

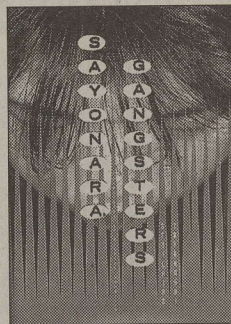
Japanese novel moves from absurd to violent

By Laura Philpot Benedict
The Grand Rapids Press

Some works of fiction require a more energetic suspension of disbelief than others, and none more so than Genichiro Takahashi's "Sayonara, Gangsters," a landmark Japanese post-modern novel originally published in 1982, but only recently translated into English and released in the United States. Part science fiction, part poetry, part philosophical treatise and noir thriller, with the odd graphic element tossed in, "Sayonara, Gangsters" is a playful blend, a true work of metafiction that never takes itself too seriously.

"Sayonara, Gangsters" does have a ghost of a plot: A thoughtful male poetry teacher who has endured the death of his child falls blissfully in love with a beautiful woman (Song Book) who owns an alcoholic, talking cat. Tragedy ensues when the couple is overtaken by the woman's past in the most unpleasant way. But this core story lives behind the novel's often bizarre action as though hiding behind a mask. Fortunately, the forward action is good fun — if not always of the cleanest kind.

Takahashi is prescient in his vision of the near-future as a world suffused with easy sexuality and instantaneous intimacy. But while the poet is a full participant in this world, he is always circumspect. Takahashi perhaps presents him as a symbol of hope. The



FICTION
SAYONARA, GANGSTERS
by Genichiro Takahashi
Vertical Books •
\$19.95 • 331 pages

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poet ever reaches out to please, to teach, and works to help his students, casual acquaintances and even gangsters to find their humanity.

The objects of his care are strange and distorted: The gangsters are super-human in their strength and epic in their violence; his students are excruciatingly dull-witted and puffed with self-importance; the local bartender is preoccupied with the wings sprouting beneath his jacket.

As to his job, poet's sincerity is almost painful: "If any of you out there really and truly and from the very bottom of your heart wants to write poetry, and if on top of that you are troubled by the fact that you don't know how or what to write, I really hope you will enroll in our school. I will listen to what you have to say. You will be the one to talk." He even counsels the poet Virgil, who comes to him as a beer-and-cheese-stocked refrigerator on his quandary on discovering that he has become a refrigerator.

If all of this sounds a bit bizarre, it is. While "Sayonara, Gangsters" is certainly literature with a capital L, it stretches the boundaries of literature in a most satisfying way. The novel doesn't end well, but poignantly, and without much hope. But it is a joyful song all the same, and never dull. Who says serious literature can't be fun?

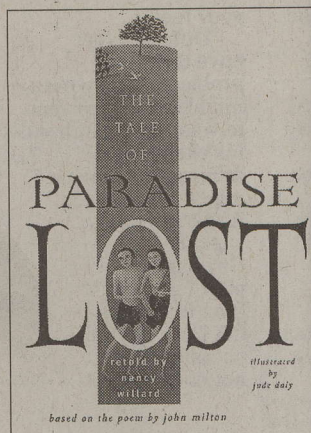
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especially tales based on true events and real people. Legends, tall tales and grand stories from history passed on from generations bring wide eyes and open minds. The following new books of retellings are treasures for a new generation of readers.

Surely, the Biblical history of Adam and Eve is the greatest story of all. Good and evil, heaven and hell, disobedience and free will are themes found in **The Tale of Paradise Lost** retold by poet and award-winning author Nancy Willard (Atheneum, \$17.95, 150 pages, ages 12 and up).

This text is based on the poem written by John Milton in 1656. Willard's brilliant and detailed retelling creates a real and powerful story that older children will find fascinating. Adding to the rich storytelling quality is a selection of watercolor illustrations by Jude Daly.

Michigan families have greatly enjoyed all the books in the "legend" series written by the creative team of Kathy-jo Wargin and illustrator Gijsbert van Frankenhuisen. Their latest and sixth book, **The Legend of the Petoskey Stone** is another enchanting, historically based tale. In this story, a father shares the legend with his young son as



they walk along the beach in search of Petoskey stones. (Sleeping Bear Press, \$17.95, all ages)

Born in northern Michigan in 1787, a fur trader named Petosegay, meaning "sunbeam of promise" offers his name to the town he helped create, Petoskey. Found only in northern Michigan, the unique Petoskey stones carry a promise of a bright, new tomorrow in honor of this great man.

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The Grand Rapids Press
Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde? Small time stuff.
Clark Kent and Superman? That

took that long to intrude."
It was not his first effort at fiction, but it was the first to