

From Ashes to Ashes...

By: Yuki Allyson Honjo (*Int. Herald Tribune-Asahi Shimbun*)

“The man strolled slowly through the sunshine until he came to a stone bench and eased himself down onto it in like an old man. He wasn’t young, but he wasn’t exactly old either. Gray suit. After he loosened his understated tie slightly, he sat still, hardly moving.”

Tanaka has close-cropped hair, and wears a subtle tie to work every day. He chain-smokes Camels. His career was once on the fast track but was derailed when he was transferred to a subsidiary office. Everyday he meets his appointments but his heart is not in his job: he is merely going through the motions. He fears he will live out his life doing the same job day after day, until he dies. Like his sex drive, his passion for life is waning.

At first glance, Tanaka appears to be one of the anonymous and ubiquitous “salary men” who plod the streets of Tokyo. Even his name, which is the Japanese equivalent to Smith or Jones, suggests that he is the Japanese everyman.

But Tanaka is not an accountant or an actuary. He is a *yakuza* crime lord, running drugs, prostituting girls, and extorting money.

Kenzo Kitakata’s novel *Ashes* (originally published in 1990 in as *Bo no Kanashimi*) nominally tells the story of a gangster. Tanaka, once favored to head the crime syndicate, now leads a branch “family” gang. While Tanaka’s group manages to achieve a modicum of success, he is over looked as heir to the Boss. When the Boss collapses, the syndicate is in disarray as the chosen successor lacks the ability to maintain control. Tanaka sees this as a window of opportunity to grasp power and redefine his life.

Kitakata is one of Japan’s most prolific hard-boiled novelists with over a hundred books in print. Sparsely written with atmospheric prose, the author deftly depicts a world of stale cigarette smoke and unstirred bourbon sodas. While *yakuza* life and violence are depicted, sometimes quite graphically, the book centers on the character of Tanaka and his journey into middle age oblivion. Most of all,



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(Translator)

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Kitakata manages a neat trick: he captures Tanaka's boredom with his life without the novel itself becoming boring.

Tanaka is the urban male seeking meaning in his existence though his occupation. His stated purpose is to rise up the gang ranks. He foregoes normal relationships both carnal and emotional to achieve his goal: "It was better not to start a family if you were a *yakuza*. . . A *yakuza* doesn't have the right to taste ordinary pleasures. . . I believe that if you lived an ordinary life, you lost your capacity for extraordinary things." However, he does not seem to derive much pleasure from his chosen path: "I had lived like a dog. I had assumed I would die like a dog." Even his achievements within the organization give him little satisfaction: "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*. . . Why did I become a *yakuza*? Maybe I'd had no choice."

Kitakata's anti-hero is more than the usual clichés of underworld denizens with punch perms, sharp suits, and gold jewelry. Tanaka lives alone in the same apartment he kept for twelve years. He carefully vacuums his floor and uses a cloth to dust his sideboard. He sews his own buttons back onto his grey suit. He does not drive a Mercedes, drink expensive booze, or wear flashy clothes. He doesn't care what he eats or consumes. He is indifferent to music and appetites of any sort: as he makes love to a beautiful girl, he wonders, "How much can this girl earn [as his prostitute]?"

Kitakata does not descend into pap sentimentality to tell his story: the protagonist is no stereotypical "crook with a heart of gold". Tanaka is clearly not a nice man: he squeezes his pet goldfish to death, ruins the lives of "civilians," and lures women into prostitution. In the opening scene, he trashes with efficient violence a bar that refused to pay "protection" money. As for women: "She must have been thinking of the time I messed her up so bad that she couldn't go out for almost two weeks. The best way to shut up a woman is to thrash her face." His very mannerisms are marked with casual and repeated brutality.

To say *Ashes* is a novel about Japanese gangsters and shoot-outs is like saying Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea* is a book about deep sea fishing techniques. The novel is not a mere action thriller set in an exotic locale, but a meditation on men and aging. *Ashes* is a superb example of the hard boiled genre-- well written, well translated, and verging upon the literary. ■

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