

Not a ‘moveable feast’

“Paris is a movable feast,” Hemingway said about his Bohemian days on the Left Bank in Paris. It's no wonder. With the Eiffel Tower and the spires of Notre Dame setting the scene, he could muse metaphysically in a cafe with like-minded companions from dusk ‘til dawn, while fashionable mademoiselles strolled by with their equally fashionable pet poodles. If he got bored, all he had to do was switch cafes and enjoy another feast, whiling away the day on either beer or coffee, depending on his whim. Paris sure had a life.

Like Hemingway's Paris, the English-language scribes who make up the scene here in Tokyo are diverse in their own way. "There are the Sumo groupies, for example, or there are those who follow Buddhism, while there are others who are into the great outdoors, living in the countryside and commuting between places like Tokyo and Gunma, and there are the onsen groupies," according to Mark Schrieber, a free-lance writer/translator/copywriter based in Tokyo, who also pointed out that the scene, while diverse, is compartmentalized.

The scene in Tokyo isn't nearly as vibrant as Hemingway's Paris, though. "The Left Bank scene in Paris in the 20s and 30s had a lot of Americans and English feeding off of the French culture and were very interested in Paris. People don't get enough spark from living in Tokyo," comments John Cross, editor of *The Human Body*, a low-budget, high-concept Tokyo zine.

Tom Dow, poetry editor of *Printed Matter*, a Tokyo literary magazine, has a good reason for this seemingly staid state of affairs.

"I'm afraid this environment, like many others, is overwhelmed by middle-class values and lifestyles and appearances, so it tends to put a lot of pressure on people and detracts from, let's say, a real nurturing environment, unfortunately."

For a long time Japan, as presented through the English-language media, was an enigma. "There are these writers whose vision of Japan is somehow frozen in pre-bubble times. The ones that have a fascination with public baths, tea ceremonies or whatever. They're trying to ride the wave that came in with the bubble, inspired by Pico Iyer's *Video*

Night in Katmandu," said Louis Templado, the editor of Tokyo Time Out, a publication that Went completely online on the Internet recently.

Dan Papia, an editor and satirist who attempts to be the surrogate for the expatriate mindset at Tokyo Journal added, "The Japanese are fond of saying that their country's so different, and people around the world eat that up. They want to know the connection between the tea ceremony and the prime minister's policy on Korea and apologizing for the war."

Mark Schilling, movie critic for *The Japan Times* and foreign correspondent of *Screen* magazine, isn't optimistic either, reflecting on this country's deficit of cross-cultural interactions in comparison to a place like Hong Kong. "Japan is so isolated in some ways. I mean, what relationships do you have living here with Korea, Siberia or China? You're in your own head," he said.

But other writers feel that Tokyo couldn't be more conducive to pursuing their craft. "There's something about being a foreigner in Japan. One doesn't really have to conform because one can't conform. I suppose I feel free, and it's easier for the creative juices to flow," says Papia.

In the neoconservative nineties, the literature coming out of Tokyo appears to be taking a more sober look at the Land of the Rising Sun.

A magazine published and edited by Shawn McIntosh, one of the founding members of the Library poetry readings (see *Poetry* article), is probably exemplary of this new genre of writing. McIntosh titled his magazine *Lost & Alone*, a phrase that probably accurately describes the predicament of many Tokyo-based foreigners in the nineties, and he believes he's onto something. "I wanted something for people who have lived in Japan, who like Japan, and realize that it has faults, basically like any other country. Sure, there are the ikebana (flower arrangement) kinds of articles in the magazine, but you know, I didn't want the "Oh, look at this weird country, this and that" or for that matter, the kind of hipster's voice that some other magazines have."

This "lost and alone" edge is definitely not lost on Leonard Koren, the author of many books on Japan, including *Wabi-Sabi*, an exploration of Japanese aesthetics. "The advantages of the peace, quiet and physical amenities in Japan offers the opportunity to turn

off the noise from someplace like Berkeley where you're constantly bombarded with trends, and things of fashionable import that might pollute your work in a different way." he said. "So being in a different culture with different cultural priorities helps me to focus on what I'm doing. It's an oblique advantage."

Perhaps Tokyo, the city of neon kitsch and commercial ostentation, does have a thriving literary scene after all, that is, more in the vein of William S . Burroughs' interzone than Hemingway's Paris.

"I think being in Japan is more of a journey of self-discovery than learning about the Japanese per se," McIntosh said.

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