

# LITERATURE

## A long, rich history and exciting present

The written literature of Japan forms one of the richest of Oriental traditions. It has received foreign influences since its beginning in the 8th century. Before the middle of the 19th century, the source of influence was the culture of China. After the middle of the 19th century, the impact of modern Western culture became predominant.

### Early and Heian Literature

Official embassies to the Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907) dynasties of China (*kenzuishi* and *kentoshi*, respectively), initiated in 600, were the chief means by which Chinese culture, technology, and methods of government were introduced on a comprehensive basis in Japan. The *Kojiki* (712; *Record of Ancient Matters*) and the *Nihon shoki* (720; *Chronicles of Japan*), the former written in hybrid Sino-Japanese and the latter in classical Chinese, were compiled under the sponsorship of the government for the purpose of authenticating the legitimacy of its polity.

However, among these collections of myths, genealogies, legends of folk heroes, and historical records, there appear a number of songs—largely irregular in meter and written with Chinese characters representing Japanese words or syllables—that offer insight into the nature of preliterate Japanese verse.

The first major collection of native poetry, again written with Chinese characters, was the *Man'yōshū* (late 8th century; *The Ten Thousand Leaves*), which contains verses, chiefly the 31-syllable *waka*, that were



*Man'yōshū*  
Stone inscribed with a verse from the *Man'yōshū*.

composed in large part between the mid-7th and mid-8th centuries. The earlier poems in the collection are characterized by the direct expression of strong emotion but those of later provenance show the emergence of the rhetorical conventions and expressive subtlety that dominated the subsequent tradition of court poetry.

A revolutionary achievement of the mid-9th century was the development of a native orthography (*kana*) for the phonetic representation of Japanese. Employing radically abbreviated Chinese characters to denote Japanese sounds, the system contributed to a deepening consciousness of a native literary tradition distinct from that of China. Poets compiled collections (*shikashū*) of their verses and, drawing partly on these, the *Kokin wakashū* (905; *Waka Collection from Ancient and Modern Times*), the first of 21 imperial anthologies of native poetry, was assembled in the early 10th century.

The introduction of *kana* also led to the development of a prose literature in the vernacular, early examples of which are the

*Ise monogatari* (early 10th century; *Tales of Ise*), a collection of vignettes centered on poems; and the diary *Tosa nikki* (935; *The Tosa Diary*). In the late 10th century, the ascendancy of the Fujiwara regents, whose power over emperors depended on the reception of their daughters as imperial consorts, resulted in the formation of literary coteries of women in the courts of empresses, and it was these women who produced the great prose classics of the 11th century. Such works as *Genji monogatari* (early 11th century; *Tale of Genji*), a fictional narrative by Murasaki Shikibu, and the *Makura no soshi* (996–1012; *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*), a collection of essays by Sei Shonagon, are considered by Japanese to be a watershed in the development of the native literary tradition.



**A statue of Murasaki Shikibu**  
The author of the Tale of Genji. (Photo courtesy of AFLO)

## Medieval Literature

The chief development in poetry during the medieval period (mid-12th to 16th century) was linked verse (*renga*). Arising from the court tradition of *waka*, *renga* was cultivated by the warrior class as well as by courtiers, and some among the best *renga* poets, such as Sogi, were commoners. A major development in prose literature of the medieval era was the war tale (*gunki monogatari*). *Heike monogatari* (early 13th century; *The Tale of the Heike*) relates the events of the war between the Taira and Minamoto families that finally brought an end to imperial rule; it was disseminated among all levels of society by itinerant priests who chanted the story to the accompaniment of a lutelike instrument, the *biwa*. The social

upheaval of the early years of the era led to the appearance of works deeply influenced by the Buddhist notion of the inconstancy of worldly affairs (*mujo*). The theme of *mujo* provides the ground note of *Heike monogatari* and the essay collections *Hojoki* (1212; *The Ten Foot Square Hut*), by Kamo no Chomei, and *Tsurezuregusa* (ca 1330; *Essays in Idleness*), by Yoshida Kenko.

## Edo Literature

The formation of a stable central government in Edo (now Tokyo), after some 100 years of turmoil, and the growth of a market economy based on the widespread use of a standardized currency led to the development in the Edo period (1603–1867) of a class of wealthy townsmen. General prosperity contributed to an increase in literacy, and literary works became marketable commodities, giving rise to a publishing industry. Humorous fictional studies of contemporary society such as *Koshoku ichidai otoko* (1682; *The Life of an Amorous Man*), by Ihara Saikaku, were huge commercial successes, and prose works, often elaborately illustrated, that were directed toward a mass audience became a staple of Edo-period literature. Commercial playhouses were established for the performance of puppet plays (*yoruri*) and *kabuki*, whose plots often centered on conflicts arising from the rigidly hierarchical social order that was instituted by the Tokugawa shogunate.

The 17-syllable form of light verse known as *haikai* (later known as *haiku*), whose subject matter was drawn from nature and the



### Oku no Hosomichi

A screen decorated with the text and illustrations showing scenes from Bashō's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. (Photo courtesy of the Yamagata Museum of Art)

**Portrait of  
Natsume Soseki**  
(Photo courtesy of  
the Museum of  
Modern Japanese  
Literature)



lives of ordinary people, was raised to the level of great poetry by Matsuo Basho. He is especially well known for his travel diaries, such as the *Oku no hosomichi* (1702; *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*). A number of philologists, among them Keichu, Kamo no Mabuchi, and Motoori Norinaga, wrote scholarly studies on early literary texts, such as *Kojiki*, *Man'yoshu*, and *The Tale of Genji*.

## Modern Literature

The imperial restoration of 1867 was followed by the wholesale introduction of Western technology and culture, which largely displaced Chinese culture. As a result, the novel became established as a serious and respected genre of the literature of Japan. A related development was the gradual abandonment of literary language in favor of the usages of colloquial speech.

Futabatei Shimei produced what has been called Japan's first modern novel, *Ukigumo* (1887–1889; *Drifting Clouds*). What is strikingly fresh about the novel is the colloquial style of the language, Futabatei's conception of his hero's plight within the context of a quickly changing society, and his subtle psychological examination of his protagonist. In the 1890s, Futabatei's psychological insight was adopted by several young writers. One of the most impressive works of fiction in this style was the story "Takekurabe" (1895–1896; "Growing Up"), by Higuchi Ichiyo. In this tale of children living in a red-light district, Ichiyo describes adolescent loneliness and the confusion attending the onset of puberty. Another writer, Shimazaki Toson, relates in his first novel, *Hakai* (1906; *The Broken Commandment*), the story of a schoolteacher who hides the fact that he was born in a community of outcaste people until he realizes his only salvation lies in living openly with the truth. After *Hakai*, however, Toson retreated into his own private world to write in the genre of personal history known as the "I-novel" (*shishosetsu*).

The modern Japanese realistic novel was brought to full maturity by Natsume Soseki. His heroes are usually university-educated

men made vulnerable by the new egoism and an overly keen perception of their separation from the rest of the world. Guilt, betrayal, and isolation are for Soseki the inevitable consequences of the liberation of the self and all the uncertainties that have come with the advent of Western culture. These motifs are explored in his novels *Kokoro* (1914; *The Heart*), *Mon* (1910; *The Gate*), and *Kojin* (1912–1913; *The Wayfarer*). Mori Ogai first won acclaim with three romantic short stories set in Germany. The most popular, "Maihime" (1890; "The Dancing Girl"), deals with the doomed love affair of a young Japanese student in Berlin with a German dancer. His most representative late works are fictionalized studies in history and biography, such as the life of an Edo-period doctor presented in *Shibue Chusai* (1916). Akutagawa Ryunosuke was one of Japan's most famous short-story writers. Such stories as "Rashomon" (1915; "Rashomon"), and "Yabu no naka" (1922; "In a Grove") are brilliantly told, combining psychological subtlety and a sardonic tone with a fanciful delight in the grotesque. Nagai Kafu, whose life and work reflected the tension between the modern and a yearning for the old Japan, is best known for his elegiac works. *Bokuto kidan* (1937; *A Strange Tale from East of the River*), a notable example of such fiction, depicts in loving detail a fading demimonde on the outskirts of Tokyo.

The writer who most clearly reflected the sense of loss and confusion following the shattering experience of World War II was Dazai Osamu. Dazai's *Shayo* (1947; *The Setting Sun*) and the novel published just before his suicide, *Ningen shikkaku* (1948; *No Longer Human*), attracted a large readership. Not long after the defeat, Tanizaki Jun'ichiro published his masterpiece, the massive novel *Sasameyuki* (1943–1948; *The Makioka Sisters*). A chronicle of the lives of the daughters of a patrician merchant family in its

last stages of decline before the outbreak of the war, it is a beautiful elegy to the final passing of all that remained of an older and more elegant world.

In novels such as *Yukiguni* (1935–1947; *Snow Country*), Nobel laureate Kawabata Yasunari creates enormous distances between his characters, suggesting a dread of intimacy that threatens even the most promising of human relationships. After the war, Kawabata took to writing what he called “elegies to the lost Japan” in such works as *Yama no oto* (1949–1954; *The Sound of the Mountain*). Yet Japanese writing in the early postwar years could not be characterized solely in terms of the shock and dislocation of defeat. There was, in fact, a vigorous renaissance of literary activity after 1945, and a new group of writers who debuted at this time came to be known as the “first generation” of postwar authors. Members of this group include Noma Hiroshi and Ooka Shohei. The “second generation” of postwar writers includes Abe Kobo and Mishima Yukio. Abe would eventually create a distinctive type of Kafkaesque existential allegory in novels such as *Suna no onna* (1962; *The Woman in the Dunes*), while Mishima attracted an international readership with his opulent aestheticism in such works as *Kinkakuji* (1956; *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*).

Critics have posited a turning point in the 1950s, after which Japanese fiction can no longer be easily characterized in terms of the early postwar consciousness. Beginning about this time, a revival and restructuring of the I-novel form was achieved by a “third generation” of postwar writers such as Kojima Nobuo, Yasuoka Shotaro, Yoshiyuki Junnosuke, and Shimao Toshio. Also included in this group is Endo Shusaku, a Catholic convert who examines the issues of betrayal, cowardice, and martyrdom in novels such as *Chimmoku* (1966; *Silence*). From the 1960s onward, writers have sought to synthesize various approaches to fiction or to experiment with new modes of representation. Oe Kenzaburo, who received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1994, has been a prodigiously inventive force in contemporary fiction, continuously experimenting with form and mode of presentation in such novels as *Kojinteki na taiken* (1964; *A Personal Matter*)

and *Man'engannen no futtoboru* (1967; *The Silent Cry*). Tsushima Yuko, the daughter of Dazai Osamu, has explored the lives of women who are single parents in *Choji* (1978; *Child of Fortune*).

Finally, the generation raised on the international culture of the last decades has found its voice in writers such as Murakami Ryu, author of *Kagirinaku tomei ni chikai buru* (1976; *Almost Transparent Blue*), and Murakami Haruki, whose *Noruuue no mori* (1987; *Norwegian Wood*) sold more than ten million copies. Yoshimoto Banana, who was born in 1964, portrays the lives of people in desperately isolated situations in *Kitchin* (1987; *Kitchen*). These writers have been immensely popular with young readers both in Japan and abroad.

## Literature today

Since 2000 new forms of literature have been appearing, including online novels released on the Internet and cell phone (*keitai*) novels sent by cell phone, as Internet and cell phone use spreads. Among *keitai* novels that were accessed by many people are some that have become bestsellers in book form and works that have been dramatized. Light novels for young people, which include many illustrations and are written in an easy-to-understand style, are also becoming popular.

In addition, the works of Murakami Haruki have been translated into many languages and achieved international acclaim. In 2006 he was awarded the Franz Kafka Prize in the Czech Republic, and in 2009 the Jerusalem Prize in Israel.