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[Book Review]Sarah Bird (2014) : Above the East China Sea

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[Book Review]

Sarah Bird (2014)

*Above the East China Sea*

New York: Alfred A. Knopf (317 pages)

Davinder L. Bhowmik\*

In *Above the East China Sea*, Sarah Bird's widely reviewed ninth novel, the author leaves her comic voice aside to write a somber narrative of war's effect on two young girls, one Okinawan, the other American. Given that the Battle of Okinawa is the uber-theme in postwar Japanese fiction from Okinawa, the opening line of Barbara Fisher's review of Sarah Bird's novel, which made the shortlist in the Sunday Book Review of the *New York Times* initially startled me: "The Battle of Okinawa is a piece of World War II history rarely explored in fiction, especially from the points of view Bird has chosen." In recent years, literature from Okinawa on the Battle, voluminous in Japanese, has steadily become available in English translation, though to my knowledge, none depicts the so-called "Typhoon of Steel" and its aftereffect, the militarization of Okinawa, by employing a narrative that alternates between a young Okinawan girl and her American counterpart. And, while a few works written in Japanese feature well-depicted American characters, such as George in Matayoshi Eiki's "The Wild Boar George Shot," most Americans make only cameo appearances in Okinawan fiction. *Above the East China Sea*, through its alternating stories of Tamiko and Luz, gives equal weight to Americans and Okinawans.

The stories of Tamiko, a 15 year-old Okinawan girl who struggles to survive the Battle, which raged during the spring of 1945, and Luz, a rootless military brat inhabiting the narrative present 70 years after the end of WWII, merge seamlessly in a novel whose innovative structure follows the course of the three days of Obon—Unkei, Nakanuhi, Ūkui—when families in Okinawa welcome the dead. Through the course of the novel, the two girls, who seem initially as polar opposites, reveal themselves to be more similar than dissimilar. In particular, Bird shows Tamiko's and Luz's unquestionable loyalty to their respective older sisters. Ever loyal, Tamiko stays by the side of Hatsuko, a Himeyuri student, ensuring her survival as the girls are pushed southward in the last days of the Battle. For Luz, the rootless child of a military soldier, Codie is her hometown, the anchor she turns to for solace each time she finds herself in yet another military base. Bird's compelling portrait of the siblings' closeness makes ominous Codie's decision to enlist in the Air Force and her subsequent assignment to Afghanistan.

That Sarah Bird has carefully read English translations of Okinawan fiction and poetry is clear from the start of *Above the East China Sea*. Not only is the novel prefaced by an excerpt of a poem by Yonaha Mikio entitled "Ocean of the Dead," but one half of the novel, Tamiko's story, takes the form of a dialogue between mother and unborn child that Yamanoha Nobuko adopts in "Onibi"

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(Will o' the Wisp, 1985). Indeed, the novel is replete with material the author surely gleaned from copious Okinawan studies reference materials, from the island's history and culture to its language and politics. For the most part, Bird subtly incorporates her material into the novel's well rounded, believable characters, avoiding the pedagogic cast that runs through some works of Okinawan literature.<sup>1)</sup> The palpable sense the novel exudes of being in Okinawa comes, perhaps, from Sarah Bird's own experience as a military brat in Okinawa, which baffled her, as she explains in her acknowledgements: "This novel began in 1970 when I was an Air Force dependent strolling around the vast green fairways of a golf course at Kadena Air Base, and I wondered, 'Why, do we get all this space to play a game?'" Even so, the fact that forty-four years have passed since Bird's visit to the island as a young woman makes the realism of the work all the more impressive.

A partial list of the topics from source material Bird incorporates into the novel would include the Tsuji pleasure quarter and *juri*; dialect tags; Okinawa's prewar railroad and contemporary monorail; the sinking of the Tsushima-maru and the battleship Yamato; indigenous spiritual beliefs, *yuta*, *noru*, and *munchu*; imperial ideology and the rhetoric of the "shattering jewel"; comfort women; the "Bush"; bone retrieval campaigns; agent orange and rainbow herbicides; battle hymns; leper colonies; and Onaha Buten, Okinawa's "Chaplin." Okinawan words and phrases abound, too, *mensore*, *haisai*, *nifée deebiru*, and most importantly, *nuchi du takara*, or "life is a treasure," the lesson of war Bird inserts into her dedication, addressed to the people of Okinawa. The sheer breadth of topics on Okinawa and words expressed in Okinawan is astounding, as is the author's incorporation of fine detail, from the Jintan mints Nakamura, a Japanese soldier, enjoys to the A&W restaurant (ubiquitous in Okinawa) where Luz meets with a *yuta*.

So, too is the author's decided emphasis on the Okinawan side of the story. It is easy enough to empathize with the plight of Luz, the teenage American girl, but other Americans or Japanese who desecrate ancestral tombs by doing such things as making them a spectacle or insensitively placing vending machines adjacent to the tombs, are far from admirable. Further, the American military includes many "pill happy doctors," and prewar Okinawa is rife with Tokyo-appointed educators who spout imperial ideology to students, as does the principal of an elementary school in Tamiko's neighborhood. Though she is an American, Luz is of partial Okinawan extraction; thus, the novel tilts decidedly toward her search for, and preservation of, Okinawan familial ties.

Of note, too, is the author's recreation of the natural world in Okinawa, from banana spiders and monkey lizards to dwarf deer and pigs. In the narrative of Tamiko and her unborn child, the reader encounters eels with "blubbery lips" who lure

. . . a rainbow of fish to us in colors dazzling as hand-blown glass. So many different sorts of fish. Fish with scales of yellow, purple, silver, green. Clouds of fish that flashed a neon blue brighter than the lights of Naha. Fish with blue teeth and green lips. Fish striped black and white like prisoners. Fish that never tired of chasing one another about in endless games of tag. Our favorites, though, were the ones that floated stupefied in front of us, as if they had forgotten how to swim. (10)

Readers familiar with "Will o' the Wisp" will recognize echoes of Yamanoha's story in Bird's colorful underwater scenery.

In another vibrant passage Tamiko recalls Okinawa before the Battle:

I see the colors of paradise. The pink of the baby piglets. The gold of the trunks of our bamboo grove. The purple of my mother's sweet potatoes. The yellow of the flowers on the sea hibiscus hedge that lined the path leading to our house. The red of the blossoms on the *deigo* tree, blazing as though the side of the mountain were on fire. The colors sparkle against a background of infinite green. Leaf, vine, grass. Above and below are blue. The ocean is the blue of jewels. The sky is the blue of softness. (4)

The natural world described in the scenes above readily support a reading of the novel as the nostalgic record of a vanishing Okinawa. The shades and hues of the environment in Okinawa that Bird highlights, coupled with half-Okinawan Luz and Tamiko's search for Okinawan relatives, not to mention the largely negative appraisal of Americans and mainland Japanese as entitled, also suggest the author's primary focus lies in Okinawa and its people. Indeed, of the various ways to interpret the novel—a coming of age work; a commemoration of family, or geneology; a ghost story; a romance—the overarching theme of war, be it the Battle of Okinawa or the perpetual wars fought by the American military after WWII, together with Bird's knack for turning out believable characters whom readers grow to love demonstrate that *Above the East China Sea* is first and foremost an anti-war novel. Yes, it is sentimental, but deliciously so. Yes, the intertwining of the girls' narratives is a stretch, but Bird brings the stories together so inventively. As an anti-war novel, it is pitch perfect.

I would be remiss not to mention two of the work's drawbacks. The first is the more minor flaw, something an average English reader would likely not notice. Bird evidently researched some of the personal and place names used in the novel, such as Masaru, which she notes means victory, or Haebaru, glossed meadows of southerly winds. Unfortunately, at least two of the surnames Bird chooses—Furusato and Medoruma—are peculiar and would raise eyebrows in a Japanese translation.<sup>2)</sup> So, too, would the village name Madadayo, which Bird settles on for the origins of the Kokuba family. The title of film director Akira Kurosawa's 1993 swan song *Madadayo*, or “Not yet,” refers to the protagonist's determination to live, and while this idea is thematically related to Bird's novel, prefaced as it is with “Life is a treasure,” those who know the geography of Okinawa and Kurosawa's film may experience a clash of cultures. All other place names appear to match actual locales in Okinawa, which further enshrouds Madadayo with a veil of mysticism this largely realistic novel eschews.

The second shortcoming is Bird's innumerable references to Tamiko's feet as broad, splayed, or wide. Granted, Tamiko's rootedness to Okinawa stands in stark contrast to her sister Hatsuko, whose gaze looks ever upward to the lofty and “pure” Japanese soldier Nakamura, whom she admires as a consummate soldier faithful to the emperor. Stressing this point in the novel once or twice helps Bird clarify the difference between the siblings; however, her multiple references to Tamiko's physical features—withered and brown feet, wavy hair, guppy-like demeanor—when cast as Okinawan in contrast to Japanese, only serves to exacerbate differences, which can often become the basis for rampant discrimination toward Okinawans, as in the prefecture's prewar period.

### *Above the East China Sea*

In spite of the few odd names that crop up in the novel and the more problematic overemphasis on Okinawan difference, *Above the East China Sea* is an absorbing read. Its characters linger in the mind long after the novel is over, and the reader comes to understand Bird's confusion over why the American military is permitted acres upon acres of lawn to play a game of golf when so many in Okinawa live cheek to jowl. Sarah Bird's novel goes a long way toward rectifying the gap in the American public's knowledge about the huge loss of life in the Battle of Okinawa in the spring of 1945. Her fine writing ensures that the island's decimation will stand alongside the globally-known tragedies of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the total casualties of which she notes are fewer than the lesser-known Battle of Okinawa.

As a specialist on modern Japanese literature in the United States, I must admit the novel, with its broad sweep and its three-dimensional characters, surprised me. The work left me wondering why relatively few lengthy works of serious fiction are published by authors in Okinawa. To be sure, the fact that Bird previously published eight novels allowed Alfred A. Knopf, the premier publisher of fiction in America, to take a chance on *Above the East China Sea*. What's more, writers of serious fiction in Okinawa no doubt have constraints ranging from finding the time to write full time, still a luxury for a precious few, to convincing publishers in Tokyo to take on fiction that presents the complexity of Okinawa, beginning with its entangled geopolitical position to its language variation and religious practices. It may be wishful to think that with the publication *and* translation into Japanese of more works like *Above the East China Sea*, which bridges the divide between American and Okinawan literature, writers in Okinawa and beyond may aspire to write about the island just as Bird did after reading English translations of poetry and fiction from Okinawa. In any case, *Above the East China Sea* is a novel deserving of translation. Once available in Japanese, it may serve as a springboard for other, as yet untold, stories.

#### **Notes**

- 1) Ōshiro Tatsuhiro's *The Cocktail Party* is a case in point. Throughout this novella and other of the author's works, the narrator educates the reader about the history of Okinawa, its language, and culture.
- 2) *Furusato*, or one's hometown, while a common enough Japanese word, is not a surname. Medoruma, which Bird surely chooses because it belongs to the contemporary writer Medoruma Shun, whose works she admires (personal communication), is also not a Japanese surname. It is the Okinawan author's pseudonym.

#### **Reference**

Fisher, Barbara. (2014, August 8). World War II Lit. [Sarah Bird's *Above the East China Sea*, and More]. *New York Times*.