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BIG IN JAPAN

Those Kicks Were Fast as Lightning

by Sanford May

There is not much reason to write a regular column unless one can occasionally pull in something of an entirely personal nature, gnaw on it and draw a loose, perhaps untenable comparison to one's usual theme. Indeed, it's blowing **a crisp, refreshing wind in Japanese literature** this autumn: Last month, I read Randy Taguchi's *Outlet*, a unique novel comprising a little mystery, some contemporary spiritual questing, and, yes, even a healthy dose of graphic physical grappling between the novel's protagonist and a couple of her would-be suitors. Virtually unmentioned in last month's number was Glynne Wally's translation work. Wally, you'll recall, also translated Koji Suzuki's modern urban horror novel *Ring* for Taguchi's stateside publisher, Vertical. Certainly enough can be written of Wally's translation, but I don't believe I've quite reached that mark. **Wally has a knack for taking Japanese prose -- a thing elegant and severe; lush and martial -- conveying it in the English language without discarding its essential elements.** Like those brigands discarded my library card, health plan identification, and a lucky penny I kept secreted in an inner fold of my wallet. Or I don't know, maybe they spent that, too. In any event, both *Ring* and *Outlet* have sequels in Japanese; and I'd love to see both in English editions, refined and retuned by the able literary code breaker Wally.

Next month, I'll be diving into *Strangers*, the new novel from Taichi Yamada -- notice how I skillfully avoided the pitfall of writing "meeting *Strangers*." That's an ugly pun; and I'm not much up for meeting strangers these days, as the last couple I ran into kicked me in the face. But the book looks like a winner. Yamada draws on his own background, as one of Japan's favored television scriptwriters, to create Harada, a man divorced and alone, drifting back to his childhood stomping grounds in Tokyo's Asakusa region, a district known for its entertainment venues. (Note to myself that I shouldn't have used the word "stomping" as it brings back just the brushy fringes of bad memories.) One wonders if novelist Yamada spent some research time in Asakusa, knocking back distilled sake, gobbling up some delicious hot noodles, taking in the sights, sounds and smells: fragrances and stench, too. I hope he wasn't robbed while he was down there. I hope he wasn't beaten while he was robbed. His novel *Strangers* is a ghost story: I'll like that, taken as I am of late with entirely fictional entities that go thump in the night -- or thump me in the night.

Also new this season is Natsuo Kirino's *Out* from Kodansha International. Yes, it's another killer thriller; and yes, it looks just as good as the many

other tension tigers coming out of Japan these days. Taking the nod from Dostoyevsky, great Russian forbearer of psychological thriller stylists, Kirino gets her hands right around the throat of a thoroughly modern take on the slaying man's classic, *Crime and Punishment*. Seems an excellent read on a chill November evening when you just don't want to get out. And I really don't want to get out much these days. Also look under the Kodansha label for *In The Miso Soup* by Ryu Murakami. Another bloody thriller with a nasty knife edge? You bet. Give the Japanese another couple of months and there won't be space on store shelves for new English mystery novels. It's the age of the tingling spine and the snapped-shut shutter in today's Japan; no Ellery Queen here, either, and we're all that much better for it. Dorothy Sayers and surely grand dame Christie have had their days -- long, deserved days -- but there is a new tide rising in the east; best to swim high and ride it in; everyone in the know will be lounging on these wicked black shores come this winter.

From my admittedly skewed perspective, literature is life and life is literature: pained that the twain shall ever part for separate ways. Perhaps you'll forgive my indulgence, my typewritten catharsis. Maybe you'll even send back my wallet. It was a good one. A nice oxblood dye; held up well, too: I've had it for years and nary the shade of a spangled stain upon it. The credit cards, I suppose you've discovered by now, aren't much good after I've cancelled them. Ah, but you may want them as souvenirs. Hell, hang on to the billfold, too -- something to remember me by, because you came from nowhere and I can't recall you at all. No hard feelings. My face? It's healing just fine, thank you. The scars will fade in a few years to a wiser shade of pale.

Strangers by Taichi Yamada (translated by Wayne P. Lammers), Vertical, 2003.

Ring by Koji Suzuki (translated by Robert B. Rohmer and Glynne Wally), Vertical, 2003.

Outlet by Randy Taguchi (translated by Glynne Wally), Vertical, 2003.

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