

Amidadō-dayori [Amida Hall Newsletter]

By Nagi Keishi

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阿弥陀堂だより

南木 佳士

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Life in Japan has changed dramatically since World War II, especially in rural areas. A society that was once centered on agriculture rapidly became urban and industrial, and farming villages trod a path of decline in the regions left behind by this transformation.

The hero of this book, a novelist named Ueda, was brought up as the only child of a smallholder family in the fictitious village of Yanaka in Nagano Prefecture before finally abandoning his birthplace for life in the city. When his wife, a doctor, slides into depression after suffering the shock of a miscarriage during a hectic work schedule, they resolve to move back from Tokyo to Yanaka. By doing so, Ueda also hopes to overcome his creative block. On returning to the mountain village for the first time in years, Ueda starts to farm again, while his wife examines patients at the local clinic. Surrounded by the same natural beauty as in past days and pursuing a leisurely lifestyle, the two regain their physical and mental health.

Their worldview starts to change, particularly through encounters with O-ume, a woman who, at more than 90 years old, resides alone on the mountain as the custodian of the village's "Amida hall," dedicated to the spirits of the villagers' ancestors. The elderly O-ume does not have a television, telephone, or even a flushing toilet, and leads a life severely lacking in modern conveniences. She does not complain, however, as she plows her own small field and lives in cheerful self-reliance with no fear of death or illness.

In his warm and highly empathetic portrayal of an elderly woman who transcends her era, the author interrogates the present day and shows readers the potential of a different way of living. (*NK*)

Nagi Keishi

Born in Gunma Prefecture in 1951. Novelist and physician. Won the Bungakukai New Writers Award for "Hasui" [Breaking the Waters] in 1981. Won the Akutagawa Prize and the Saku Culture Prize in 1989 for *Daiyamondo dasuto* [Diamond Dust] and the 2008 Izumi Kyōka Prize for Literature and the 2009 Minister of Education's Art Encouragement Prize for Kusa suberi: sono ta no tanpen [Sliding on Grass and Other Stories]. Other works include Fuyu monogatari [A Winter's Tale] and Yōko no ichinichi [Yōko's Day].

南木 佳士

1951年群馬県生まれ。小説家、医師。1981年「破水」で文學界新人賞、 1989年『ダイヤモンドダスト』で芥川賞、佐久文化賞、2008年『草すべ り その他の短編』で泉鏡花文学賞、翌年同作で芸術選奨文部科学大臣 賞を受賞。著書に『冬物語』『陽子の一日』など。



日本の、とりわけ地方の生活は、第二次大戦後まさしく激変した。農業に基盤を置いていた社会は急速に産業化、都市化し、その流れに取り残された地方の農村は凋落の一途をたどる。

本書の主人公である小説家・上田は、信州・谷中村の零細農家の一人っ子として育ち、やがて都会に出て故郷を捨てる。しかし医者である妻が、激務に流産のショックが重なって心の病を得たことをきっかけに、生活の拠点を東京から故郷の村に移す決心をする。それは自らの創作の行き詰まりを打開するきっかけを求めてのことでもあった。久しぶりに戻った山里の村で、作家は農業を再開し、妻は村の診療所で病人を診察する。昔と変わらない美しい自然に囲まれ、ゆったりとした暮らしの中で、二人の心身は健康を取り戻していく。

とりわけ、九十歳を越えてたった一人、村の阿弥陀堂(村人の霊を祀る場所)の堂守として山中で暮らす「おうめ婆さん」との出会いを通して、二人の人生観は変わっていく。おうめ婆さんは、テレビも電話もなければ、トイレさえない不便きわまる住環境を苦にもせず、小さな畑を耕して自給自足し、死も病気もおそれず朗らかに暮らしている。

作者は時代を超越したような老婆の姿を温かく、共感豊かに描きながら、われわれの現在を問い直し、別の人生の可能性を提示している。(NK)

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