



Three Japanese Short Stories

Ryunosuke Akutagawa , Kafu Nagai , Koji Uno , Jay Rubin (Translator)

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'Oh the cruelty of time, that destroys all things!'

Beguiling, strange and hair-raising tales from early 20th century Japan: Nagai's Behind the Prison, Uno's Closet LLB and Akutagawa's deeply macabre General Kim.

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Three Japanese Short Stories Details

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Laura says

"What power rules these tens of thousands of creatures, what makes them all unite in one voice to besiege me like this?" Nagai Kafuu

I loved these stories. The first one (which the quote above is from) was perhaps my favourite because it enlightened me with a little bit of country that the narrator experienced themselves in 20th century Japan. I especially liked reading and coming across a word that clearly can't be translated into English—for example, nagauta which is nagai (long) and uta (song). Other words might be "shoji" which are the thin paper doors/walls in some houses.

The second story I couldn't understand the meaning of as much, if there was one. But it was still a nice read about something anyone around the world might be able to connect with. (It is about a boy who cannot find the urge to actually *do* something.)

The third story didn't mean much to me at all, but perhaps that is because I don't already know anything about Japanese history (and legends?) as this is what it seems to focus on quite a bit. Although, I think it was the shortest of all three.

Rhys says

I have been a huge fan of the short stories of Ryunosuke Akutagawa ever since I read a brief and ingenious fable of his called 'Sennin' in *The Book of Fantasy* edited by Borges. That was many years ago. Since then, I always pounce when I see a volume that contains one of his tales. This was the reason why I purchased this little book.

The Akutagawa story it features is every bit as excellent as I had hoped. But the real surprise for me was how good the other two stories were, both by writers I had never heard of, Nagai Kafu and Uno Koji. Now I want to seek out more of their work. I am also looking forward to the forthcoming *Penguin Book of Japanese Short Stories* of which this book is a sampler.

Ivy Ngeow says

On my tatami is this book of early twentieth century Japanese short stories I've just finished. Obsessive and strange, I was drawn to them as in the first two the protagonists are angsty middle class spoilt brats who are now seeking life as dilettante artists while their poor relatives foot the bill (though it's not clear in the first story why the rich guy is actually narrating from prison, I did re read it but I don't understand why he's incarcerated). The third story is full of the usual Japanese sadistic torture stuff, eg decapitation and amputation but then it is supposed to be a legend of two rivalling warlords.

Rosaria Battiloro says

Behind the prison by Nagai Kafu is probably one of the most beautiful piece of prose I have ever read!!!

Rucoby says

This book of three short stories just didn't hit the mark for me. The first story behind the prison by Nagai Kaf? was the stronger story in my opinion. The prose was beautiful. While I thought the other two were ok I perhaps had set my own expectations too high, which granted isn't the books fault.

Araceli.libros says

3.5*

Behind the prison: 3/5

Closet LLB: 4/5

General Kim: 3/5

“Life is not much fun, is it, Madam? “

Mobyskine says

Membaca Kaf? Nagai dan K?ji Uno mengingatkan saya tentang perasaan sewaktu membaca Natsume S?seki. Kisah klasik kontemporari Jepun berkisar hal harian, budaya setempat, masyarakat dan keluarga. Watak utama di dua kisah ini juga punya latar hampir sama--lelaki muda yang masih keliru dengan arah hidup, impian dan kemahuan. Seakan membaca diari dan keluhan harian, tapi dalam ritma yang santai. Tulisan Ry?nosuke Akutagawa pula berkisar hal perang dan pemerintahan. Ia berlegar di antara hal permusuhan dan perebutan kuasa. Ada adegan lawan dan main pedang. Penceritaan dan bahasa yang bagus--tertarik sekali dengan gaya penulisan Akutagawa.

Kumpulan fiksi pendek yang agak menarik dalam gabungan memori di awal abad ke-20.

Peter says

Mmmm; that went well.

Japanese fiction has always been an impenetrable experience for me, but this little book was a revelation. Enjoyable but not great, the three stories here makes one realise that Murakami is a wrong turn.

Three solid little tales of life that will make you smile.

Jessica Connelly says

These stories are loosely bound thematically. The final story is only partly about Japan it seemed more about Korea. I'm not entirely sure whether the first two stories are satire. They depict artists as those with a lack of direction or duty. Both stories worked well in parallel with the first story critiquing Japan for its lack of artistry and the second critiquing the artist for his lack of duty. The third story seemed out of place with these other stories but was the most interesting plot wise. The characters were pompous and generally unlikeable.

Christy Lau says

Heroes have always been monsters who crushed sentimentalism underfoot.

Behind the Prison: ★★★★★

Lethally sharp satire whetted against uncomfortably relatable truths. *Behind the Prison* is at once uproarious and unapologetically pessimistic.

"No, nothing in this world is as oppressive and debilitating as blood ties."

"For her I would gladly ferry across the Sumida on the coldest winter day to buy her those sakura-mochi sweets from old Edo that she loved so much. But medicine? Not even on the warmest day would I want to go buy her medicine."

Closet LLB: ★★★★★

The most personally terrifying of the three. Like Otsukotsu Sansaku, I had "embraced the unshakeable goal of becoming a novelist" as a child, and I, too, steep myself in literature while I have supposedly settled into (and here is the most obvious difference) medicine. Thankfully, studying medicine was my own choice, and I hope to become something of a Paul Kalanithi or Atul Gawande. But my goodness, may I never be reduced to a Sansaku!

"How much fun are you getting out of life?"

General Kim: ★★★★★

This last story fits the blurb best: "beguiling, strange, funny, and hair-raising". A delightfully surreal parody of Patriotism with a capital P to round it all off.

Overall, these new Penguin Moderns are great bite-sized tasters for new authors and unfamiliar cultures. I have been making an effort to read more non-English literature, and these have been amazing for that!

Justin McMoore says

Uno K?ji's "Closet LLB" was the highlight of the three stories for me; one of the funniest things I've read in awhile. A great example of classic Japanese humor.

Kirsty says

Three Japanese Short Stories is the fifth inclusion in the wonderful Penguin Moderns series. I have not read much Japanese fiction that I have really enjoyed to date; rather, I tend to find it a little hit or miss, and usually a bit off the wall in its plotting for my particular taste. I was intrigued by this collection, however; it consists of 'three beguiling, strange, funny and hair-raising tales of imprisonment, memory and atrocity from early twentieth-century Japan', all of which have been newly translated by Jay Rubin. Overall, I found the collection difficult to pin down; I very much enjoyed the first story, but was not much of a fan of the second or third.

'Behind the Prison' by Nagai Kafu is told in the form of a letter, addressed to 'my dearest excellency'. The narrator is a thirty-year-old man who, after living in the West, has returned to Japan to live 'in a single room on my father's estate, which is located behind the prison in Ichigaya.' He describes quite how this came to be, when his greatest desire was to hide away amongst people who have no knowledge of him, or of his family. I found the writing in this story poetic, and quite absorbing.

The second story, 'Closet LLB', is a third person perspective story written by Uno Koji. It provides an account of an unambitious law graduate, whose only wish lies in becoming a novelist. He has delusions of grandeur about his person, and is both self-important and self-obsessed. This story was not quite to my taste; I found the character almost loathsome, and the tone of the narrative felt a little off to me.

The third and final story collected here is 'General Kim' by Akutanagawa Ryunosuke. This is rather a short story in comparison to those by the previous two authors. It follows two 'powerful Japanese generals, who had crossed the sea to assess military conditions in the neighbouring kingdom of Korea'. In some ways, this was quite interesting, but it was also, almost overwhelmingly, bizarre.

J. Watson (aka umberto) says

3.5 stars

Reluctant to write and post its review since late last month, I thought a reason might be my unfamiliarity with Uno Koji whose works I've never read while the other two are relatively familiar; the first being Nagai Kafu, who is brand-new to me and I'm reading his *Geisha in Rivalry* (Tuttle, 1963), the second being one of the highly-acclaimed and famous Japanese authors, Ryunosuke Akutagawa whose *Rashoman and Seventeen Other Stories* (Penguin, 2006) I enjoyed reading in April, 2010.

Recommended to fledgling newcomers as Japanophiles, these short stories would introduce them to the "Three beguiling, strange, funny and hair-raising tales of imprisonment, memory and atrocity from early twentieth-century Japan." (back cover) For instance, I found this part in "Behind the Prison" amazing due to its descriptive power that reminded me of my childhood memories on being awoken from sleep at night in the midst of wild storm with heavy rainfalls sometime pounding off and on at the corrugated, galvanized-iron roof with fierce thunder both nearby and far away like a symphony over our house at night in rural Thailand some 60 years ago:

. . . , the sounds of the raindrops striking them varying from light to heavy depending on the thickness of their leaves. The shower symphony rises to a great crescendo with the rumbling bass drum of thunder that rolls through, to be followed by the gentle moderato of the green frogs' flutes and a final hush as sudden as the piece's opening. . . . (pp. 10-11)

To continue . . .

Sandra says

Behind the Prison was absolutely fantastic and I can't even begin to wonder how the actual story in Japanese would actually be.

Ellie Plummer says

Picked this up when I was up before everyone else at lovely Lyd's house and read half of it that morning, finished the other two stories while getting my tattoo done and made the whole experience very relaxing.

Think Nagai's Behind the Prison was my favourite - so on that:

Pros: some really beautiful imagery; stories decreasing in length (which for some reason I really liked); interesting comment on the human condition

Cons: sometimes a little rambling/was easy to get lost (but then again is that really a con?)
