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Lives Lived in the Margins: A Collection of Second-hand Japanese Fiction

As a child, I had always been an ardent collector of books, ranging from children's fantasy series to complex, diagrammatic World War II encyclopedias. In high school, I discovered contemporary Japanese literature and immediately fell in love with the genre. Over the past five years, I have assembled a collection of mostly used, annotated Japanese novels. The collection primarily features authors that are recipients of the Akutagawa Prize and center the experiences of marginalized people as protagonists of the story. Throughout the process of collecting books, I have focused on finding annotated books replete with underlining and comments to create a shared sense of community between me and previous readers.

I developed a deep appreciation for the Japanese literary tradition in the summer between my junior and senior year of high school. During this period, I felt really disconnected from my peers and nervous about baring my soul during the college application process. One of my friends recommended that I read *Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami. After finishing the novel, I found myself overcome by tears, moved by the quiet, sympathetic portrayal of adolescent angst and romance. After finishing the novel, I began devouring other books by Haruki Murakami, such as *IQ84* and *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*.

As I read, I started the habit of underlining sentences and writing comments or little quips in the margins of each book I read. I wanted to share my appreciation for the genre with my friends, so I frequently lent out my copies of novels to a few close friends. A friend returned one novel a few days later replete with multicolored underlining and every page covered in comments reacting to what I wrote. The humble Murakami novel I had lent out evolved from a simple book into a discursive site where we viscerally reacted to the novel and shared our frustrations and love for each character.

At the beginning of my senior year, I discovered Ryu Murakami's *Almost Transparent Blue*. I knew I had to read the novel after Western critics praised its depiction of alienated youth, longing for a sense of purpose and finding it in all things dangerous and destructive. I vividly remember finding a used copy on eBay and waiting two weeks for the package to arrive from Japan. Upon opening the book, I was delighted to find a beautifully worn book replete with underlining and annotations scattered throughout the novel. The first page of the book had a small stamp indicating that it was from a collector's personal library. As I read the novel, I added my own annotations and responded to the previous collector's comments. I felt like I was having a rich discussion with a stranger I had never met before as we both struggled to find the meaning of the novel and parse how abstract the language was.

After finishing *Almost Transparent Blue*, I began to realize the depth of my appreciation for Japanese contemporary fiction. The genre tends to eschew traditional narrative structures to center the experiences of outcasts marginalized by society. Many Japanese novels have themes about finding one's family in a group of likeminded people. Japan's postwar literature reflected a lack of trust in the traditional institutions that rooted social life, such as family, education, and religion. The youth of the 1950s and 1960s discovered community in their peers, mediated through the powerful lens of art, books, and films. The fiction of that era, such as Yukio Mishima's *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* and Osamu Dazai's *No Longer Human*, reflects a deep-seated anxiety about themselves and the direction that society is headed in.

Each protagonist battles their loneliness and sense of unease in contemporary society by indulging in the fantastical and magical sides of their existence.

By reading Japanese literature, I began to feel more at peace with myself and comfortable in my own skin. I have an unconventional physical experience and am a religious minority. Reading stories about ethnic minorities or the homeless in Japan, for example in Yu Miri's *Tokyo Ueno Station*, encouraged me to lean into my own identity as a tool to find people with similar passions and dispositions towards life. Annotating each of my books forced me to reflect on my struggles with mental health and identity and as a result, I became more honest with both myself and those who I shared my books with. Each addition to my collection marks not only a new purchase or a new author discovered, but a diary entry chronicling my emotions, refracted through the lens of a story. Some of the most emotional and affective moments in my life occurred as I read a book from my collection, illuminated by the soft glow of a lamp, and my entire being felt seen, understood, in a way that no person has ever seen me before.

I love purchasing used books because I appreciate knowing that someone else held this same novel before me and felt the same emotions as I do now. Books have the power to index and collect other people's experiences as the physical form of the book is altered by each subsequent reader. For this reason, when I go to used bookstores, I pay close attention to the material condition of each book I purchase. I gravitate towards copies that have been well-loved and retain traces of the previous owner, through annotations, collecting stamps, or even library check-out cards. Each used book acts as an index of all the previous readers and transforms reading from a solitary act to a communal experience. I've also developed the habit of buying a used book when I travel. Some of my favorite memories of visiting other cities include sorting through racks of used books in the East Village used bookstore Codex or chatting with the incredibly knowledgeable booksellers at Heywood Hill in Mayfair, London. I've even found English-language Japanese novels in the Boquinistes lining the Seine in Paris. Each book acts as a memento of the places I purchased them and mediates my experience of the city through the lens of the book I am reading at that moment.

The Japanese novels I have collected so far are a strong reflection of how I have evolved over as a person the past five years. I hope to continue collecting novels that force me to take a moment of solitude and reflection in the midst of my busy life. Recently, I have acquired a deep interest in other countries' contemporary literature movements. Notably, the work of Qiu Miaojin, a Taiwanese queer writer, has encouraged me to seek out other diasporic Asian writers who discuss queer issues as a central point of their novel. With the assistance of the Booker Prize, I hope to purchase more used books and mail books in my collection to friends after we graduate so that I can continue to build my community of used book lovers.