

Fukushima Fiction: The Literary Landscape of Japan's Triple Disaster

Reviewed by David Gugin

Fukushima Fiction: The Literary Landscape of Japan's Triple Disaster, by Rachel DiNitto. University of Hawai'i Press, 2019; 228 pages; Paperback, \$30.00.

A prominent English language translator of Japanese wartime and contemporary fiction, and author of the 2008 *Uchida Hyakken: A Critique of Modernity and Militarism in Prewar Japan*, Rachel DiNitto has written a must-read book for anyone – student, teacher, researcher – with an interest in Japanese literature. As her title indicates, she focuses on the Japanese literature that was produced in the aftermath of what the Japanese have come to call 3/11, the social and environmental catastrophe that occurred on March 11, 2011. On that day the Tohoku region on the northeast coast of Japan was devastated by the most powerful earthquake ever recorded in Japan, followed by a tsunami wave that reached as high as 133 feet, and the subsequent level 7 meltdowns at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant (NPP). Almost 16,000 people were killed; more than 330,000 people were displaced; and in Miyagi, Iwate, and Fukushima prefectures especially, the structural damage to the land itself was immense. But as DiNitto titles her Introduction, when “Disaster Strikes, Literature Responds,” and the foundational argument of *Fukushima Fiction* is the case it makes for the necessity and importance of literature when a country is faced with this kind of crisis. The powerful, often angry writing that followed 3/11 explicitly questioned conventional Japanese cultural and political norms and assumptions while also redefining contemporary Japanese literature itself. Both new and longtime authors used their pens to, in the words of Ichikawa Makoto, “wield their words like a shovel to confront the wasteland of our imagination, and shake the foundations of this reality to unearth another” (DiNitto 1-2). The human and environmental destruction caused by the events of March 11, 2011,

challenged Japanese writers in any number of ways. This book shows how they met that challenge.

As DiNitto points out, the social costs and health ramifications, both physical and psychological, of 3/11 are still ongoing, one result of the uniqueness of the triple disaster. In particular, the effects of the Fukushima Daiichi NPP radiation leakages are in no sense over, even though that is what the Japanese government and the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), owner and operator of Fukushima Daiichi, want everyone to believe. It is this combination of two natural disasters (the earthquake and tsunami) and one manmade disaster (the nuclear meltdowns) that problematizes 3/11. DiNitto notes that because the three disasters have some surface differences it is tempting to simply divide the fiction into three categories of analysis – earthquake, tsunami, and meltdowns – and to proceed from there. She then quotes Kristina Iwata-Weickgenannt, who argues that the destruction caused by the earthquake was “massive, immediate, and undeniable,” yet the nuclear accident had almost no initial visual impact and no immediate victims (DiNitto 2). This is why the fiction written directly after 3/11 almost always focused on the earthquake and tsunami but soon shifted to the nuclear, which tended to generate a change in storylines and characters. However, DiNitto cautions that “many victims were affected by more than one of these threats and causally they are intimately intertwined. To treat them separately is to risk hiding their overlapping and interrelated nature, while viewing them together risks downplaying any one aspect of this triple disaster” (2). In an effective display of “simultaneity” she manages to offer compelling readings of the fiction related to the specific disasters, the poems and stories (which predominated early on) and the later novellas and novels. But she is also able to stress the ultimate multidimensionality of the 3/11 experience.

In its often botched and misleading response to the crisis, particularly the nuclear meltdowns, the Japanese government eventually adopted a concentric circle model which based evacuation decisions on the proximity of people to the stricken Fukushima Daiichi NPP. DiNitto utilizes a similar spatial approach in *Fukushima Fiction*, deciding not to

organize the book around type of disaster, or literary genre, or author, choosing instead to start at the epicenter and work outward. Her analysis also only examines “serious fiction” – the belles lettres (*junbungaku*) of Japan – because Japanese entertainment media and popular cultural/fiction have largely ignored 3/11. Therefore, her approach begins with discussions of the specific (local) experience of victims in the affected zones and then proceeds through the “regional and national conceptualization of the disaster, to considerations of the disaster as history, and last, to the global concerns common to nuclear incidents worldwide” (4-5). Furthermore, she tempers her spatial framework with temporal considerations when, for example, she compares and contrasts the fiction of 3/11 with earlier, post-WWII atomic bomb survivor fiction. As mentioned, DiNitto could have structured her book differently, and that probably would have made for an easier read overall. Personally, I typically prefer simpler designs, but I do admire what she has accomplished here. First of all, she has constructed a sophisticated theoretical model, a quite elegant perceptual lens. Crucially, she then uses that model or lens to provide a wide variety of truly helpful interpretations of Japanese literary texts. I am relatively new to the field (and certainly no expert), but I doubt there are too many Western scholars who know more about contemporary Japanese literature than DiNitto.

Chapter 1, “Voices from the Debris: Cultural Trauma and Disaster Fiction,” is a good example. On a technical note, DiNitto uses headings effectively throughout the book, dividing, or signposting, her material into more manageable sections. At the beginning of this chapter, she asks and addresses a key question, one that goes back to the multifaceted nature of the catastrophe – “Who is a victim?” Or rather, “Who speaks for or narrates the 3/11 disaster?” (22). Her larger point is that proximity-based criteria for victim status are useful for, and developed for, natural disasters like earthquakes and tsunamis, but not so useful for radiation fallout, which is typically spread by wind and contaminated food far beyond the initial accident zone. The toxic effects of radiation poisoning can also last for centuries, whereas the physical damages caused by earthquakes and tsunamis can be repaired fairly soon after they occur

(though that does not mean they always are). In other words, victimhood is not just about distance from these incidents. It is about the constituent elements of the incidents themselves. Next, working ground previously prepared by sociologist Jeffrey Alexander and others, DiNitto argues that for narratives of disasters of this type to become more than just representations of individual suffering they must be somehow transformed into “a collective transformation – they must be narrativized as trauma.” More specifically, this narrative “is not one of individual psychological trauma, but of cultural trauma, a representation of the event that establishes significant meaning for the social group [. . .] a theoretical concept that emphasizes the collective, socially constructed nature of trauma” (DiNitto 25). What literature can provide, and what Japanese literature did provide after 3/11, is a creative and imaginative path forward that, without diminishing or marginalizing an individual’s pain or loss, still leads from the one to the many, from the trauma of the “I” to the trauma of the “We.”

Pacing is important in any writing genre. Given the sophistication of its theoretical model and critiques of the political and sociohistorical context of the triple disasters, pacing is critical in *Fukushima Fiction*. Fortunately, DiNitto is up to the task, moving skillfully from the abstract to the more concrete whenever the book is in danger of dragging a bit, getting a little too esoteric. She thus concludes chapter 1 with an excellent close reading of a short story and a novel that were written within a year of 3/11: Shigematsu Kiyoshi’s “To the Next Spring – Obon” and Ikezawa Natsuki’s *The Two-Headed Boat*. Again, one of her main points is that when looking at this fiction it is important to remember that the narrative retelling is always determined by which of the disasters is the focus. Shigematsu’s story is about the nuclear victims, the *hibakusha*, who have never been treated well by Japanese society, while Ikezawa’s novel is about victims of the earthquake and tsunami, natural disasters with which Japan is historically all-too familiar. DiNitto uses the two texts to show that the impact of 3/11 on different groups of victims was not the same, that the manmade and natural disasters were not experienced in the same way, and that possibilities for closure were and are less likely for the victims of the nuclear disaster. In Shigematsu’s “To

the Next Spring – Obon,” DiNitto argues that “the nuclear disaster has permanently robbed victims of their communal past and future.” However, Ikezawa’s *The Two-Headed Boat* “presents a hopeful view of a community coming together to rebuild lives for those who lost homes and loved ones in the earthquake and tsunami” (49). Generally speaking then, the fiction that emerges out of the reactor meltdowns at the Fukushima Daiichi NPP is less hopeful, less capable of optimism.

In Chapter 2, “Tohoku on the Margins: Furukawa Hideo’s *Horses*,” DiNitto extends herself even further and devotes the entire chapter to an author that many readers like myself had probably never heard of before, an author that I would certainly like to read in the future. DiNitto makes the point that perhaps somewhat surprisingly most Fukushima fiction is not usually experimental in terms of form and structure, even when written by writers who were previously known for their experimental style. However, Furukawa Hideo’s 2011 *Horses, Horses, in the End the Light Remains Pure* (a lovely title I might add) is a notable exception. Like several other examples of Fukushima fiction, Hideo’s novel is a rewriting of a previous text, his 2008 *The Holy Family*, which is a fictional account of an earlier road trip he had taken through Tohoku. But *Horses* is not just a journalistic record of his journey into and across the disaster zones, and it certainly does not stick to the documentary approach characteristic of much of the initial 3/11 fiction. Instead, operating both spatially and temporally, the text moves back and forth between his personal journey and Tohoku’s long history, between the present and the past, between the building of medieval castles to the building of nuclear power plants, especially the Fukushima Daiichi NPP, which generated the electricity for Tokyo, 160 miles away. As DiNitto says, “Furukawa mixes fact and fiction in a literary tour de force that reveals Tohoku’s status as an ‘internal colony’ (*naikokuteki shokuminchi*) of Japan with a long-standing tributary relationship to the nation,” a relationship of exploitation that was dramatically exposed when the 3/11 calamities “stripped away the prosperity of nuclear subsidies to reveal a region teetering on the brink of survival” (57). DiNitto’s explication of what Furukawa is doing in *Horses* is impressive to say the

least. I think it would be very useful to anyone interested in working with what appears to be an important but complicated novel.

Continuing with her concentric circles approach, DeNitto's Chapter 3, "Hiroshima Encore: Return of the Hibakusha," offers a comparative analysis of the literature that emerged from the August 1945 atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the literature that resulted from the March 2011 nuclear reactor meltdowns in Fukushima. The return of the term *hibakusha*, or "nuclear victims," was itself a shock to most Japanese. But DiNitto is careful to emphasize that any attempt to examine the historical relationship between the two events – one caused by the intentional use of a newly invented weapon and the other by what had always been portrayed as a safe energy source – was not as straightforward as it might seem to be at first glance. In fact, she gives a variety of reasons for looking at them differently: "The number of victims, the singularity or multiplicity of the events, the nationality of the perpetrators," to name a few (89-90). And many Japanese, including writers like Taguchi Randy in "Into the Zone," hesitate to use *hibakusha*, preferring instead the more neutral word *hisaisha*, or "victims of a disaster." The Fukushima victims themselves often avoid the *hibakusha* label, given the social stigma typically associated with it. In addition, a major narratological difference is that atomic bomb writing is essentially survivor fiction, written by victims of the actual bombings (see Oka Yoto and *City of Corpses*) while fiction pertaining to the Fukushima meltdowns is typically written by people who did not have first-hand experience of the disaster and the toxic, radioactive poisoning it unleashed and is still unleashing. Nevertheless, according to DiNitto, although "Fukushima fiction does not necessarily trace itself back to the legacy of Hiroshima or Nagasaki atomic-bomb literature [. . .] neither does it ignore their historical or political significance." In an interesting comparison with 9/11, she argues that unlike 9/11 fiction, which tended to dehistoricize the Al-Qaeda attacks, Fukushima fiction "is written into Japan's historical encounter with atomic bombings, nuclear testing and war," in other words, historical precedent functions as a "prominent intertext" (91-92). With her usual adroitness, she then discusses the statements and writing of a variety of Japanese writers and public intellectuals, concluding with

Tsushima Yuko's *Mountain Cat Dome*, another Japanese novel and author that seem well worth reading.

Since the Fukushima disaster at least temporarily altered Japan's relationship with nuclear power, in her final chapter, "Chernobyl and Beyond: A New Era of Nuclear Literature," DiNitto looks at how as a consequence of Fukushima Japanese writers reimagined possible realities and potential futures in the contaminated areas of both Japan and the world. Here her analysis "moves outward to consider how Fukushima fiction reaches beyond the 3/11 disaster and Japan to engage with the global culture of the nuclear" (121). In effect, what has emerged is a new global genre of "nuclear fiction." DiNitto uses this chapter to discuss Japanese writers who are working within that genre, all of whom are exploring in their own way the literary implications of life in an irradiated world. Throughout *Fukushima Fiction* DiNitto does not shy away from pointed political critiques of the Japanese government and its cozy relationship with the Japanese nuclear power industry, both before and after the 3/11 meltdowns. At the end of this chapter, she is at her most polemical, arguing that one constant in these works is their authors' courage in condemning the Japanese political system and by extension Japanese culture for its willingness to abandon transparency and individual rights in pursuit of widespread reliance on nuclear power. Concurrently, she is also at her most hopeful, writing that these specific texts and Fukushima fiction in general "reveal the power of the word [. . .] to make visible the very 'foreseeable' nature of the Fukushima disaster, to expose the euphemisms of power and surveillance, and to force painful reflections on complicity" (159). For those of us who believe that literature is not too rarefied, not too removed from the practicalities and pressures of modern life to make any kind of difference, DiNitto provides an invigorating breath of fresh air.

Fukushima Fiction concludes with an interesting "Epilogue: Writing toward the Future" that starts with a summary of a visit to Tokyo DiNitto made while finishing up her research for the book. She juxtaposes the continuing bad news from the ever problematic "cleanup" of the Fukushima Daiichi NPP with a stroll she took through the fashionable

Roppongi Hills shopping district, where she encountered the “Summer 2017 *Mirai* (future) Tour,” a festival “replete with armies of Doraemon statues, dancing cartoons, giant inflatable cat balloons, and saccharine pop music,” all offering the “promise of a bright, amnesiac future” (161-162). In 2017 the Japanese government and its corporate allies was intent on keeping all eyes focused on the upcoming 2020 Summer Olympics, which was supposed to be the exemplar of that happy future, as well as the signal to the world that Japan had fully recovered from the 3/11 disasters. Of course, Covid-19 intervened and it is unlikely that too many people in Japan right now (or anywhere else) are thinking optimistically about what comes next. And as we have seen, the opposition to the eventual 2021 Summer Olympics by most Japanese was intense, and their corresponding levels of distrust of the Japanese government, were very high. DiNitto could not have anticipated Covid-19, so it will be instructive to watch and see if the pandemic and its numerous ruptures impact Japanese literature to the extent the 3/11 disasters did. I suspect it will.

Human history has never been lacking in disasters and the 21st century has already contributed its share. Unfortunately, there is every indication that the trend will continue and even accelerate. As a result, the disaster fiction genre will undoubtedly expand and grow in relevance. With its insightful writing and innovative organization, as well as its 30-page Endnotes section and 20- page Bibliography, *Fukushima Fiction* has thus significantly enhanced the landscape of literary criticism, both in terms of contemporary Japanese literature and the broader field of international eco-criticism. As a personal example, I am currently using the book to prepare for an upper-division environmental literature course that I will be teaching here at the University of Guam in the spring of 2022. I have previously taught the course on several occasions, but for the first time I will be focusing specifically on disaster fiction, including Matsuda Aoko’s “Planting” and Sato Yuya’s “Same as Always.” In the final analysis, *Fukushima Fiction* reminds us of the vital, courageous role many Japanese authors played in the wake of the triple disasters – a role many authors continue to play today in their own parts of the world. Rachel DiNitto should be commended for writing this book, and the University

of Hawai'i Press should be commended for publishing it. But most importantly, as *Fukushima Fiction* insists, the victims of 3/11, those who died and those who lived, should be always honored and forever remembered.