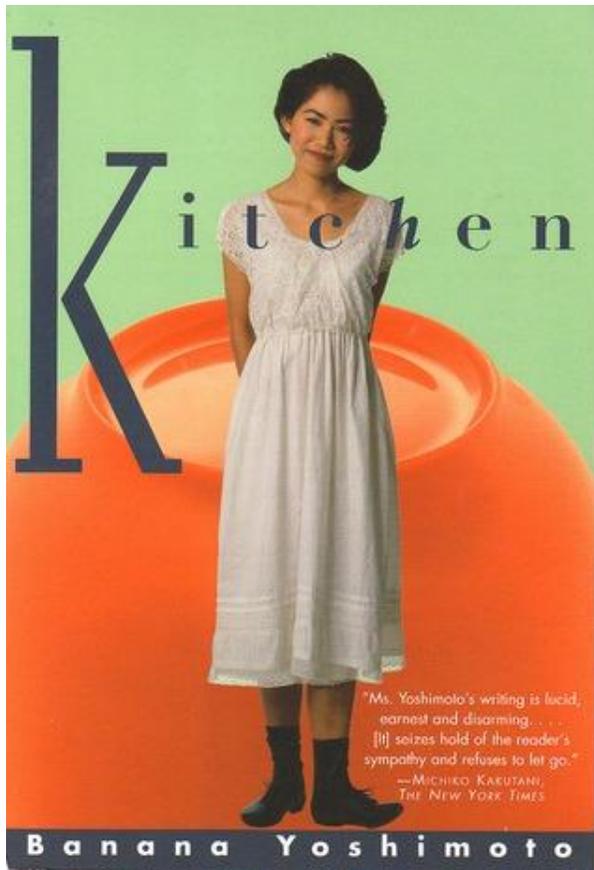
Abe Kôbô (1924-1986)



Enchi Fumiko (1905-1986), as depicted on the cover of one of her finest novels (Source: Goodreads)



Ôe Kenzaburô (1935-), being interviewed in Germany, in 2008



Yoshimoto Banana (1964-), as depicted on the cover cover of her best-known novel (Source: Goodreads)



Murakami Haruki (1949-) (Source: New York Times)

* Unless otherwise noted, all images are sourced from Wikimedia Commons