
Five Japanese Works for the Age of the Covid-19 Virus

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We turn to literature for many things: for insight, for pleasure, for the exploration of other worlds that push our imaginations, for solace. At a time like now, in the middle of the corona virus pandemic, we are assailed by many things that disturb us and give us deep concern for the future. On the other hand, if there is anything positive to be gleaned, this is also a rare opportunity to reflect on what is important, and to reach out determinedly to the world beyond us. The Japanese works I have chosen can in no way answer our immediate needs. Instead, literature plays another, but equally pivotal, role. Literature reflects our search for meaning in our lives, however we find ourselves, through a variety of ways—some light-hearted, some more serious—but they all deserve a place on our bookshelves at a time like this.

Although my own area of interest has been modern and contemporary Japanese literature—and that prejudice is reflected in the texts I have chosen—I must mention one text from the traditional literary cannon that is particularly relevant to the present moment. Kamo no Chōmei (1155-1216) wrote *Hōjōki* (1212) at a time when the political and social order of the Heian Period (794-1185) had collapsed, and the capital Kyoto, when he was living, faced a series of natural and human catastrophes: conflagration, whirlwind, famine, earthquake. Kamo no Chōmei responds with a form of ‘self-isolation,’ by retiring to a tiny hut where he learns to appreciate the small beauties of life, and take each moment as it comes, rather in the style of Henry Thoreau’s *On Walden Pond*. Of course, he is a medieval Japanese aristocrat writing from a Buddhist perspective, and we live in vastly different times now. However, the

same impulse to look inwards at times of upheaval, and reflect on what is fundamentally central to our lives, is something from which we, too, can learn.

The corona virus has affected people across the world at the same time, but literature often explores crises through a more individual lens, and no more so than in Ōe Kenzaburō's inspiring book, *A Personal Matter* (1964). The main character, Bird, is a failed cram-school teacher, unhappily married, with a drink problem. His wife gives birth, but the infant turns out to have been born with part of its brain outside its head. The book traces Bird's evolving feelings towards the new baby. At first, he can think of nothing more than his planned trip to a mythical Africa with his mistress, Himiko, but he finds himself increasingly caught up in his own ethical and emotional feelings towards the imperilled child. He is torn between satisfying personal desires and reaching out to the new infant. What is inspiring about this book is the way he takes responsibility for his own actions in the end.

The next book is very different and has a more contemporary feel. Akasaka Mari's lyrical and thoughtful *Vibrator* (1999) depicts Rei, a lost, lonely young free-lance journalist with alcohol and eating disorders. One evening, she encounters a hunky truck driver, Okabe, at the local convenience store. There is an immediate connection between them, and she joins him on a road trip through Japan. The book explores the powerful sexual chemistry that develops between them, but the initial impression of Okabe, as an attractive but slightly dangerous character, is tempered as he gradually reveals to Rei a remarkably soft, nurturing side. Raw human feelings are set among some beautifully lyrical passages as Rei undergoes a voyage of self-discovery.

One important role of literature is to take us away from everyday life. In our present situation, Mishima Yukio's *Life for Sale* (1968) may be just the thing. It is the story of Hanio, an advertising man who, having failed to commit suicide, gives up his lucrative job and puts

an ad in a newspaper, offering his life for sale. What follows is a series of sexy, trashy, ridiculous and very funny encounters between Hanio and a range of characters: a gangster's moll, a hippy, spies, librarians and vampires. But, as you would expect in any Mishima novel, there is also a darker side. The story is pervaded with Hanio's bleak sense of loneliness and his unfulfilled desire to connect with the outside world. The novel's mixture of serious and humorous tones in the novel amounts to a sharp critique of 1960's post-war Japanese culture.

My last recommendation is one that surprises even me. I have never been a fan of what I feel to be the rather sugary sentimentality of Yoshimoto Banana's *Kitchen* (1988). However, the work was a huge best-seller both in Japan and abroad when it came out. It worked for many, I think, because it depicts a need to communicate with another person at a time of great difficulty, and there is a gratifying warmth at the heart of the story. Mikage, who has just lost her beloved grandmother, moves into the house of Yuichi, who used to work for her grandmother, and Yuichi's mother, who was originally his father but had transitioned to female. At her moment of loss, Mikage luxuriates in the warmth of Yuichi's kitchen, especially its refrigerator with its comforting hum. After Mikage moves into her own place, Yuichi's mother is murdered in a nightclub, and the emotional loss that the young couple now share brings them closer together romantically. Their intimacy is sealed by a delicious meal which Mikage brings Yuichi. In difficult times, food is a great comfort, so maybe this book is just what you need. Eat well!

5 Books recommended by Dr Stephen Dodd

1. ***Hōjōki: A Hermit's Hut as Metaphor***
by Kamo no Chomei
Independently published (5 April 2020)
ISBN-13: 979-8633865431
2. ***A Personal Matter***
by Kenzaburo Oe
Grove Press (13 January 1994)
ASIN: B009CRFTC6
3. ***Vibrator***
by Mari Akasaka
Faber & Faber (17 March 2005)
ISBN-13: 978-0571210824
4. ***Life For Sale***
by Yukio Mishima
Penguin (1 August 2019)
ISBN: 0241333148
5. ***Kitchen***
By Yoshimoto Banana
Faber & Faber (1 March 2018)
ISBN-13: 978-0571342723

