Book Review

Scripting Suicide in Japan

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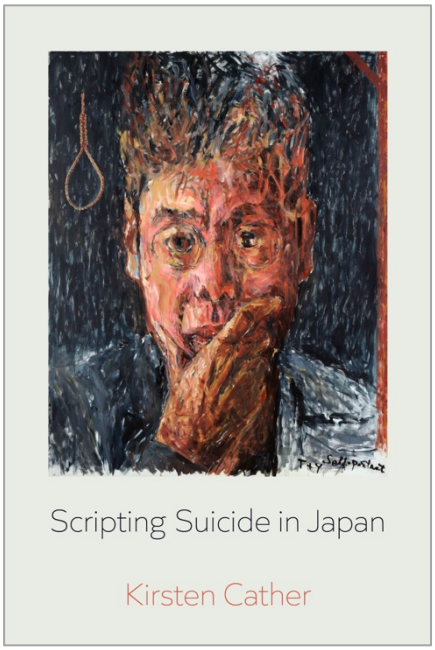
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Book Review



Scripting Suicide in Japan

by Kirsten Cather

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Abstract

This publication by Kirsten Cather, who teaches Modern Japanese Literature and Film at the University of Texas at Austin, the United States of America, is a literary overview of the modern and historical theme of suicide in Japan. It discusses writers of all ages and degrees of accomplishment, including Misao Fujimura, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, Kishigami Daisaku, Tsuburaya Kōkichi, Etō Jun, and Yamada Hanako.

In addition to poetry and fiction, media such as film, theater, and manga are also descriptively analyzed as expressing ideas and emotions related to suicide. Associate Professor Cather usefully evaluates ephemera as well as more permanent writing, including works by literary tyros, despite their lack of polish or finesse. A geographical analysis of sites in Japan where suicides are frequent and an extended chapter on the writings and films of Yukio Mishima add to the overall message that Japan has been creatively inspired by suicide. Even researchers who may dismiss the notion that Japanese writers are more suicidal than those of other nations should find useful material in this dense study.

Keywords: suicide in Japanese literature, Mishima Yukio, dark tourism

Over centuries of literature and lore, Japan has acquired a notoriety for suicides, specifically literary suicides.[1] A welcome new Open Access research study by Kirsten Cather, Associate Professor of Modern Japanese Literature and Film at the University of Texas at Austin, the United States of America, addresses the persistent ambiguities surrounding the grim subject. As in The art of censorship in postwar Japan (2012), a previous publication, Cather analyzes ephemera as well as renowned literature, expanding the definition of writing to include manga, film, and hasty scrawls not usually considered as literary achievements.

The result is an abundant, densely written examination of a corpus of interest to researchers intrigued by the societal fabric of Japan. The author states that her goal is to show the "many ways that suicide is mapped, noted, scripted, pictured, and mourned in Japan." (Cather, 2024).

Generalizations are risky, for it turns out that each writer's suicide is a unique expression of individual anguish, with all the ambiguities of human emotional experience.

Nevertheless, **Scripting Suicide in Japan** is valuable in what it does offer. It comprises an introduction, nine chapters and an epilogue.

The introduction begins with an extensive discussion of the Austrian essayist Jean Améry, a suicidal writer who had no apparent connection with Japan and its authors, but did write on the theme of suicide. As a literary scholar, Cather regularly mentions other writers, including the American poet Anne Sexton, French philosopher Jacques Derrida, and Canadian essayist Anne Carson, who are not directly involved with the Japanese authors in question, but had something to say about suicide.

While an international perspective can be enriching, readers interested in Japanese writers might benefit more from focused national references, especially since, as Cather notes, many of the Japanese suicidal authors cited, or were influenced by, Western literature in their farewell messages. So there is already a range of pertinent foreign references at hand, without bringing in such extraneous, albeit well-known, names as Sexton, Carson, Derrida, et al.[2]

[1] For an overview, see Iga (1986), Lifton (1979) and Ancuta (2019). For more specific topics, see Monzaemon (1953), Wolfe (1990) and Teixeira (2014). There is also an extensive bibliography on the suicide of Yukio Mishima including Seidensticker (1971), Yamanouchi (1972), Kristeller (1972), Richie (2006) and more recently, Rankin (2018).

[2] Of these, doubtless the best-remembered is "A Note to a Certain Old Friend" left by the short story writer Ryunosuke Akutagawa. See Kantha (2023).

The book's first section addresses geographical sites for suicide in Japan with poetic resonance. These include Misao Fujimura, a Japanese philosophy student and poet, largely remembered for his farewell poem engraved at age sixteen on the trunk of a tree at Kegon Falls in Nikko, a famed scenic area.

Also investigated is Mount Mihara, an active volcano on the Japanese isle of Izu **Ō**shima. Starting in the 1920s, several suicides occurred in the volcano each week. The most notorious death by suicide was of Matsumoto Kiyoko, a 19-year-old schoolgirl, who leapt into the volcano after an unhappy love affair.

Aokigahara (Blue Tree Meadow), also known as the Sea of Trees, a forest on the northwestern flank of Mount Fuji on the island of Honshu in Japan, has been nicknamed Suicide Forest, since it is a frequently used suicide site. This equivalent of dark tourism through some areas of Japan sets the scene for the book's weighing of written evidence to assess the importance of suicide as a national literary theme.[3]

Section two of the book comprises chapters relating to suicide notes by Akutagawa Ry**ū**nosuke, a celebrated short story writer; Kishigami Daisaku, a third-year university student and aspiring poet; Tsuburaya K**ō**kichi, an athlete disappointed in love and sport; Et**ō** Jun, a literary critic; and Yamada Hanako, a manga artist. This survey is noteworthy for the sheer prolixity and persistence of some of these leavers of notes, in producing multiple drafts sent to a wide range of people. The urge to communicate and explain clearly outweighed immediate personal misery.

Section three of the book evaluates artists who contemplate their own deaths in different media, including film, theater, and photography as well as poems and stories. Nagasawa Nobuko and Haraguchi T**ō**z**ō**, poets who killed themselves in their teens, are juxtaposed with a self-appointed star of all media, Mishima Yukio, who is accorded fully 36 pages, or about twice the length of other chapters in Scripting Suicide, likely due to the sheer profuseness of his creative output and its extensive scholarly bibliography.

While the author is clearly imbued with her subject and relates it with intense empathy and respect, it might have clarified the subject matter to note that despite any myths to the contrary, Japan is not a world leader in suicide frequency. According to World Health Organization (WHO) statistics for 2019 (WTO, 2019) Japan ranked 49th of 183 countries studied,

[3] Dark tourism (also thanatourism, black tourism, morbid tourism, or grief tourism) involves travel to places historically associated with death and tragedy. See Isaac (2022).

with fewer suicides per capita than in Finland, Russia, India, the United States of America, and many other nations.

Another possible flaw or missed opportunity about this book is that as a literary study, it tends to accept author statements at face value, even in the case of politically charged writers such as Yukio Mishima. More historical context might be helpful to guide students, for example more explicit criticism of the militarist stance of Mishima, which most scholars have justifiably found objectionable.[4]

In another ambiguity, the Nobel Prize-winning author Yasunari Kawabata's death may have been accidental rather than suicidal, according to researchers.[5] Cather alludes to the ongoing controversy over Kawabata's fate, but then proceeds to discuss the writer throughout the rest of the book as if he had indeed committed suicide. In fact, Kawabata, who so often commemorated the demise of literary colleagues that he was nicknamed "The Undertaker," failed to leave any suicide note, nor did his writings dwell on suicide, unlike those of the comparatively obsessed Mishima. This silence from Kawabata on the topic of suicide might be seen as a significant omission.

By contrast, an incomplete bibliography which omits some useful titles about literary suicide in Japan (see below) is merely a minor quibble.

More significantly, added mention of writers from other traditions, specifically death-obsessed and often suicidal French Symbolists, might have conveyed the useful message that Japanese writers are not the only ones captivated by this theme. Nor are Japanese authors necessarily more morbid than other international writers. Cather correctly refers to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* as a turning point in Romantic literature about self-harm.[6]

Implied, if not overtly stated in this otherwise substantial study, is that suicidal Japanese writers have constantly referred to past admired literary compatriots. This effectively creates an echo chamber that magnifies the resonance of Japanese literary suicide until it may seem more of a widespread national predilection than it actually is.

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[4] For example, Mishima's affinity for such predecessors in suicide as Hasuda Zenmei (1904–45) and French Nazi collaborator Pierre Drieu La Rochelle (1893–1945) is cited by Cather without a full explanation of why posterity sees their deeds as iniquitous. Instead, their choice of death is decorously, if not euphemistically, described by Cather as "for overtly political reasons." See Cather (2024), p. 211.

[5] See Loiret (2022).

[6] See Cather (2012), pp. 89-92.

Despite the aforementioned places for improvement, this is an informative, up-to-date look at a grim subject. Even if at times it seems swept up with the negative energy that it explores, romanticizing the protagonists, especially in the case of Mishima, it does offer material for further consideration by researchers and as such deserves applause and a wide readership in the Japanese studies field.[7]

[7] If only to offer a fuller picture of the topic in Japan, it might have been helpful to offer as a counterargument the opinions of Japanese writers who are, or were, opposed to the cult of suicide that may have somewhat distorted the international image of Japan. For example, the novelist Maruya Saiichi (1925–2012) who informed the present reviewer that he disdained the Japanese school of suicidal authors (personal communication, 1992) and by far preferred the poems of the Emperor Go-Toba (1180 –1239) as indicators of the essence of Japanese literary spirit. In addition, taking the writer Mishima entirely seriously, as Cather plainly does, may not reflect how his own friends and contemporaries saw him. The actor Yoshi Oïda (b. 1933) once informed me (personal communication, 1990) that when he socialized with Mishima, the constant topic of intense conversation was whether the trousers that Mishima was wearing on a specific day were well tailored or not. The notion of Mishima preoccupied with trivial, vain details is rarely seen in the raptly admiring Western scholarly bibliography of the writer and might have provided another perspective.

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