Mentioning the war

From Griffith REVIEW Edition 36: What is Australia For?
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Written by Cassandra Atherton

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I BLAME Yasunari Kawabata for my obsession with Japan. When I was sixteen I read his short stories 'The House of the Sleeping Beauties' and 'One Arm', and I was hooked. The first, about a lonely old man who finds a place where he can watch beautiful, naked girls sleep beside him in a comatose state, later inspired Gabriel García Márquez's Memories of My Melancholy Whores. More recently, the film Sleeping Beauty, written and directed by the Australian novelist Julia Leigh, also bears an uncanny resemblance to the story's plot.

But at sixteen I thought that Kawabata was all mine. No one I knew in Australia had read any of his works and I coveted my copy of his stories, with its traditional Japanese brown paper cover, which I had bought for twenty cents at a second-hand bookshop in Carlton. I wondered who had originally bought it and why it had been abandoned after making the journey all the way to Melbourne. The second story in the collection is a magic-realist talk about a man who meets a girl and asks if he can take her arm home with him. She detaches it for him and goes with the limb – under his coat, to keep it warm! It was so wonderfully odd that I started looking at my arms and wondering how they would look under men's coats.

But Japan isn't my little secret anymore. In the past two decades Australia has become more and more influenced by Japanese culture. And while I love Japan finally getting the recognition it deserves, I've never been very good at sharing. I used to be the only girl with Little Twin Stars and Hello Kitty underwear; now they are sold at Target. Sailor Moons, Serena, a Japanese schoolgirl with long hair and magical powers, introduced to Australian audiences in 1995, was once my quirky idol, now she has a huge following. There are Australian anime clubs and conventions, and the Japanese bookshop Kinokuniya, in Sydney. Japanese DVDs are so popular that JB Hi-Fi has an entire section dedicated to them. And documentaries on Japanese teen hikikomori and Japanese women who dress as goishas for photo shoots on their wedding day are more prevalent on Australian television than ever before.

More significantly, Japan isn't mine anymore because images of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami captivated the world. Stoic children were shown in voyeuristic glossy images as they were carried through the debris. They didn't cry. Reports of the rising radiation at Fukushima dominated the evening news. Japanese men gave up their lives to stop the nuclear flood: they were the Fukushima Fifty, the nameless samurai. My Japanese publisher wrote on his blog: 'Keep your power usage low and donate what you can to those who need it.' On his Facebook page he posted: 'It is often said, 'Life is short'. The Japanese people have one of the longest life expectancy rates in the world. So far over 5,000 are dead, over 8,000 are missing... [Watching the] scenes on Japanese NHK TV of the destruction, the cold snow, and thousands of people in shelters, I feel life... became even shorter.'

There was an initial mass exodus from Tokyo, so I got on the Narita Express to make another trip back there. I was returning to my second home; I needed to show my support. When I told people I was going back to Japan, my friends were enthusiastic. They asked me to bring them back Hello Kitty chopsticks and Studio Ghibli merchandise. As an afterthought, they asked if everything was okay in Tokyo.

My family asked about the radiation. They waved newspaper articles about the Fukushima plant at me, and my grandmother started crying. They told me that my hair would fall out. They told me I would get cancer. They told me I was being selfish and stupid to go. They said, 'Why do you want to go to Japan? Do you know what they did in the war?' It always comes back to the war.

I AM NO stranger to this cross-generational divide in Australia. As a Japophile, a shinnyichi, I have struggled with many often racist remarks about 'the Japs': 'they all look alike'; 'they are a savage race'; 'I don't trust them.' When I discuss this with my peers they tell me I need to be mindful that the Silent Generation's views are shaped by their having lived through the war. It always comes back to the war.

My mother told me to be patient with my grandparents. 'I'll talk to them,' she said, but added: 'although I don't know why you keep going back to Japan either.' She told me that I had to put myself in their shoes. For a moment I felt like she was Atticus Finch and I was Scout. 'They saw what the Japanese did,' she said. 'What's that?' I asked – but she couldn't answer. 'You must know,' was all she could muster. But she doesn't know; she doesn't even really understand what happened.

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Cassandra Atherton's biography and other articles by this writer
World War II ended thirty years before I was born, and at high school the war was initially presented as Germany’s invasion of Poland. In history classes the emphasis was on Hitler and the Nazis. Discussion of Japan was confined to the bombing of Pearl Harbor and America’s entry into the war. Prior to this, without independent reading, I wouldn’t even have known that Japan was in the war, nor that the war, in many ways, began with Japan’s invasion of Manchuria in 1931.

But the secondary school curriculum is already packed and teachers can’t be expected to teach everything. And while I can’t say I learned very much about World War II at school, what I did learn was a set of relatively unbiased facts. This is worth noting, as I was part of the generation that had to complete two compulsory units of Australian Studies, in order to pass the Victorian Certificate of Education. Not that there is anything wrong with knowing the history of your own country. I find America’s patriotism and knowledge of its history heartening. But Australian history and culture should permeate the curriculum, not be scheduled once or twice a week in a compulsory class.

Australians are expected to talk constantly about Australia, promote Australia, even pay people to come to Australia to endorse our ‘wide brown land’. Lara Bingle made a motza out of it: ‘So, where the bloody hell are you? ’ But I started talking about Japan when I turned sixteen. I told my parents that I understood how you could be homesick for a place you had never been. My mother told me that was ridiculous. I was home. Home for me would always be Australia. Home was where my family lived. My father told me he loved Australia’s climate, he loved Australian people, he loved Australia. Why didn’t I? Sometimes I feel like a traitor for wanting to travel to Japan.

My grandparents always tell me that when I travel, I should tell everyone I meet that I live in the greatest country in the world. This is part of Australians’ insecurity about their nation. Perhaps it stems from lacking the settled and shared history of other countries. Perhaps Australians are ultimately still searching for a firm identity. But rather than celebrating this uniqueness, Australia seems still to need validation from England or America, in particular. The British sports commentator Francesca Cumani identified the problem when she argued that Australians need a ‘mindset change’. She challenged the habit of paying American celebrities millions of dollars to attend the Melbourne Cup: ‘It continues to surprise me that locals need their great race authenticated or approved by foreigners... I think it shows an insecurity in a race, an event, a carnival which is like no other.’ The observation can be extended to Australians as a whole.

Part of this mindset manifests in the expectation that Australian writers will write about Australia. I won’t say that I’m not conflicted. I want to write about Japan. I want to set my novel in Shibuya, start it on the scramble crossing in the middle of afternoon. My protagonist would get off the Yamanote train and wait for her lover at the Hachikō statue. It would be a clever metaphor for fidelity: Hachikō, an Akita, waited for his master in that very spot for nine years. My characters would walk up Dogenzaka hill, hand in hand, past the television screens and the ichigyō-ku building.

But I am an Australian writer and therefore I am, apparently, compelled to write about Australia. I picture myself as Sylvia Melvyn in My Brilliant Career and My Career Goes Bung, Miles Franklin taught me that the pen is mightier than any Harry Beecham. As a precocious teenager I was taken with reciting: ‘I am given to something which a man never pardons in a woman. You will draw away as though I were a snake when you hear.’ It wasn’t the best pick-up line, but it made me feel like I could have a brilliant career ahead of me. I pictured myself with Judy Davis’s red hair, a riding whip and a manuscript.

I was brought up on Barbara Baynton and We of the Never Never. My mother called me her little gumnut baby and read May Gibbs to me every night until I got sleepy. It took me a long time to realise that the women in my family were instilling in me a sense of what it was to be an Australian woman and an Australian writer. It’s just that I want to use my Australianness to write about other places. I want to be an Australian who writes about Japan.

A full text version of this article will become available during the life of this edition.