

Introduction

These stories are written, for the most part, by people I know, some of them close friends. To ask acquaintances to write was calculated but risky; while I felt strongly that I would have relished someone asking for my story about Japan, there was always some doubt in my mind that I would be able to collect enough stories in this way. However, most of the people I asked not only rose to the request, they also produced beautiful stories of personal experiences and clear revelations, memorable impressions of Japan, all of them heart-felt. These tales are snapshots and insights into real-life Japan produced by people who have a strong connection to Japan, who lived there or, in many cases, still do. A few of the writers in *Forty Stories* have been published before or are known in Japan. However, most are not professional writers, and perhaps because of this their tales resonate with the ordinary reader who simply wants to know about life in Japan. All the contributors have written stories that deserved telling and reading.

The idea for this collection was inspired by the letter writing of Naomi Arimura. It was the vitality of one of her letters recounting the adopting and training of a puppy that started the project. I suggested she could send it to the Guardian Weekly to publish in their column of letters from different countries. Then I began to think that other people living in Japan may have equally enjoyable and insightful tales to tell.

This is a varied collection, unified by the writers' admiration for Japan and roughly classified for convenience. There are stories conveying a fine feeling for the country in a simple way, others are of a more literary style that are beautifully crafted - all of them can make the heart sing. They are divided into themes: first impressions of Japan, home and family life, the cross-cultural experience, work, nature, modern life, celebrations and even pets, an important part of life in Japan today. There is a visit to a love hotel (*The Love Hotel*), a pilgrimage in the Inland Sea (*Ohenro*), climbing hills (*A Ramble on Bizan, The Mountain, A Walk Between Worlds*), going on a date (*Matchmaking at the Onsen*), going to a wedding (*Wedding*

Guests), the funeral of a family member (*Otoosan*), meeting the Chinese President in a rice field (*The President's Hand*), the world of modelling in Osaka (*Elvis*), celebrity interviews (*My Tokyo Interviews*), island longevity (*Okinawa*), an encounter with bears (*Bears in Hokkaido*), teaching ten-year-old terrors (*School Thrill*), touring Japan with a troupe of players (*Nanohana Rhapsodising*), living with a ghost (*Living with the Ghost Lady*), cross-cultural experiences (*Disturbing the Wa, Communication at a Crossroads, The Not-so-Narrow Road... , Reminiscences of Japan*) and the story that started it all - *Puppy Kindy*, taking a dog for training.

Keats wrote about Beauty and Truth. The aim of this book was something of that - to provide glimpses of the beauty and the truth of life in Japan. There is also something happily revealing, I hope, in a collection of so many different views and ways of telling. The stories are accessible; the authors have brought forth their own experiences, clearly, simply and often touching. The stories represent a side of Japan that is best revealed by people who have made Japan home - for a few years, for more than thirty years or, in some cases, for a lifetime. The length of stay is not relevant - each story is a token of the writers' connection with Japan, a country that weaves silken threads around the heart.

Read this book and your notions of Japan will be changed, whatever they may be: Number 2 in the world economy, Mount Fuji, temples and shrines, ancient *bonsai* or dazzlingly colourful '*anime*', the maker of automobiles for the world, home of traditional martial arts and sumo wrestling, groves of bamboo, snowfalls of cherry blossom on celebrating groups, food such as sushi, tofu and *sukiyaki*, rebellious whale-catching, high cost of living, long working hours, exquisite arts and crafts. We all have images of countries, and Japan provides a whole host. However, these stories present another side to Japan for you to ponder, depicting the lives of both Japanese people and those who have adopted Japan and, in turn, been adopted to some degree, though that is an issue for another book.

Japan, not unlike other deeply traditional countries, can be agonisingly frustrating, its ancient ways not too far below a westernised veneer. 'Scratch the steel you'll find bamboo', they say. Long-termers in Japan love to leave even if

just for a short time, to throw off constrictions, be it to escape to the craziness of Hong Kong, to feel the smiling warmth of the Thai people, to smell the clear air of countries like New Zealand, to experience more familiar customs of European countries, or to expand in the wide-open spaces of Australia and Canada and the USA. If they go to whence they hail, they have a newfound appreciation of the easy service in hometown restaurants and shops, the banter of family and friends, the easy use of language and idiom, the feeling that all's accustomed and well with the world. Of course that's what a holiday is for, but people have often said when they arrive back in Japan, some deeper sense of connection floods back unexpectedly. Perhaps it is triggered by the politeness and security, that all is ordered and on time; the sight of tidy green squares of rice paddies or groves of bamboo, or the sensual anticipation of tasting great sushi, *tempura* or simple rice balls, or the smell of *soba* soup or *tatami* matting, or some moment of glimpsed beauty as one passes in an urban train, or some imaginative concoction in one's collective concept of Japan. All these tales are imbued with the richness of living in Japan, telling the unforgettable experiences the writers had. The way they write is evidence of how, despite the frustrations, they hold the country close to their hearts.

I hope that everyone who reads this book will get a clearer picture of the country and its people, and that all who contributed to this book will feel drawn together in the shared memories of a country they have come to love.

In conclusion, I would like to invite anyone reading this book who feels that they, too, have a story to tell, especially about Japan, to write to graham@finelinepress.co.nz. Perhaps another forty stories of the land of silken threads are waiting in the wings.

*Graham Bathgate, FineLine Press
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