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Books: Original gangster

By John Ziebell

One of the most interesting elements of "culture" is how poorly it frequently translates. Do you know anyone who's watched an entire opera--or a cricket match--on television? How can the French, a people widely recognized for their sophistication, idolize Jerry Lewis? Mr. Bean is allegedly funny in England; maybe it's something in the water, or the mushy peas.

The fiction market is a bit more focused. With the exception of some "serious literary" (read: inescapably boring) stuff from the Indian subcontinent, most of the work imported from abroad has passed a fairly rigorous screening process--that is, it's seen as having mainstream profit potential by a publishing world that's increasingly narrow, selective and bottom line-oriented. And the market has become unflinching; even novels by Nobel laureates fall victim to "sell by" dates imposed by corporate bookstores.

Ashes is unique enough to be an exception to the rule. This novel marks the American debut of Kenzo Kitakata, one of Japan's most prolific authors, and hopefully the book will prove as successful for marketers as it is for readers.

This is a dramatic tale, to be sure, but one that never takes stereotypical shortcuts. While the novel's tone echoes the spare, direct style of World War II-era noir fiction, its structure adds narrative complexity and its language figurative elegance. The book is divided into halves, each told from a different point of view, an approach that gives Kitakata the best of two worlds.

The opening section offers a harsh, minimalist, third-person perspective of the novel's protagonist, Tanaka, initially introduced as "the man." The story is oblique, the character enigmatic; only slowly do they resolve into the image of an aging yakuza plying his trade in the bright but soulless streets



Ashes
 Kenzo Kitakata
 Vertical Inc.
 220 pages

of contemporary Tokyo. Tanaka wears gray suits. He smokes, he drinks, he kicks people senseless--the sort of approach to interpersonal communications embraced by most of Clint Eastwood characters, providing just as much depth.

When the narrative shifts to the first person in the back half of the book, it reveals a Tanaka who's even more remarkable in his viciousness than he was when we had no insight into his thought processes. This is a guy who likes his dingy apartment, hates anything that can be called fashion and kills his pet goldfish to teach it a lesson. He puts a bar in his girlfriend's name, but no economic power. His mistress, who runs a string of prostitutes, gets more of Tanaka's attention, but is not as well-favored financially; he does, though, provide her narcotics at cost.

Any story involving gangsters, no matter what neighborhood it calls home, has one thematic black hole that draws everything else in around it: power. Crime abhors a vacuum, but it's also very good at avoiding overcrowding. Some ambitious felon is always on the way up in the world, and that requires the removal of a once-murderous emeritus. Thugs pay plenty of lip service to money, but like any other enterprise that requires administration, the real issue is turf, and the yakuza are no exception.

"Live like a dog, die like a dog" is Tanaka's operative mantra, but when we're inside his brainpan, it begins to look like one he just might survive. Tanaka's reflections on the past give his character some emotional depth, but his ambition provides motivation. He's over 40 and feeling his years; as somebody once said, it's not just the mileage, but the quality of the roads that adds up. Like most midlevel bureaucrats, he's pissed about a catalogue of abuses: stolen ideas, ignored advice, incompetent sycophants being promoted ahead of him. But in Tanaka's world, filing a grievance with the ombudsman doesn't make up for prison time or dead friends. He is his only resource, and it's in the shift from emotionless tough guy to Machiavellian manipulator that he becomes credible.

There are plenty of random distractions along the way--detours for foie gras at one of Tokyo's most exclusive restaurants, the appearance of a young hooker's knife-wielding ex-boyfriend and the equivalent hierarchies of a yakuza turf war and a yakuza funeral, not to mention some bizarre personal rituals--but Tanaka's character, in the end, is what keeps us turning pages. He's his own greatest asset but his own worst enemy, something that could be said about a great many people, which is probably why we're so fascinated in seeing which way this will all turn out.

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