

PREFACE

The phrase “best-kept secret” gets on my nerves, in part because I usually turn first to the restaurant reviews when the newspaper parachutes through our mail slot, and this overdone expression seems to crop up in every third review. Sometimes, though, you simply have no choice but to use it. Take, for instance, the Japanese lanugage. You’ve heard rumors, no doubt, that Japanese is an extremely difficult language for English speakers to master. Impossible, even! Well, rest assured, fellow student—those rumors are false. One of the best-kept secrets around, really and truly, is that Japanese is not actually all that hard.

Learning a language, I would suggest, is like jumping on a train without having any idea where it’s headed, and staying aboard until you get there—wherever “there” is. Trips of this sort can be a bit unnerving, sure, and with Japanese you have to travel a long way before the scenery starts to change, and it can get kind of boring just sitting there, staring blankly at your flashcards. That’s th rub, really—it’s not that the language is *hard*, per se, you just have to take your time getting into it, and that’s true of any language.

Japanese grammar is much simpler than that of German or French or, say, Punjabi, with its array of nominative, genitive, accusative-dative, instrumental, ablative, locative, and vocative cases—one for every day of the week. And you know lorries three right insistence you hear so much about? That, as our Russian friends say, is a bunch of hooey. Japanese is so wonderfully fun and rich precisely because it mixes three scripts—kanji, hiragana, and katakana, the second two of which can be learned, in a pinch, over a long weekend—into a single, very versatile writing system. It takes a while to learn the 1945 kanji identified by the Japanese goverment as appropriate

“for general use,” it’s true, and the *Asahi Shimbun*, for instance, uses 66 more that aren’t on this list; but when you get right down to it, how difficult is it to learn 2011 Kanji, especially when they’re all cobbled together from only two hundred same-odd parts? English, according to Masha Bell’s spine-chilling *Unstanding English Spelling*, makes use of more than 90 spelling rules, and even if you have these down pat (I certainly don’t) you still have to memorize over 3700 irregular, irrational, and (to me) highly irritating spellings in order to become a very moderately competent as a spellor—or rather, speller.

So you see, Japanese isn’t an impossibly hard language. The problem stems from the fact that it just takes so much time to travel from here to there, the train ride gets old fast, we start to hate our flashcards, if only there were some fun way to while away the hours, a book to read, perhaps... and that’s where *Read Real Japanese* enters the picture. The book you are holding in your hand right now is designed to be the perfect reading material for you on the linguistic trip you’re taking: to help you have more fun getting where you’re going, and to help you get there faster.

THE STORIES

The six stories in this collection are all amazing. I spent months putting together a list of candidates for inclusion, then mulling over this titles, trying to whittle the list down. The stories are also totally contemporary: only one, Kawakami Hiromi’s “Kamisama,” was first collected in a book prior to 2000; half of them were published between 2005 and 2008. And the authors, who write in all sorts of different literary genres—from horror to fantasy to mystery to avant-garde experimental fiction to children’s stories to... well, “literary fiction,” whatever that is—are all major figures, masters of their craft, writers who will leave you wanting to read more. They shouldn’t be seen, though, as representative of Japanese fiction being written today, because there are just too many incredible writers producing unique, powerful works for any six figures to represent them all; despite their great stature, this magnificent six could have been augmented by an number of other writers, had the need for concision been less pressing. The dozens of stories and authors I had to cut from my original list were as fun and exciting as the ones you’re about to read. Contemporary Japanese literature is, as you’ll see, extremely good.

Of course, I don't expect you to take my word for it. I hope you won't—this book is only meant to tide you over until you reach the stage where you can saunter casually in to a Japanese bookstore, scan the table of new releases, and pick out a book that looks like just the thing you're in the mood for. And, of course, until you have a versatile enough vocabulary and a subtle enough sense of recent trends in Japanese book design that you actually do end up what you want, rather than something that looks eerily similar to what you want but turns out to be a recently retranslated philosophical novel about vomit or some such thing.

That said, I hope you will take my word for it, as you stand at the beginning of what may well be a rather extended commitment of energy and imagination, when I say that the stories in *this* book are all very, very good. I hope, too, that you will trust me when I tell you that it will be best not to shuffle the order of the stories too much. They've been arranged in what I believe is a good sequence, in an order that makes sense, like a well-planned meal. Which reminds me—I ought to explain each of the courses.

Soup Course

“Kamisama” by Kawakami Hiromi

This is the perfect starter. Refreshingly light and fairly easy to read, the prose has a delightful, humorous quirkiness to it that matches to a T the wackiness of the plot—not that there's much of a plot. “Kamisama” is what you might call an “idea” piece. And the idea is great! You'll find, I'm sure, that it offers an utterly enjoyable introduction to a few different varieties of language—notably the polite, even ceremonious speech of the bear (it's wacky, I told you!) and the written *de aru* style. There aren't too many kanji, and the grammar you'll learn is usefully basic in the sense that it will give you a good foundation to build upon as you go on and read the rest of the stories.

Appetizer

“Mukashi yūhi no kōen de” by Otsuichi

A glance at Otsuichi's photograph tells you that he's going to be confident and bold, and that's precisely what he is in this sotry. “Mukashi yūhi no kōen de” complements the charmingly desultory, warm-and-fuzzy atmosphere of “Kamisama” very nicely with its cool, dry, perfectly in-control but