

THE GLOBE AND MAIL (CANADA'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER) August 16, 2003 BOOKS:
Ring, Koji Suzuki *Twinkle Twinkle*, Kaori Ekuni *Ashes*, Kenzo Kitakata

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

CANADA'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER ■ FOUNDED 1844 ■ GLOBEANDMAIL.COM ■ MONDAY, AUGUST 18,

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BOOKS

CAN THREE
JAPANESE
BESTSELLERS
TRANSLATE INTO
NORTH AMERICAN
SUCCESS?

POP GOES JAPAN



SARAH SHEARD ON
CLAUDIA CASPER'S
EXAMINATION OF THE
FATHER-DAUGHTER
RELATIONSHIP

THREE CENTURIES
OF LONDON'S
UNDERWORLD

HOW THE CIA
UNDERMINED IRANIAN
DEMOCRACY

FICTION

Meet Japan's Stephen Kings

Ring

By Koji Suzuki
Translated by Robert B. Rohmer
and Glynn Whalley
Vertical, 286 pages, \$35.95 (U.S.)

Twinkle Twinkle

By Kaori Ekuni
Translated by Emi Shimokawa
Vertical, 170 pages, \$29.95

Ashes

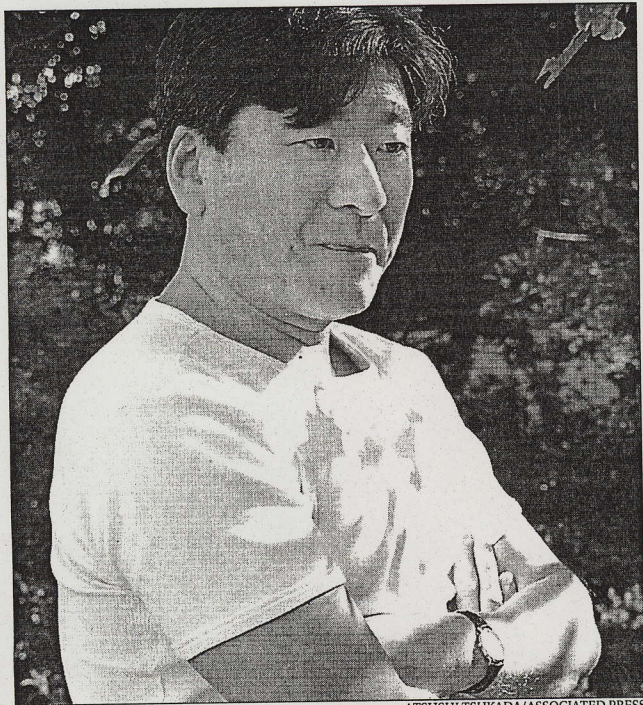
By Kenzo Kitakata
Translated by Emi Shimokawa
Vertical, 219 pages, \$34.95

REVIEWED BY TED GOOSSEN

Five years ago, an energetic, chain-smoking Japanese entrepreneur named Hiroki Sakai arrived in New York with a new and bold (and some said crazy) idea: to market Japanese popular fiction in North America. Sakai was not what one would call a literary man, nor did he speak much English. Yet he knew the book-selling business in Japan and was confident that Japanese literature could be commercially successful abroad. The trick, he thought, was to shift the focus from "serious" novelists to the Stephen Kings and Elmore Leonards of his country, writers such as Koji Suzuki and Kenzo Kitakata. If they and others like them could sell millions of books in Japan, Sakai reasoned, they could do so in foreign countries if they were presented in the right way. A good story, after all, was a good story anywhere — you just had to know how to market it.

Sakai worked hard to make his idea a reality. He hired a young, talented and largely bilingual staff, recruited a roster of up-and-coming translators, and signed the hottest book designer in the business, Chip Kidd, to look after the covers. Now his publishing house, Vertical (the name reflects the fact that Japanese lines run up and down, as opposed to across the page) has released its first three titles, with others ready and waiting in the wings. The first crop includes Suzuki's horrific *Ring*, Kitakata's hard-boiled portrait of a gangster, *Ashes*, and the romance *Twinkle Twinkle*, by Kaori Ekuni, who will appear at Harbourfront in Toronto for this fall's International Festival of Authors. Do these novels bear out Sakai's premise? Are "good stories" as portable as he has assumed? Or is their reception irrevocably limited by differences in culture, language and literary genre? Is there room, in other words, for "foreign" imports in a global market dominated by the American model?

Many are already familiar with the basic plot of *Ring*, since it has



ATSUSHI TSUKADA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Koji Suzuki wrote horror thriller *The Ring* 'with a child on his lap.'

been made into a DreamWorks production starring Naomi Watts, and before that into a wildly popular Japanese film. (It has also spawned two sequels, a prequel, two TV dramas, a radio drama and a "manga" comic.) The novel begins with the simultaneous deaths of four teenagers, who turn out to have seen the same video together exactly one week earlier. One of those victims is the niece of the journalist/hero, who sets out with his closest friend — an amoral, possibly brutal, university lecturer — to unravel the mystery. In the course of their investigation, the journalist unwittingly exposes his wife and child to the deadly tape. This gives his search a special urgency: If the secret of the video, and its antidote, cannot be uncovered within seven days he, his family and his friend will all die.

Ring the novel holds some shocking surprises for those familiar with the films. The images that make up the fatal video, for example, are quite different — and much spookier — in Suzuki's version, and his explanation for how the video was "shot" in the first place is far more compelling. In fact, Suzuki takes great pains to establish a cohesive logic to help us understand what is taking place. This logic — a metaphysics of the soul, as it were — is based on the traditional Japanese belief, shared by many other cultures, that the ghost of a person

who has died in isolation or agony is dangerous, and that every effort must be made to help it journey safely to the other side.

Unlike the ghost in the DreamWorks version, who is purely and inexplicably evil, Suzuki's ghost captures our sympathy, for she became what she was because of what people did to her and her mother. This adds a psychological aspect to the story, and allows Suzuki to deal with the question of cause, which leads him to broader issues. Was the tragedy brought about by social prejudice? Fear of the unknown? Male brutality? As the journalist and his sidekick grope for the answer, they become uncomfortably aware that the roots of the horror may actually lie within themselves, and their society.

Male brutality suffuses Kenzo Kitakata's portrait of a middle-aged gangster in *Ashes*. Like Tony Soprano in the TV series *The Sopranos*, this man, whose name is Tanaka, manages to attract our interest (and sometimes our sympathy) even as he commits the most violent acts. He too is a creature of his environment — in his case the semi-feudal world of the yakuza — and like Soprano he suffers as a result. (*Ashes'* Japanese title, *Bo no Kanashimi*, or *The Sadness of the Cudgel*, evokes the loneliness of the criminal life.) Like all hardened heroes, though, Tanaka bears his pain with stoic indifference. He is used to being

alone. He has no family or friends, nor any real attachment to the women he sleeps with. He lives in a barren apartment which he keeps antiseptically clean, wears the same gray suit every day, and eats merely to survive. When violence erupts, however, he springs into action like a modern samurai, a focused and deadly fighting machine.

Tanaka fits within the pantheon of hard-boiled heroes from both sides of the Pacific: cowboys and samurai, gangsters and detectives. Those unfamiliar with the Japanese tradition, however, will find something new in Kitakata's yakuza. He is no closet romantic à la Bogart in *Casablanca*, although women fall for him just as hard. Instead, his gentler feelings are reserved for his yakuza comrades in arms, his true family. The young soldiers he leads are his "children," his contemporaries in the gang his "brothers," the Clan elders his "uncles." Yet the only gang member he is deeply attached to is the Boss, his "father," the man to whom he bears his allegiance. Tanaka thus resembles the ideal samurai of the past, whose fealty to his lord was based on not just obligation, but love.

Like so many hard-boiled heroes, Tanaka is an anachronism, a man who continues to play by rules others have long since discarded. While his "children" are drawn to Japan's modern consumer culture, he drinks Four Roses whisky, smokes Camels and worries about getting older. As he puts it, "I wasn't really interested in fast cars, fancy clothes, or expensive apartments. Ambition. I'd wanted to rise up in the yakuza world. That was the only thing on my mind for twenty years." This single-minded devotion marks him as a throwback, but he stands atop the heap as the epitome of macho. He is also, however, one of the last of a dying breed, for the forms of manhood are changing in Japan.

Raised in tight quarters and caught in an endless round of "educational" activities, Japanese boys have little chance to play the rough-house games their grandfathers did. During their high school years they endure "exam hell," cramming each night while their North American peers are out playing sports or, more likely, dating girls. Then, after graduation, they move on to white-collar or service jobs, "productive" work having largely been moved off-shore where muscle is cheaper. Add to this a postwar system which effectively removes the father from the home (most workers are obliged to spend their evenings, and often their weekends, with their colleagues) and you have a

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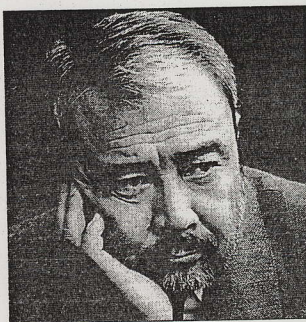
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generation of young men poorly prepared to fulfill the traditional male role.

All three novelists address this situation in one way or another. Koji Suzuki, who has written about child-rearing and played the role of house-husband (he famously wrote *Ring* "with a child on his lap"), deconstructs the traditional view of masculinity in his horror fiction. The journalist of *Ring*, for example, not only shudders at the violence against women he uncovers; he is guilt-ridden by his neglect of his own family, which has placed them in deadly peril. Kenzo Kitakata, by contrast, nostalgically reaffirms the old masculine virtues even while detailing the carnage they may leave in their wake. His stoic, tough heroes are sometimes cruel but they are "manly," and women are drawn to them like flies to sugar.

Not all Japanese women, of course, buzz in that direction. Since the 1980s, young women, especially, have flocked to popular writers of their own gender, such as Banana Yoshimoto and Kaori Ekuni. They depict a new, more feminine "ideal man" drawn from the pages of *shojo manga* (comics for "young maidens," although their readers' ages range from 10 to 30). In the *manga*, these youths are sketched with the same flowing tresses and limpid, star-studded eyes used for the female characters, so that the uninitiated find it hard to tell the boys from the girls. In their literary incarnations, however, these *manga*-derived characters occupy a strangely intermediate space. Japanese friends, for example, have told me they imagine, not human faces, but cartoon drawings when reading Banana Yoshimoto's stories. Yet translations of her works have attracted readers from around the world, many of whom have never seen a *manga*. Now, with the appearance of Ekuni's *Twinkle Twinkle*, beautifully rendered into English by Emi Shimokawa, this international phenomenon is poised to expand in a new direction.

For despite the similarity in genre, *Twinkle Twinkle*, the story of two young newlyweds, is like nothing Yoshimoto ever wrote. Shoko is an emotionally volatile translator with a drinking problem, her husband an even-tempered medical doctor who has had a male lover for 10 years. Shoko accepts that he is gay and that he has no desire to sleep with her. She loves him for his beauty and his sensitivity, and worries incessantly that, without a physical bond, their love is doomed. As she says, "The feeling I had that I was embracing water came not from the loneliness of a sexless marriage, but from the complex we both had about it—the suffocating need to be sensitive to the other's feelings the whole time." With no one sympathetic to their plight (their parents and close friends are equally scandalized), the young couple have nothing but their pure love for each other to pull them through.



Kenzo Kitakata: Tony Soprano by way of Elmore Leonard.

Many North American readers will find Kaori Ekuni's brand of writing puzzling. Horror and hard-boiled fiction are known quantities, but what are we to make of a genre that elevates the dream of pure romance over the reality of physical love? We may dismiss it as adolescent fantasy, but I doubt it is that simple. To the contrary, it appears that Ekuni is addressing a serious problem faced by many young people in affluent post-industrial societies. Shoko's world may "sparkle" (a more accurate translation of the novel's Japanese title) on the surface—she enjoys practically everything money can buy—yet, paradoxically, all that material comfort only intensifies her feelings of isolation and despair. How can she cope with the hollowness of a consumer culture in which even sex is turned into a commodity? In the end, she hits upon a new and radically different solution: the "pure joy" of a sexless, but loving, relationship.

Popular literature is often dismissed as formulaic and superficial, but *Ring*, *Ashes* and *Twinkle Twinkle* clearly deal with pressing issues, ranging from shifting gender roles to the impact of technology and consumer culture. Still, they are bestsellers in Japan because they are "good stories" that are fun to read. Will they sell equally well in the English-speaking world, as Hiroki Sakai and his crew are hoping? Probably not at first. Given time, however, they and the other works in the Vertical pipeline (which include Osamu Tezuka's classic *manga* series on the life of the Buddha and the epic *The Guin Saga*, Japan's answer to *The Lord of the Rings*) should find enough readers to allow Sakai's bold experiment to succeed. Eventually, some of these works should find a place within our cultural mainstream, perhaps, like *Ring*, in cinematic form.

We are used to associating Japan with "classical arts" such as Kabuki theatre and haiku poetry. Yet in their heyday, Kabuki and haiku were popular art forms, part of the great surge in commercial urban culture that took place during the Edo period. Now, three centuries later, it seems the East may rise again.

Ted Goossen teaches at York University and is editor of *The Oxford Book of Japanese Short Stories*.