

EVENT SUMMARY:

Six Months of Dreaming – Fact and Fiction

Book Launch by Charlotte Cory

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Talk by Charlotte Cory:

Part 1: Discovering Yutaka Kajikawa's Designs

What do a black cat, a packet of Lucky Strike cigarettes, and a Japanese artist have in common? Well, you are about to find out. About a decade ago, I went to my picture framer's shop during a chaotic exhibition. Everyone was demanding different frames, so I decided to go with the flow and wait. While the very helpful Polish assistant was working, I walked to the back of the shop, where a picture dealer was selling prints. As I flipped through her collection, I found something extraordinary mixed in with the standard prints: fourteen original necktie designs. These were part of a set of twenty designs that a young Japanese artist named Yutaka Kajikawa had sent to the English aristocrat Lady Grace Drummond-Hay when she visited Japan during the historic 1929 round-the-world flight of the *Graf Zeppelin* airship. The dealer was selling them off. Although I knew nothing about Japan or airships, I became intrigued by this 1929 round-the-world voyage. I asked the dealer, "How do you know Kajikawa sent these designs to Lady Grace on the Zeppelin?" She replied, "There was a letter that came with the designs." I immediately told her, "I will buy the remaining fourteen designs, but only if I can have the letter." She initially refused, offering me a photocopy instead, but I insisted: "If I am buying fourteen designs, I want the original letter." Insisting on that letter was the best thing I ever did. I put it on my shelf, and it sat there until my sister-in-law, Yoko, came to visit me at my home in France.

We sat in the garden, and I asked her to translate the letter. It turned out to be the kind of letter that any young, aspiring artist could write. He wanted to succeed in the world but had no idea how. In the letter, Yutaka begs Lady Grace to take his designs back to the West and promote his work, explaining that everyone he had shown them to in Japan considered them far too modern. There was a particularly moving moment in the letter where he wrote: "*Even if you can do nothing for me, though I beg you, please try, I will at least enjoy six months of dreaming that you might.*" That phrase, "six months of dreaming," sparked my imagination. It was the beginning of my journey. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, I finally had the time to write the novel, conduct extensive research, and visit the Zeppelin Museum library in Friedrichshafen, southern Germany, to gather materials.

Part 2: The Inspiration and the Japanese Obsession with Airships

If you visit Japan today, you will notice a fascinating trend: the Japanese remain deeply obsessed with airships. Whether you visit Kyoto's futuristic train station or browse a stationery shop, airship motifs frequently appear on notebooks, books, and everyday items. When Yoko and I traveled to Tokyo a year ago, they seemed to spring out at me everywhere we went.

What did I know about Yutaka Kajikawa when I started? From his letter, I knew he was a young, married artist. He wrote to Lady Grace that if she did nothing for him and he never heard back, he would abandon his artistic ambitions and find a proper way to earn a living to support his family. Unfortunately, Lady Grace did absolutely nothing for him. Ten years ago, his designs were sold off alongside his letter. I worked out that her grandchildren must have been clearing out her estate and selling her papers.

Interestingly, Yutaka had written in his letter: *"If you think nothing of my work, tell nobody, show nobody, throw them out of the Zeppelin window over the ocean."* But she did not do that either. She neither helped him nor destroyed his work. Instead, the designs remained tucked away in her private papers from the time of her death in 1946 until they were sold in 2012, eventually leaving them for me to find and finally give his story the recognition it deserved.

Part 3: A Quick Journey Through the Novel

To give you a taste of the book, *Six Months of Dreaming*, let's briefly look at how the story unfolds. On the front cover, we have reproduced the original envelope, which Yutaka or his wife stamped and posted to Lady Grace Drummond-Hay, care of Kasumigaura Airport. On the back, Yutaka's address in Suita-cho, Osaka, is written in Lady Grace's handwriting, likely transcribed after someone translated the letter for her.

- Chapter One begins with an unprecedented marital row between the young couple. Despite their chronic financial and family troubles, Yutaka and his wife, Onei, are usually very happy together. However, tension rises because a great German airship is about to arrive in Tokyo, on the other side of Japan from their home in Suita, a suburb north of Osaka. This feels like Yutaka's one and only chance to get his art noticed.
- Chapter Two takes place on the late evening of August 15, 1929. Yutaka finally sits down to write the letter that he hopes will launch his much-yearned-for artistic career. He writes: *"You do not know me, dear Lady Grace. Perhaps you never will. I have to face this possibility..."*
- Chapter Three introduces the professional letter writer. Yutaka is far too nervous to write the letter in English himself, so he hires an underling charging ten cents per page, located right next to his bus stop in Osaka. At the end of a long day, the letter writer enjoys a glass of sake and reflects on the "young fools" of Osaka. Yutaka is the eighth young man that day, and the twenty-eighth that week, asking for a begging letter to send to the English lady arriving in Tokyo on the *Graf Zeppelin*.

- Chapters Four through Eleven follow the perspectives of Yutaka's beloved wife, Onei; his three-year-old son, Tiki, who plays "Zeppelins" in the park on his Uncle Sudo's shoulders; and Yutaka's demanding boss, Mr. Nohara, the short-tempered owner of the Nohara Print Works in downtown Osaka. After sending the letter, Yutaka is consumed by immediate regret, tossing and turning in the night, moaning to his wife, "Why didn't you stop me?"

Part 4: The Arrival of the Graf Zeppelin

Monday morning, August 19, 1929, was a day of national celebration. With the *Graf Zeppelin* expected to fly over Japan, no one could concentrate on their work at either the Nohara Print Works or Yoni's Department Store. Staff and customers alike gathered around radio receivers to listen to the live commentary. Through crackling static, the commentator shouted excitedly at the top of his lungs: *"We are expecting the Graf Zeppelin to appear in the skies above Tokyo early this afternoon! The airship has already traveled 11,080 miles: 4,200 miles from Lakehurst, New Jersey, to the Zeppelin headquarters in Friedrichshafen, Germany, and then an incredible 6,880 miles nonstop from Friedrichshafen to Tokyo. The average speed has been 64 miles per hour, utilizing only three of its five engines. The twenty passengers who ate breakfast in Germany on Thursday will dine in Tokyo tonight! Among them is the only female passenger on board: the English aristocrat, Lady Grace Drummond-Hay."*

Amidst this excitement, an employee named Genji decides to take advantage of the distraction. Hoping to curry favor, he whispers to Mr. Nohara's chief assistant that Yutaka Kajikawa has been secretly printing custom stationery to apply for jobs elsewhere. Annoyed by the interruption, Mr. Nohara summons Yutaka to his office [24]. As they sit together listening to the radio, Mr. Nohara says, *"I am sure you are as keen as anyone to hear the Graf Zeppelin landing. These are exciting times; it is the start of a new era of global communications."*

Suddenly, the radio blares. The commentator struggles to find words to describe the majestic sight: *"It appears out of the clear blue sky! Like a vast, silver koinobori, the finest carp streamer any kite seller could ever offer! It is simply enormous and shiny. It is now slowly inclining its bow in a mark of respect toward the Imperial Palace, making a complete circuit. The crowds here are going wild, throwing their hats and yelling 'Banzai!' at the top of their voices! Up in the Zeppelin, they are leaning out of the windows, waving white handkerchiefs. I can see Lady Grace waving an elegant, gloved hand down at the crowd! Below, the women of Tokyo have turned out in their finest kimonos, twirling colorful parasols to welcome her! Tokyo is a seething mass of joy! And now, the Emperor himself has appeared on the palace rooftop, waving the Japanese flag! This is being broadcast simultaneously 9,000 miles away in Berlin via the Berliner Tageblatt radio station! This is a German technological achievement of the first order, completing half of its circumnavigation of the globe!"* The commentator mentions that even a black cat named Lucky is on board the airship.

Watching Lady Grace wave her red-rose patterned handkerchief from the window, Yutaka Kajikawa gasps, *"She is waving down at me personally."* Mr. Nohara glances at his bright-eyed employee and says with a touch of sarcasm, *"You speak as if you know her."* Yutaka smiles and replies, *"I admire her hugely, sir. I feel I know her personally through the papers."* Amused by Yutaka's youthful enthusiasm, Mr. Nohara decides to promote him

rather than fire him. Ultimately, Yutaka keeps his promise to his wife: he buckles down, works hard, and enjoys a highly successful career as a first-rate administrator under Mr. Nohara's watchful eye.

Part 5: Historical Legacies

The real-life histories of the people and passengers involved in this voyage are equally extraordinary.

Lucky the Cat: Lucky, the feline passenger, proved to be a very sensible cat. Once the airship landed and the journalists headed into Tokyo, Lucky slipped away and ran off. Whenever I travel to Japan and spot a black cat, I like to imagine it might be a descendant of Lucky.

Lady Grace Drummond-Hay: Lady Grace utilised her Zeppelin fame to advertise Lucky Strike cigarettes with the famous slogan, "*I smoke Lucky instead of eating sweets.*" Tragically, her life took a dark turn a decade later. Still working as a travel journalist alongside her colleague and lover, the prominent Hearst journalist Karl von Wiegand, the two were captured by the Japanese in the Philippines during World War II. They spent a grueling year in the Santo Tomas internment camp in Manila. In a highly unusual move, they were eventually repatriated to America via India in a Red Cross prisoner exchange. Photos of them in *Life* magazine show them terribly emaciated, with Von Wiegand having lost an eye. Weakened by her captivity, Lady Grace died of a heart attack in a New York hotel room in 1946. In my novel, I imagined a poignant encounter in the Philippines, where Yutaka Kajikawa crosses paths with Lady Grace, who feels a fleeting, inexplicable sense of recognition.

Dr. Hugo Eckener: He was the brilliant commander who steered the Zeppelin, was a visionary who dreamed that airships would unite the world and revolutionise global mail delivery. He knew that the safe future of airships depended on securing non-flammable helium from the United States, but the American government, deeply concerned by the rise of militarism in Germany, refused to supply it.

When the Nazi party took power, Adolf Hitler hijacked Eckener's immense popularity and seized the Zeppelin factories in Friedrichshafen for nationalist propaganda. When the hydrogen-filled *Hindenburg* tragically exploded in 1937, Hitler blamed Eckener, accusing him of sabotage. Eckener was stripped of his factories and inventions, spending his final years in Friedrichshafen sweeping leaves with his Airedale dog, his grand dreams completely shattered.

Part 6: The Kamikaze Connection

In 2019, I traveled to Japan to trace the physical remains of this history. I took a train to Tsuchiura to visit Lake Kasumigaura. Under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, the Allied powers confiscated Germany's airship hangars, and Japan was awarded one. That massive hangar was rebuilt beside Lake Kasumigaura, which is why the *Graf Zeppelin* was able to land and dock there in 1929. Even today, the local community celebrates this history; I was able to buy "Zeppelin Curry" at a local supermarket, a dish originally created for the arriving German crew because sailors arriving at Yokohama were traditionally served curry.

However, the history of the site has a very dark side. Ten years after the Zeppelin landed, the naval airbase at Kasumigaura became the training ground for the *Yokaren*, the preparatory flight corps from which the brightest and best young men were trained as kamikaze suicide pilots. Visiting the Yokaren Peace Museum there is a devastating experience, filled with the final, heartbreaking letters of young boys trained to guide manned bombs directly into Allied ships.

This dark history inevitably found its way into the novel. If Lucky the cat escaped and lived by the lake, he would have witnessed these young men training a decade later. Yutaka's son, Tiki, would have been the exact age of those young pilots. In the novel, as World War II ravages Japan, Yutaka's wife and daughter find themselves fleeing toward Hiroshima, where her sister lives. While their names are later found among the historical lists of casualties at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, I allowed them a small mercy in my fiction, having them step off the train before reaching the city.

Part 7: Fulfilling Yutaka's Dream

Yutaka Kajikawa's dreams disappeared into history, but through this book, I wanted to give him his life back. Ninety-six years after he wrote his letter, Yutaka finally received his exhibition. The Artworkers' Guild in central London allowed me to place his name on the wall, hand-written by a calligrapher alongside the guild's historical members.

We also held a wonderfully lively launch event in Osaka. Local theater students put on a performance where an actor played Yutaka, and a brilliant translator acted as a comedic foil, translating my English while playfully teasing me. His original necktie designs have even been adapted into elegant silk scarves and wallpapers that are now sold in boutique shops in Tokyo and Osaka.

Ultimately, this project is a testament to the power of dreams. When talking to the young people in Osaka, I asked them: *"We all have dreams. What are yours? Write your letter. Even if it takes ninety-six years, do something about it."*