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Main Page

General News

Business

Op-Ed

Letters

Arts & Culture

Life in Japan

Sports

Cabinet Profiles

Links

Services

Subscribe

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About us

Contact us

Advertise

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Shukan ST

JT Weekly

Travel Service

Hotel network

Book club

InterFM radio

Japan Times Jobs

ELEC

Study abroad

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THE BOOK REPORT

Top-selling authors go abroad

By JANET ASHBY

Once again, the Japanese tax office has issued its annual list of top taxpayers for the previous year. Not surprisingly, it reflects the continuing economic slump, with a contraction in the amounts paid. What's more, six of the top 100 taxpayers are Wall Street bankers -- and five of them are foreigners. Only one executive from the four main financial groups (Mitsui Sumitomo) made it into the top 100.

Heading the list of the top 10 taxpaying authors for the fifth year in a row was Kyotaro Nishimura, one of six mystery writers who made the list. The other five were Miyuki Miyabe, Yasuo Uchida, Jiro Akagawa, Kenzo Kitakata and Keigo Tono. Haruki Murakami returned to the list thanks to "Kafka on the Shore," his hit novel about a teenage boy. But his new translation of J.D. Salinger's "Catcher in the Rye" is also attracting much attention this year.

Coming in at No. 7 and No. 8 were two writers of women's fiction -- Kaori Ekuni and Kei Yuikawa -- the latter of whom won the Naoki Literary Prize last year. Rounding out the list at No. 10 was Fuyumi Ono, whose fantasy book series "Twelve Kingdoms" became a popular animated show on NHK and spawned several comic books, audio books, DVDs, two video games and several CDs of theme music.

I have always wondered why the annual list of top taxpayers is issued, and this year the Yomiuri Shimbun (May 16) gave me the answer.

The system was instituted in 1950, amid the confusion that immediately followed the war, primarily to catch tax evaders: rewards were given to those who informed on people who failed to report their full earnings to the tax office. The reward was dropped in 1954, and the announcement of amounts paid added in 1983.

Those listed complain of blackmail bids, kidnapping attempts on their children, and coercive calls for donations from ultranationalist groups. The government's tax committee is now considering ending the system because of privacy concerns, but there is still a strong feeling that it helps prevent tax evasion as well as give recognition to the achievements of the top earners.

While Japanese authors who are as successful as the ones on the tax office's list remain largely untranslated, a new publishing company has been established to remedy this situation.

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無料で毎日英会話!

無料でTOEIC
対策メール購読



Vertical Inc. in New York hopes to find an audience in the United States for literary entertainment from Japan beyond Banana Yoshimoto and Haruki Murakami. Founded by Hiroki Sakai, a former book editor at Nikkei Shimbun who has, according to Publishers Weekly (April 7), secured funding from the Nihon Keizai Shimbun and Itochu International, Vertical published its first four books this spring, has eight more scheduled to print in fall and 20 to 24 more set for next year.

The four titles already published are "Ring" by Koji Suzuki, the basis for the horror film recently remade in Hollywood; "Twinkle Twinkle," an urban love story by Kaori Ekuni; "Ashes," a hard-boiled mystery by Kenzo Kitakata; and book one of the heroic fantasy "Guin Saga" -- comprising 100 volumes in all! -- by Kaoru Kurimoto.

These books are being aggressively promoted, with author tours this month by Suzuki, Ekuni and Kitakata.

I personally did not find "Twinkle Twinkle," although a short and pleasant read, to be the "impeccable comedy of manners" promised in the company's press release. The story traces the first year of the unconventional marriage of Shoki, an emotionally unstable translator of Italian, and Mutsuki, a gay doctor, through the jealousies that arise between Shoki and Mutsuki's gay lover Kon, pressures from both sets of parents to have a baby, adjustments to living with another person, and the happy ending that comes about for all three of them.

I thought Ekuni did a good job portraying Shoki's emotional fragility and the mutual misunderstandings she and Mutsuki had during their period of adjustment. However, only Shoki felt like a real person, and the book read like a trendy TV drama; in particular there never seemed to be anything pulling Shoki and Mutsuki together, so the whole idea of the marriage was never fully convincing.

However, "Twinkle Twinkle" did drive home to me how difficult translation can be in a cultural as well as technical sense. Shoko's fragility and alcoholism, for example, may well be endearing and quirky to Japanese readers, but how will American readers react?

Although the use of alternating chapters from the viewpoints of Shoki and Mutsuki was effective, their voices sound the same, no doubt in part because of the loss of the distinctive male and female language characteristics of the original Japanese. And while the method of having the book translated by a native Japanese speaker first, then having it rewritten by an American who has no knowledge of Japanese, removed much of the unnatural English, there were a few jarring exceptions, such as when colloquialisms, like "It kind of freaked me out" or "You know, whatever," were used.

not exactly

Isn't the success of Murakami in America at least partially due to the skilled translation of native English speakers who also understand the Japanese?

But despite such cavils, one has to appreciate the efforts of Vertical to address the woeful imbalance in translations across the Pacific, and wish

them every success.

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