

Yakuza tale roughly told

By Sonia O'Regan
Daily Yomiuri Staff Writer

"The Daily Yomiuri" June 1, 2003

Ashes

By Kenzo Kitakata
Translated by Emi Shimokawa
Vertical, 224 pp., \$23.95

If a book can be enhanced by the environment in which it is read, *Ashes*, by Kenzo Kitakata, may be best enjoyed in a dimly lit, smoky room with a glass of whisky on the rocks close at hand.

The grim yakuza story, titled *Bo no Kanashimi* in the original Japanese, begins in a dark bar with the shady protagonist making his presence felt by bullying the bartender, who naively believes he is dealing with a regular drunk.

The troublemaker initially is referred to as "the man"—a title best read with dramatic intonation. We learn his name only when a police officer calls him Tanaka as he clears out the bar after the ensuing chaos.

Kitakata has crafted a complex and contradictory character in Tanaka: a Mr. Nice Guy willing to do whatever is necessary for the good of the gang, or his survival within it at least.

He lives modestly in a small apartment and has his boys drive him around town in a family car or takes a cab (occasionally threatening death to drivers who ask him to put out his cigarette). His disregard for flashy appearances is made up for by his ambition to one day lead the main clan of his yakuza family.

The boss, however, has other ideas and suggests over dinner at a top-class restaurant in Tokyo that he start up a branch family. Tanaka knows he's being shafted, but is shrewd enough to work the situation to his advantage.

Kitakata is a prolific and popular writer in Japanese. Vertical, Inc., the publisher of his first

book to be translated into English, states that none of his 100 books in Japanese have gone out of print.

More the shame, then, that the English edition of *Ashes* is literal and clunky. The sophisticated nuance for which Kitakata has been praised is notably missing. Descriptions and dialogue in the first section of the book are simplistic and drawn out, while the use of pronouns rather than names for many of the characters creates unnecessary confusion.

The dramatic shift in voice in the middle of the story provides a welcome change from the forced mysterious prose of the early chapters.

Tanaka begins telling the story in first person, and we become privy to his thoughts as he builds up his group's drug and prostitution businesses to the point where he wields more power than those leading the main gang.

While his boss lies dying in a hospital, Tanaka reflects on the man he hated, but diligently served for more than 20 years, and wonders at times if he is becoming just like him.

Part hard-boiled mob tale, part character critique, *Ashes* may well appeal to die-hard noir fans. But those enticed by the publisher's promise of a tale that does for the yakuza what *The Sopranos* does for the U.S. mafia are likely to be disappointed.

NEW PAPERBACKS

BY COLIN DONALD

Almost There: The Onward Journey of a Dublin Woman

By Nuala O'Faolain
Penguin £10.99

After a comfortable career as an Irish Times columnist, Nuala O'Faolain struck a chord with *Are You Somebody?*, which Colm Toibin called a "classic of Irish autobiography." She returns for a second helping in this strangely hypnotic sequel, resuming her story from the point at which she found this new burst of fame and moved to the United States. Depicted with downcast eyes picking at her fingers on the cover, O'Faolain is nothing if not introverted, but she does have an Ancient Mariner quality, making you listen to her tale of boozy middle-aged trials, starting with the departure of her female lover, and moving on to her perceptions of 9-11, the ripples of which affected her, an honorary New Yorker, more than most of her compatriots. She gets away with the self-pity because of the clarity of her expression and a brand of heroic dowdiness that makes her a believable everywoman.

Tommy's Tale

By Alan Cumming
Michael Joseph, £7.99

Scottish actor famous for slightly sleazy or creepy parts (like a blue-faced monster in the current X-Men movie), Alan Cumming has written a novel loosely based on his own experiences as a bisexual, drug-snorting party animal. Can its hero choose between his boyfriend and his child, or indeed commit to anything at all between bouts of debauchery in the disabled toilets? The skills for good comic acting and for being funny on paper are quite different, and Cumming does not have much going for him as a writer except

American youth, Packer unfazed by hype

ie's country where the thick coffee served in little cups was so strong it could keep you awake for days."

pill Packer says it's not hard to take the media coverage in stride "if you can keep a sense of yourself, that

think, 'Oh, is she going to steal something,' or, if I went into a boutique or something, 'Will I really spend my time on this person who looks like she's 20 and probably doesn't have money?' So there are