

The Treatment of Disasters in Japan-Related Literature



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Introduction

In my previous article on this topic (*Japan SPOTLIGHT*, March/April 2023), I noted a new genre of Japan-related literature that has emerged since the Fukushima triple catastrophe of March 11, 2011 – one focused on disasters. As well as Fukushima, there have been many other major natural disasters throughout Japan’s recorded history, giving rise to a wide range of calamity-related literature and other creative works. Below I look at a few examples, and consider their relevance today.

Natural Disasters Seen as Resulting from a Ruler’s Lack of Virtue

In his fascinating articles on natural disasters in the last two issues of *Japan SPOTLIGHT*, Mohan Gopal eloquently explains some of the spiritual beliefs associated with disasters in Japan. Gopal’s thorough elucidation of the Shinto links and spirits considered to reside at the heart of disasters from ancient times was entertaining and educational. I also encountered in early-modern Japanese literature the pervasive presence of O-tento-sama, the entity thought to rule heaven and earth that gives energy equally to all things, and grants rulers their power. Tento, a word meaning sun or the solar deity, was the central pillar of a substantive stream of Japanese thought from the middle ages to the 17th century. In *Visions of Ryukyu: Identity and Ideology in Early-Modern Thought and Politics* (1999) by Gregory Smits, Tento philosophy is described as “a major intellectual and religious tradition that combined elements of Confucianism, Buddhism, Chinese correlative cosmology, and native beliefs... Floods, famines, epidemics and similar natural disasters were classic signs of O-tento-sama’s displeasure with a ruler’s virtue.”

The Great Kanto Earthquake: First-Hand Account, Post-Quake Resilience

Her personal experience of the Great Kanto Earthquake of Sept. 1, 1923, at the time the biggest natural disaster in Japan’s history, was meticulously recorded by Nobu Matsumoto (1895-1978). About 90% of the more than 100,000 casualties in this earthquake lost their lives as a result of fires. Matsumoto’s detailed notes describe how she fled the earthquake and devastating fires with her two young children and husband – who died when he attempted to return to their home for some valuables – and their difficult lives in the following months.

She recorded these events with the aim of providing practical advice and help for her children and succeeding generations in surviving other potential natural disasters in the future. A video made to commemorate the centennial of the Great Kanto Earthquake this year suggests that many of the lessons observed and written down by Matsumoto are still relevant today: 1) Disasters happen suddenly, and may be on a scale far bigger than we can imagine; 2) Victims may also become rescuers and help others; 3) It is important to take responsibility for saving your own life; and 4) We should think ahead and prepare for the worst. Matsumoto’s book is considered the first to specifically address post-quake fires.

The famous *Japan Sinks* (*Nihon Chinbotsu*, 1973) by Sakyo Komatsu, which depicts a series of natural disasters hitting Tokyo first, eventually resulting in Japan’s sinking into the sea, became a bestseller in its multiple formats. Although fiction, this work has strong echoes of the Great Kanto Earthquake. At the same time, some saw it as an indictment of the many social problems in Japan at the time, and a call for renewal. Renowned author Masuji Ibuse, in his short story “Kanto Earthquake” (*Kanto Daishinsai*), describes both the enormous suffering people experienced in this disaster and their post-quake resilience.

Fukushima

Issues related to the Fukushima catastrophe continue to be of concern, such as the potential spread of radiation if the large-scale discharge of treated water into the ocean by the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) goes ahead as planned. Despite approval of the plan by the International Atomic Energy Agency, there are strong objections by both the local fishing industry and other countries in the region, especially since there have been fish caught nearby with alarmingly high levels of radioactive cesium (e.g., see article by Gavin Blair in the July 24, 2023 issue of *The Guardian*).

Several books on the Fukushima disaster were discussed in my previous article. I would now like to introduce a few others. *The Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station Disaster: Investigating the Myth and Reality* (2014), edited by Mindy Kay Bricker, documents the findings of the Independent Investigation Commission on the Fukushima Nuclear Accident, analyzing what actually happened behind the scenes, with the goal of informing future nuclear safety. *3.11: Disaster and Change in Japan* (2013) by Richard Samuels offers a scholarly review of the disaster’s overall impact on Japanese society and its uncertain legacy. *Natural Disaster and Nuclear Crisis in Japan* (2012), edited by Jeff Kingston, considers Fukushima’s

broader repercussions in depth. *Radiation Brain Moms and Citizen Scientists: The Gender Politics of Food Contamination after Fukushima* (2016) by Aya Hirata Kimura homes in on radiation levels in food.

On the non-fiction side, *Fukushima Devil Fish* (*Fukushima no Akumagyō*) by Yasumi Kobayashi is a novel about an investigative journalist and how the disaster affected local residents. Renowned mystery writer Miyuki Miyabe's thriller *The Devil's Whisper* (*Akuma no Sasayaki*, 1989) incorporates the Fukushima nuclear catastrophe in its plot. Finally, *The Emissary* (*Hikari*, 2014) by Yoko Tawada is set in a radiation-infused post-Fukushima Japan.

Other Natural Disasters

Several famous authors have turned their hands to disaster-related fiction. Haruki Murakami's *After the Quake* (2003, translated by Jay Rubin) is a collection of stories that all feature "the Kobe earthquake" (the Great Hanshin Earthquake of Jan. 17, 1995), if only as an incidental element, and "dissects the violence beneath the surface of modern Japan". *The Waves* (*Shosai*, 1954) by Yukio Mishima evocatively depicts the aftermath of a huge tsunami in a coastal village. *The Sound of the Mountain* (*Yama no Oto*, 1954) is a novel by Yasunari Kawabata set in an area with volcanic activity. Finally, Seiichi Funabashi's *Thirteen Nights* (*Juusanya*) is a story about villagers facing a typhoon. Earlier natural disasters of various kinds, such as the Sanriku earthquake and tsunami of 1896, have also been the subject of poems and other literary works.

Hiroshima & Nagasaki

Although instigated by human beings rather than nature, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were disasters of the highest magnitude. The bombings are deeply embedded in the human psyche – especially, of course, Japan's – and have been recurring themes in many creative endeavors, including Japan-related works of literature, perhaps partly in an effort to understand and come to terms with the long-lasting horrors they inflicted. One example, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (*Nijuyojikan no Joji*, literally *24-hour Love Affair*), is a 1959 film written by Marguerite Duras and directed by Alain Resnais which portrays the romantic relationship between a French actress visiting Hiroshima to make an anti-war film, and a Japanese architect whose family has just been killed in the bombing. This film was highly controversial because of its sensitive subject matter, but nevertheless won several top awards and was instrumental in bringing issues related to nuclear bombs and radiation into clear international focus.

Another work by Ibuse, the classic *Black Rain* (*Kuroi Ame*, 1966), also explores the aftermath of the Hiroshima bombing. The 1989 film *Black Rain* directed by Shōhei Imamura is based on Ibuse's book.

Hiroshima (1946) by John Hersey was first published as a 30,000-word story in August 1946 in *The New Yorker*, boldly using the magazine's entire editorial space. The publisher noted, "Few of us have yet comprehended the all but incredible destructive power of this weapon... everyone might well take time to consider the terrible implications of its use." Hersey, a journalist, spent a month in Japan



There is a prolific body of literature on disasters in Japan, natural, man-made, and fictional.

in May 1946, interviewing survivors and gathering material first-hand. The article apparently caused a sensation, with the magazine selling out just a few hours after publication.

Fireflies (*Hotaru*, 1953), by Nobel Prize-winner Kenzaburo Oe, tells the story of a boy traumatized by firebombing in World War II, while *Barefoot Gen* (*Hadashi no Gen*, 1973-1987) is a manga series based loosely on writer Keiji Nakazawa's own experiences as a Hiroshima survivor. Both of these are widely known. *The Postman of Nagasaki* (1984) by Peter Townsend compassionately narrates one Nagasaki survivor's story. This book greatly affected my father, who had been a dental surgeon with the British Royal Navy in World War II. He told me its detailed descriptions of the horrors experienced and observed by the protagonist highlighted the universal suffering of ordinary people on all sides in times of war, and motivated him to oppose the proliferation of nuclear weapons and to encourage other members of the Royal New Zealand Returned and Services Association (RSA) to do the same.

More recently, *The Atomic Bomb: Voices from Hiroshima and Nagasaki* (1989), edited by Kyoko and Mark Selden, features poems, memoirs, photos and drawings by atomic bomb survivors. In the foreword, Robert Jay Lifton says, "The world is insufficiently aware of the terrible value of Hiroshima and Nagasaki."

These works differ from the other literature mentioned here since wartime disasters are not "natural" and may have a political element. However, they share the common themes of unimaginable suffering and human strength in the face of severe adversity.

I have introduced here just a few of the numerous written and cinematic works related to disasters in Japan. Like Nobu Matsumoto's practical disaster survival tips, these works of literature surely still have valuable lessons for us today. Some recurring themes are the unpredictable character and overwhelming power of nature, the difficulty of making life-and-death decisions in an instant, the need for humility, the importance of emergency preparedness, and ways to develop greater resilience.

J.S.

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