

Hiromi Tsuchiya Dollase, *Age of Shōjo: The Emergence, Evolution, and Power of Japanese Fiction*

Albany: SUNY Press, 2019. 224 pages. Hardcover, \$80. ISBN: 9781438473918.

The Japanese term *shōjo* is made in reference to young females of middle school or high school age and can refer to the modern cultural identity of adolescent Japanese girls. There is a major school of literature known as the “way of *shōjo*,” which dates

back to the Meiji period (1868–1912) and is targeted at young women in that transitory period between puberty and marriage. This literature has brought about an explosion of magazines and novels meant for these young women, which emphasize their dreams and fantasies as they moved toward adulthood.

Here, Hiromi Dollase, a professor of Japanese at Vassar College, examines the role that magazines and novels have played in the creation and development of the concept of *shōjo* from the early 1900s to the present. Dollase begins her study of Japanese girl's fiction by analyzing the many transformations it has experienced over the past century, where it has repeatedly reshaped its themes and the images of its heroines. She notes that while the themes and messages of this literature have changed over time, “at the core of today's sprawling Japanese girls' culture, an evolving force consisting of a pattern of attitudes and processes has persisted. Sparked by girls' resistance against their oppressive fates as females in traditional Japan, this force originally manifested as a passive retreat into fantasy worlds and the attempts to maintain them beyond their practical limits” (xi).

Dollase provides a historical analysis of the history of *shōjo* literature through various stages of modern Japanese history starting with the late Meiji period and progressing through the early 1900s, the 1920s, the war years of the 1930s and 1940s, the Occupation period, and the contemporary age with a focus on the 1980s. The tone and drive of *shōjo* literature differed with the key themes of each period. The focus during the Meiji and early 1900s was on how young women should prepare themselves to be good mothers and wives, while during the 1930s and 1940s the emphasis was on patriotism. The literature of the 1980s and beyond promoted the idea of women becoming strong individuals now free to determine their own course in life.

Dollase traces the “way of *shōjo*” back to the introduction of Western girls' literature into Meiji Japan, which included such works as *Little Women*, *Anne of Green Gables*, and *Heidi*. The author examines the first of many Japanese translations of *Little Women*, explaining how the Japanese version emphasized the concept of “good wife, wise mother.” The second chapter looks at the start of magazines for girls including *Shōjo sekai* (Girl's world), with “good wife, wise mother” as its educational tenet. The third and fourth chapters look at the growth of this genre during the 1920s. This period saw great growth and diversification of women's literature, including some female writers whose literature was motivated by discontent with a society that sought to exploit women, girls, and the socially weak.

The late 1930s and early 1940s saw the passage of the National Mobilization Law, which forced all publications to support the war effort. Magazines, which often included such star writers as Kawabata Yasunari, had to publish war propaganda and instructions on how girls could contribute to the war through labor. When the war ended with the defeat of Japan in August 1945, allied forces led by the United States ordered a complete change in direction for the media, including girl's magazines. The Occupation utilized the media to introduce American democratic values into Japanese society. While some of the older writers like Kawabata lamented the end of Japan's traditional culture and filled their writing with “escapist nostalgia for the purity and beauty of traditional Japan,” girl readers reacted enthusiastically to the new ideals of American culture (xviii).

There was a tremendous expansion of girl's literature starting in the early 1950s, and an even greater explosion occurred in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Japanese women

were beginning to find their inner strengths and to realize their own ambitions. They were no longer confined to the strict role of married mothers, and topics such as sexual relationships became common. One magazine, *Cobalt*, emphasized “women’s careers, independence, and gender equality” and featured an advertisement that promoted the magazine’s “novels by young women which contain fresh feelings and dreams only they can express” (101). Matters regarding how women should be viewed and treated in the “traditionally male-oriented work sphere” also gained much attention (103).

A concluding chapter looks at the more contemporary writing of Tanabe Seiko. She composed the *Ubazakari* (Blooming old woman) series of short story collections, featuring an elderly character, Yamamoto Utako. The focus here is on the trials and tribulations of elderly women who are ignored or, at best, treated as marginal beings in society.

Dollase concludes her work by noting that “one may wonder how this study of girls’ fiction relates to the larger picture of Japanese girls’ culture. One very important incursion of the way of *shōjo* into popular culture is clearly witnessed in *shōjo* manga, which describe girls and young women’s pursuit of ideal love, ambition for career goals, search for justice, and more, and often take place in the realm of fantasy” (129). The book then finishes with an epilogue, followed by notes and a full bibliography.

Dollase’s *Age of Shōjo* is a highly original and very welcome study of an important genre of Japanese literature and culture. The research is sound, and the writing is sharp and clear. We find excellent coverage of the material from start to finish. The book will appeal to scholars and students of Japanese literature and women’s studies and would be an ideal text for an advanced graduate seminar on feminist studies or popular culture in contemporary Japan. Another useful aspect of this work is the introduction of several authors and works of literature that have received little or no attention in the West to this point.

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