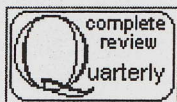


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Ashes

by
Kitakata Kenzo

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Title: *Ashes*
Author: Kitakata Kenzo
Genre: Novel
Written: 1990 (Eng. 2003)
Length: 258 pages
Original in: Japanese
Availability: [Ashes - US](#)
[Ashes - UK](#)
[Ashes - Canada](#)

- Japanese title: *Bo no kanashimi*
- Translated by Emi Shimokawa

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Our Assessment:

B+ : hard-boiled yakuza story, with a bit too much focus on personality over action



See [our review](#) for fuller assessment.

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Review Summaries

Source	Rating	Date	Reviewer
The Village Voice	.	8/7/2003	Mary Jacobi



From the Reviews:

- "This yakuza fable reads like a treatment for a Takeshi Kitano film, and its aging mobster Tanaka evokes Beat's sullen screen ennui." - Mary Jacobi , The Village Voice

Please note that these ratings solely represent the complete review's biased interpretation and subjective opinion of the actual reviews and do not claim to accurately reflect or represent the views of the reviewers. Similarly the illustrative quotes chosen here are merely those the complete review subjectively believes represent the tenor and judgment of the review as a whole. We acknowledge (and remind and warn you) that they may, in fact, be entirely unrepresentative of the actual reviews by any other measure.

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The complete review's Review:

Ashes is told in two parts. The first is told by an omniscient third-person narrator, but in the second it is the central character himself, Tanaka, that recounts events.

In the first part the episodic chapters introduce the character, describing scenes in which his yakuza (sort of the Japanese mafia) ways are displayed. In the very first chapter he plays yakuza strongman, tearing up a bar. Only

slowly does a picture of the man emerge: he's forty, near the top of the ladder in his yakuza family but not quite there, always subservient to the Clan Boss (though, while he's devoted to the man -- understanding the order of things -- he doesn't entirely respect him (not that he'd ever say that to anyone)). He has a calm demeanour, but is capable of great violence. He's married to the job, though he keeps some women -- the bar business being an effective way to do that and earn some money at the same time.

The Boss has Tanaka branch out and form another arm of the clan -- which doesn't thrill Tanaka, since it makes it less likely that he'll be able to succeed the Boss when his days are done. Tanaka's mini-gang is successful, and when the Boss gets ill it puts him in a good position to flex his power and undermine his main in-clan adversary, the anointed successor, Kurauchi

As the Boss lies dying in hospital the clan wobbles under the infighting (as well as from attacks from outside), with Tanaka carefully maneuvering to position himself for when the Boss finally does die.

There are some confrontations and a bit of violence. Tanaka doesn't mind getting a serious knife-wound or two -- a badge of some sort of honour, apparently -- and he even sews his wounds up himself in some of the book's odder -- and very graphic -- moments. *Ashes* does offer considerable insight into yakuza ways, particularly the strange codes of honour and respect (mostly for show, as in fact everyone turns out to be pretty much as petty and self-serving as in most other businesses). There are some interesting bits, such as the expectation that junior members will sacrifice and serve some time in prison (as Tanaka did). The to-do surrounding the Boss after his death is of particular interest and amusement.

Kitakata has the hard-boiled tone down pat, and his Tanaka is one of those strong, silent, loner types wielding great power (but with a core of vulnerability) familiar from everything from Western films to 1930s detective fiction. He's a decent hero-figure, balanced between being too old for this sort of thing and yet knowing he can't ever escape this lifestyle. He's never entirely sure of himself:

"Sometimes I wonder why I've stayed in this world for so long. More than twenty years. There's a part of me that resists being a real *yakuza*. I just don't fit."

But, of course, he's the type for whom there is no alternative.

Ashes is a fine character-study, with some decent action and storylines. Tanaka is a fairly compelling figure, but the book disappoints in not having nearly enough connected or truly dramatic action: the mainly loose episodes ultimately don't quite add up to a whole, leaving a snapshot-impression rather than really conveying a story.

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About the Author:

Japanese author Kitakata Kenzo has written an enormous number of novels.

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