

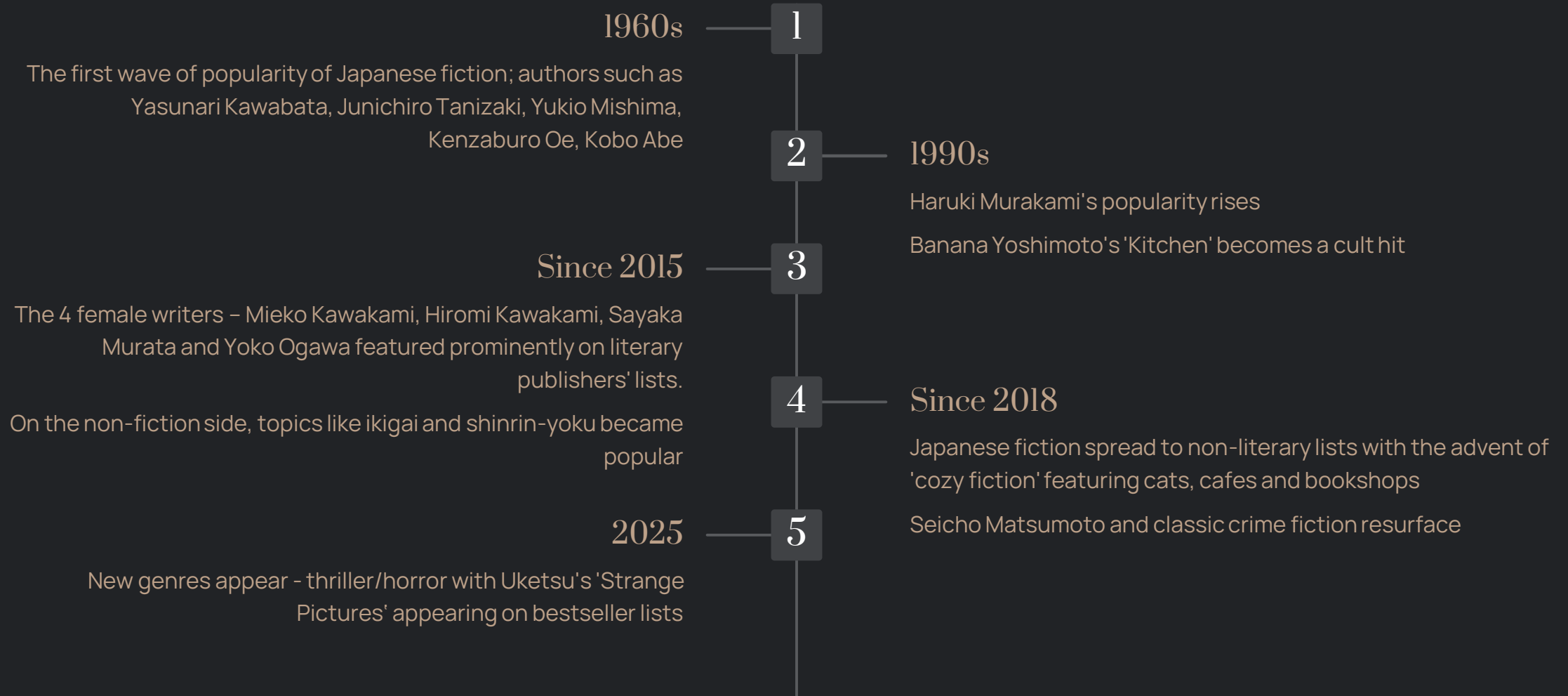


The Japanese Fiction Boom: From the Publisher's Desk

Kaja Murawska

Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation, 15th July 2026

The Rise of Japanese Literature in English Translation



New wave of female literary writers

1

Strange Weather in Tokyo

by Hiromi Kawakami (2017)



2

Convenience Store Woman

by Sayaka Murata (2018)



3

Breasts and Eggs

by Mieko Kawakami (2020)

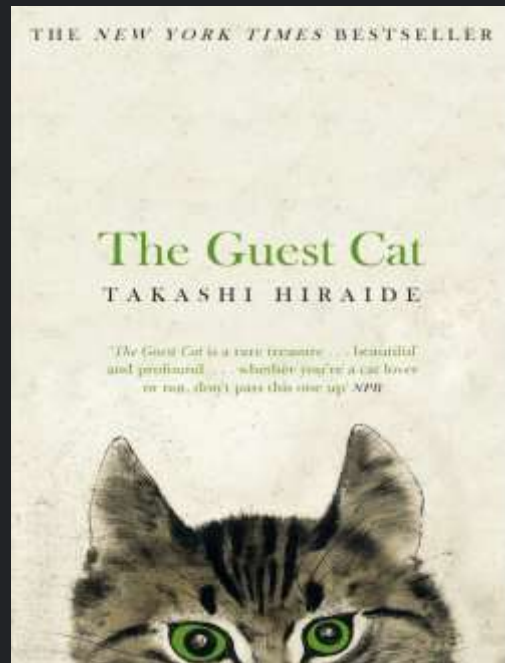


The Cat Books (it's a separate genre!)

1

The Guest Cat

by Takashi Hiraide (2014)



2

Travelling Cat Chronicles

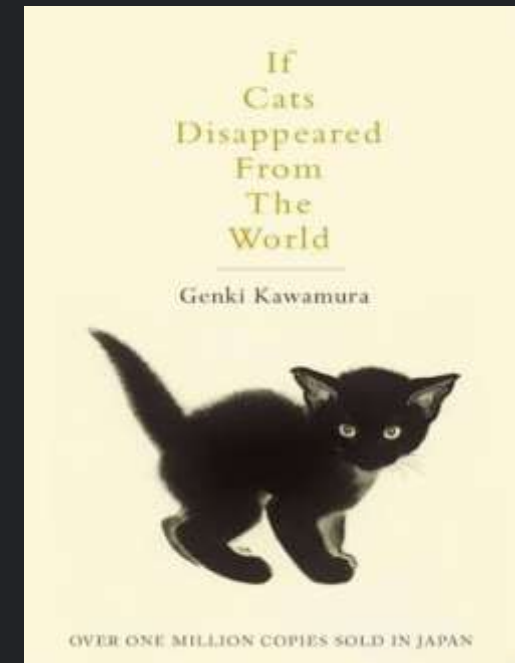
by Hiro Arikawa (2018)



3

If Cats Disappeared From the World

by Genki Kawamura (2018)



Ironically, the only cat book still not selling well is Natsume Soseki's 'I Am a Cat'

The Healing Fiction Phenomenon

1

Before the Coffee Gets Cold

by Toshikazu Kawaguchi (2019)



2

What You Are Looking for is in the Library

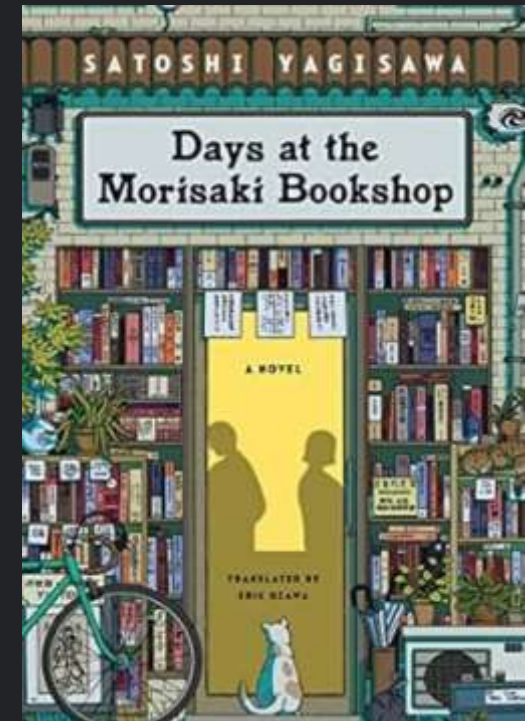
by Michiko Aoyama (2023)



3

Days at the Morisaki Bookshop

by Satoshi Yagisawa (2023)

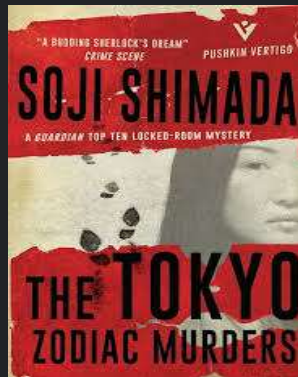


Many shades of crime fiction

1

Classic Crime

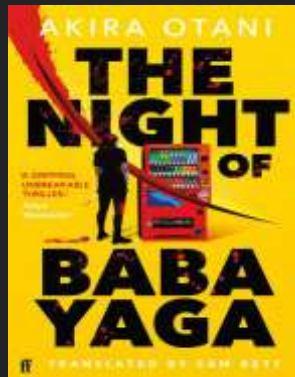
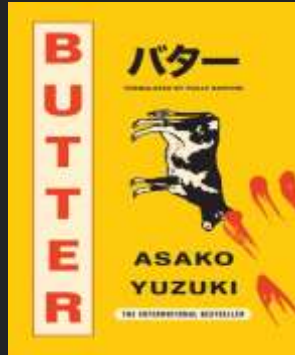
Seicho Matsumoto, Seishi Yokomizo, Soji Shimada



2

Feminist Crime and Revenge

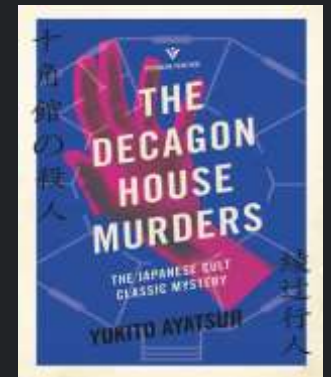
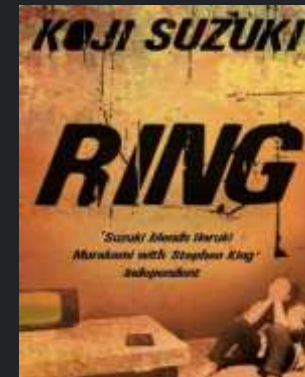
Asako Yuzuki, Natsuo Kirino, Akira Otani, Kanae Minato



3

Horror/Mystery

Uketsu, Koji Suzuki, Yukito Ayatsuji



Bookseller's UK foreign fiction bestseller list in 2025:

Data source: Makoto's BookData Data range: 2025 Weeks 1-21		
Bestselling translated fiction*		
* Excluding Manga & Graphic Novels		
1	 Butter Asako Yuzuki, Polly Barton (trans) Fourth Estate, 9780006511685	72,205
2	 Butter Asako Yuzuki, Polly Barton (trans) Fourth Estate, 9780006511715	44,030
3	 I Who Have Never Known Men J Harpman, R Schwartz (trans) Vintage, 9781529111798	31,514
4	 The Wizard of the Kremlin Giuliano da Empoli, W Wood (trans) Pushkin Press, 9781805530100	24,199
5	 Before the Coffee Gets Cold T Kawaguchi, G Trousdale (trans) Picador, 9781529029581	23,342
6	 Strange Pictures Ukatsu, Jim Rion (trans) Pushkin Vertigo, 9781805535599	22,880
7	 White Nights F Dostoevsky, R Meyer (trans) Penguin Classics, 9780341252055	21,733
8	 The Vegetarian Han Kang, D Smith (trans) Portobello, 9781844276033	18,324
9	 Perfection Vincenzo Latronico, S Hughes (trans) Picador, 9781804279049	15,512
10	 What You Are Looking For M Aoyama, A Watts (trans) Penguin (Transworld), 9781804994139	14,460
11	 Days at the End of the World S Yagisawa, E Ozawa (trans) Mandarin Press, 9781786585239	11,834
12	 Drive Your Plow O Tokarczuk, Lloyd-Jones (trans) Picador, 9781913097257	11,593
13	 The Convenience Store Woman S Machida, B Navasky (trans) Oion, 9781398722774	11,160
14	 The Alchemist Paulo Coelho Thorsons, 9780722532935	10,303
15	 We Do Not Part Han Kang, Yae-won, Morris (trans) Harrish Hamilton, 9780341400289	10,133
16	 On the Calculation S Balle, BJ Haveland (trans) Faber, 9780671363376	9,855
17	 My Brilliant Friend E Ferrante, A Goldstein (trans) Europa Editions, 9781787702224	9,773
18	Welcome to the Wreck Hwang Bo-reum, S Tan (trans) Bloomsbury, 9781526622566	9,463
19	Eurotrash Christian Kracht, Daniel Bowles (trans) Serpent's Tail, 9781806223047	9,448
20	Madonna in a Fur Coat S Ali, M Freely (trans) Penguin Classics, 9780241422267	8,512

21	 We'll Prescribe You S Ishida, Shimoda (trans) Doubleday, 9781529936711	8,388
22	 Inspector Inarishiki S Matsumoto, B Cary (trans) Penguin Classics, 9780241724438	7,978
23	 Tokyo Express S Matsumoto, J Kirkwood (trans) Penguin Classics, 9780241439081	7,925
24	 Norwegian Wood H Murakami, J Rubin (trans) Vintage, 9780099448822	7,879
25	 The City and Its Vicinities H Murakami, P Gabriel (trans) Harvill Secker, 9781787304475	7,658
26	 The Empuska O Tokarczuk, A Lloyd-Jones (trans) Picador, 9781804279087	7,566
27	 Murder at Mount Fuji S Natsuki, RB Rohmer (trans) Hutchinson Heinemann, 9781529155105	7,468
28	 Murder Mindfully K Dusse, F Dujsens (trans) Faber, 9780571384044	7,202
29	 Greek Lessons Han Kang, Yae-won, Smith (trans) Penguin, 9780241997042	6,751
30	 Daller Guit Dream M Lee, S Joosun Lee (trans) Widya, 9781035412781	6,646
31	 Convenience Store S Murata, Takemori (trans) Orion Books, 9781844276842	6,466
32	 Crime and Punishment Dostoevsky, McDuff (trans) Penguin, 9780140448134	6,381
33	 Hunchback Saou Ichikawa, Polly Barton (trans) Penguin, 9780241700785	6,299
34	 Tender Is the Flesh A Barterrica, S Moses (trans) Pushkin Press, 9781782276203	5,642
35	 Human Acts Han Kang, Deborah Smith (trans) Portobello, 9781844275973	5,553
36	 One Hundred Years of Solitude Garcia Marquez, Rabassa (trans) Penguin, 9780241968581	5,358
37	 Kairos Jenny Erpenbeck, M Hofmann (trans) Orion Books, 9781783786138	5,172
38	 The Cat Who S Natsukawa, L Heal Kawai (trans) Picador, 9781035050404	5,040
39	 If on a Winter's Night Calvino, Weaver (trans) Vintage, 9780099430896	4,868
40	 Death at the Sanatorium Jonasson, Cribb (trans) Penguin, 9781405949088	4,853
41	 The Outsider Albert Camus, S Smith (trans) Penguin Classics, 9780141198044	4,775
42	 The Memory Police Y Ogawa, S Snyder (trans) Vintage, 9781784300447	4,755
43	 Goodnight Tokyo A Yoshida, H Trowell (trans) Europa Editions, 9781787705579	4,668
44	 The Full Moon M Mochizuki, J Kirkwood (trans) Braken, 9781914240942	4,554
45	No Longer Human Osamu Dazai, D Keene (trans) New Directions, 9780812048111	4,434
46	More Days at the End of the World S Yagisawa, E Ozawa (trans) Mandarin Press, 9781786584328	4,419
47	The Restaurant H Kashiwai, J Kirkwood (trans) Pan, 9781035009640	4,328
48	The Count of Monte Cristo Dumas, Buss (trans) Penguin, 9780140448266	4,075
49	The Three-Body Problem Cixin Liu, K Liu (trans) Head of Zeus, 9781784971571	4,027
50	The Travelling Cat H Arikiawa, P Gabriel (trans) Doubleday, 9780857524195	3,935

Demographic

(UK data compiled by the International Booker Prize)

51% of translated fiction is bought by men - in contrast to 38% of general fiction buyers.

73% of readers of translated fiction are under 45, with 25-34 being the biggest demographic (in contrast with 60-84 for general fiction).

Readers more likely to buy in independent bookshops (16% vs 10% for general fiction).





How do books travel?

Discovery patterns

1960s - 2000s:

1

East Coast Japanese Studies professors advising New York publishers, later discovery happening via literary journals like Granta

The current boom:

2

Mainstream publishing route, titles acquired from the Japanese publishers/sub-agents or Western agents representing Japanese authors, Japanese market is covered by literary scouts advising publishers.

Junbungaku vs entame shosetsu

3

Japanese literature used to be represented solely by literary fiction (junbungaku) and winners of Akutagawa and Naoki Prizes (as expected when recommended by university professors). The current wave of popularity opened up avenues for translating genre fiction (entame shosetsu).

The rise of generations influenced by anime and manga

While for the older millennials anime and manga were a niche, 'nerdy' interest, for the following generations they constitute part of mainstream culture.

Japanese popular media excel at producing 'all-age' content while the Western book industry struggled with 'losing' teenage and young adult readers as they enter adulthood.

By building franchises spanning multiple media, Japanese media are more likely to convert manga readers into fiction readers.

The same generation is much more likely to travel to Japan, driven by its popularity in the media and the post-lockdown travel bucket lists.



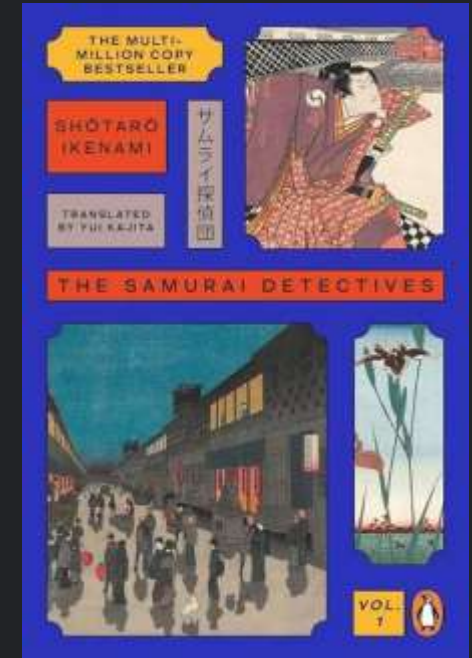
Film inspiration

Marketing of many Japanese titles follows the aesthetic and themes already popularised by Japanese media – publishers are giving readers what they already enjoyed on screen in book form.

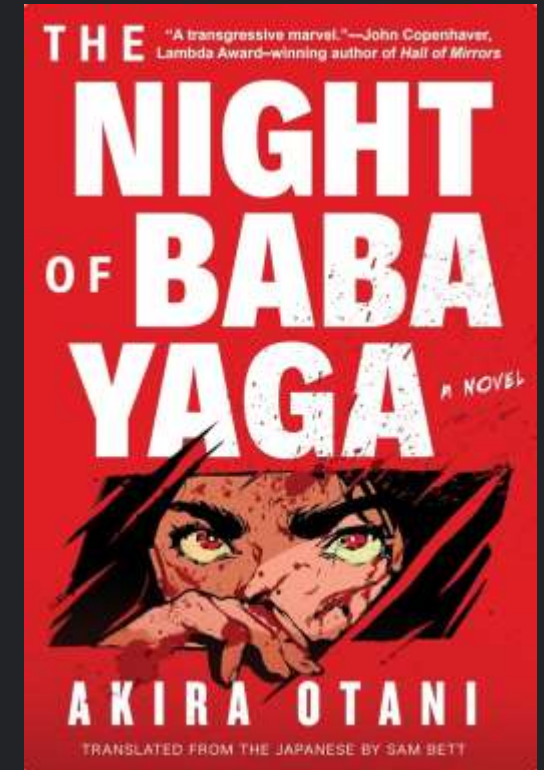
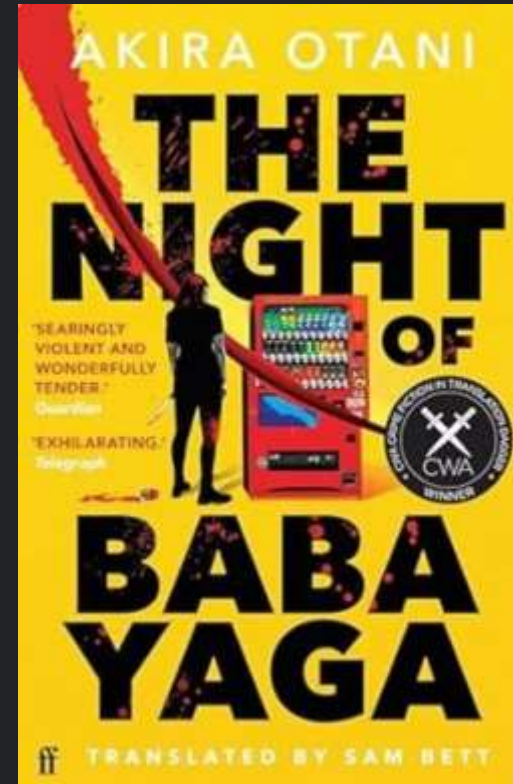
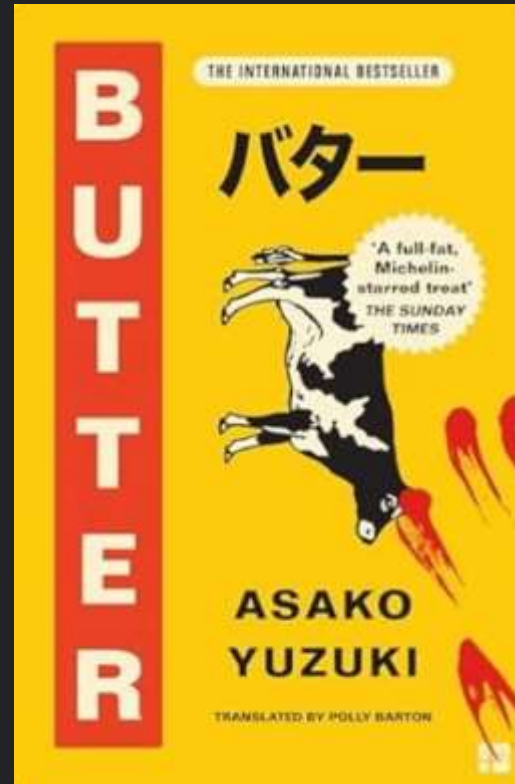
'Healing fiction' readers are looking for the sentimental, philosophical tone they liked in Ghibli or Makoto Shinkai animations – the covers are consciously referencing the illustration style.



The popularity of the ongoing 'Shogun' remake is bringing about the return of samurai-themed historical novels.



... sometimes the inspiration can even come from the Hollywood side.





POTENTIAL PROBLEM AREA:

Differences in writing styles can make the transition between markets difficult



Some Japanese novels originate serialised in daily newspapers – this often results in repetition in places where new chapters started.



Due to the popularity of literary journals short stories are much more popular in Japan and for many authors they constitute a large part of their literary work – whereas short stories are notoriously difficult to publish in the West.

I-Novel

I-Novel tradition often include a diary-like recording of mundane daily activities - this results in what looks to Western readers like **pointless repetition that doesn't advance the narrative → editors request cuts**

Extensive world-building and backstories

Western writing - from Dickens to Zadie Smith gives lots of weight to world-building and multi-level backstories of all characters. To Japanese readers this looks like **unnecessary information that confuses the narrative → editors request cuts**



POTENTIAL PROBLEM AREA:



The hype part of the Japanese Fiction Boom is **already dying down** - rights managers report lower interest at London Book Fair in March 2026.



Places on publishing lists filled with titles bought at the height of the boom - editors **now acquiring for 2029**.



Little financial support for Japanese translations from the Japanese government (compared to countries such as Korea, Taiwan, Germany or the Netherlands)



Eventisation of literature – many book copies are sold during in-person events, but travel for authors (and accompanying persons they request) is expensive, frequent festival appearances require commitment from the authors, same as ongoing social media presence – an extrovert personality and English language skills help in establishing an international career.



Lacking integration of Japanese publishing industry and the Western ones – know-how, language skills and longstanding personal connections (going back 20-30 years!) are missing, so unless a foreign editor or scout comes looking for Japanese titles and shows a lot of patience, there is little hope of discovery.

THE JAPANESE FICTION BOOM CAME ABOUT ORGANICALLY FROM THE DEMAND SIDE, NOT THROUGH CONSCIOUS EFFORT (UNLIKE HALLYU) - THE UNDERLAYING STRUCTURAL PROBLEMS HAVE NOT BEEN FIXED



POTENTIAL PROBLEM AREA:

Difference in rights management systems

The Western publishing system is based on exclusivity - only one publisher can publish a given author at one time. This justifies economically investment in an author's rights and advertising their titles - all future profits will come back to the publisher.

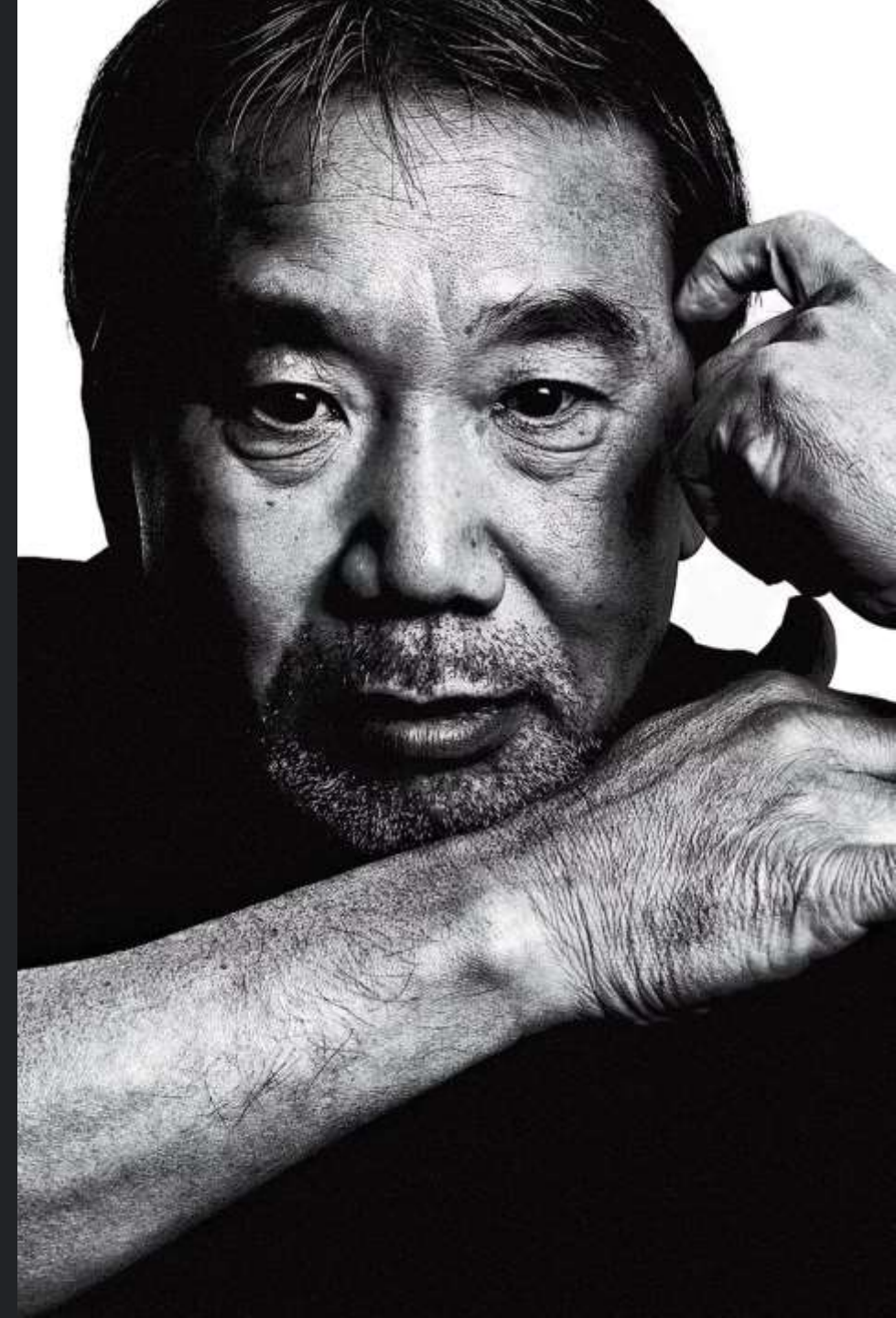
On the other hand, in Japan the same author can be published by even 20 publishers, who then control their foreign rights. Each one of them can technically sell their titles to a different foreign publisher! While there are attempts at coordinating rights sales or placing them with sub-agents (often 2 or 3 layers of sub-agents, all taking their cut!), this complicates each transaction and later daily communication with the author. It's no coincidence that the Japanese authors who are most successful in translation have Western literary agents, who manage their foreign rights the same way they deal with bestselling Western authors.

Case: Haruki Murakami

Author's own initiative – removing all obstacles on the road to publication
with the most prestigious publishers

Haruki Murakami described his experiences in 'Novelist as a Vocation':

'Several Americans I met through my work cautioned me: "It's difficult to be successful as a writer in America unless you sign a contract with an US agent and have your books come out from one of the major publishers". And it goes without saying that I felt the same way. (...) I decided to go out on my own and find an agent and a new publisher. After interviewing several people in New York, I decided to work with Amanda 'Binky' Urban at the major agency ICM; with the publisher Knopf (an imprint of Penguin Random House) and its president and editor-in-chief Sonny Mehta; and with the editor Gary Fisketjon. All three, at the time, were leading figures in the literary world in the US. (...) Another reason I was successful, I believe, was that though I was technically a Japanese writer, I put that aside and was, from the very first, determined to stand on a level playing field with other American authors. I found my own translators and had them translate the works for me personally, checked them myself, then brought the manuscripts to my agent to sell to the publisher. This way the agent and publisher treated me the same way they would an American writer. Not as a foreign writer writing novels in a foreign language, but as someone standing on the same playing field as American novelists, playing by the same rules. The first thing I did was to make sure this system was firmly in place.'



B U T T E R

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

バター

A NOVEL OF FOOD AND MURDER



ASAKO
YUZUKI

TRANSLATED BY POLLY BARTON

"An exuberant, indulgent romp of a novel...
Butter is a full-fat, Michelin-starred treat."
—*The Times*

Case: Asako Yuzuki's 'Butter' (2024) – perfect storm of ingredients

Culmination of several trends (gruesome/eccentric crime, feminist revenge fiction, wholesome element of cooking)

Sensibility matching the UK market in particular (a sense of irony)

8-year-old title, handpicked by the Japanese co-agent (Hamish McAskill) and sold in collaboration with a prestigious UK agency (RCW), making an exception to act as a co-agent.

Booksellers fell in love with the book – afterwards the publisher launched an effective campaign, including sending booksellers real butter. Asako Yuzuki is also exceptionally good at creating rapport at live events.

Why the Boom occurred now?

Some existing theories

- Alienation in a ruthlessly convenient, post-modern society - Japanese authors take a timeless theme and focus on how it plays out through the eyes of fiercely introspective characters.
- Feminist fiction - since female writers are struggling with significant inequality in society (Japan is 118th in the Global Gender Gap Index), their writing has a sense of urgency that male writers might lack.
- Both of those factors combine in 'Weird Girl Fiction' (now seen as a separate international genre!) - stories with heroines who are fully alienated from society's expectations and fully embracing their subversiveness. Sayaka Murata's books are the extreme example, though softer, more quirky versions are equally popular.





Why the Boom occurred now?

Similarities between the Ice Age generation and the post-2008 generation

'It all started with Sayaka Murata's 'Convenience Store Woman' and Kikuko Tsumura's 'There's No Such Thing as an Easy Job' describing the plight of contract labourers. My generation born in the 1970s and 1980s is called the 'Ice Age generation' – they graduated in the 1990s straight into the post-bubble stagnation and struggle with un- and underemployment until today. Ice Age generation was not welcomed in society but still held up to the standards set by the Boomer generation. People abroad resonate with this feeling. We in Japan are ahead of time; there will be a younger generation in the US and Europe who will write of the same experience, but we already have done so for years.'

– Asako Yuzuki



Why the Boom occurred now?

Retromania

In the last 15 years commentators both in Japan and in Western countries have noticed their respective cultures being caught up in a 'retromania' - obsession with remixing and finding inspiration in the past decades. Japan has been in grips of a Showa nostalgia, with 80s city pop, emblematic for the exuberant bubble era, making a come-back and with multiple Showa museums opening around the country. Healing fiction features an unrealistic number of kissaten cafes and independent bookshops - while in real life half of them have closed in the last 20 years!

Western readers respond to this expression of nostalgia for a time of optimism and possibility of forming human connections in an atomised society - a time before the watershed dates of 2001 WTC attacks / 2008 financial crisis - which is missing from the Western literature. This matches the data about the readers of translated fiction, most of whom are millennials / Gen Z.



What comes next?

Horror and gothic (with a folklore twist) – think 'Midsommar' in Japan or H.P. Lovecraft with yokai!

Authors from the overlooked decades – between the 1960s generation of Mishima/Kawabata/Tanizaki/Oe/Abe and the current boom only Haruki Murakami and Banana Yoshimoto managed to effectively break through. 1970s Introverted Generation, 1980s Postmodernism, 1990s subcultures are all ready to be (re)-discovered!