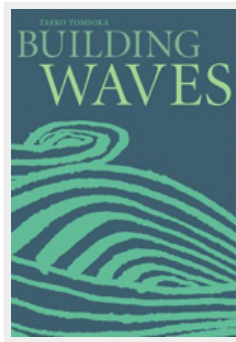


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Reviews



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## BUILDING WAVES

by *Taeko Tomioka*

Translated from the Japanese by Louise Heal Kawai

Reviewed by **Jouce Nickel**

First published in Japan almost thirty years ago and now translated into English this year, *Building Waves* is a fictional and highly symbolic look at the social changes washing over Japan in the early 1980s. These changes include women moving out of their traditional roles, the expansion of homes into mountain and forest areas, and the explosive growth of car culture.

The novel opens with the first-person narrator, Kyoko, as she begins an affair with a man who she soon concludes is a frustratingly poor conversationalist. Kyoko is a married forty-something woman, who along with her husband has chosen not to have children. She rarely mentions her husband or their relationship. She doesn't mention her paramour's name either, and refers to him simply as "the man." She knows few personal details about the man, and he thus becomes a symbol of all traditional Japanese males. There is no doubt that from the beginning she thinks of the man as a humourless dolt, and it's a mystery why she chooses to spend the claustrophobic first one-third of the book in cars and hotel rooms struggling to drag conversation out of him. After Kyoko finally abandons the affair, she says "I completely forgot about the man. All I felt was a sensation of freedom, a release from the confined space of his car and from him."


Except she doesn't really forget him, because on the next page her younger single friend Kumiko begins an affair with the same man, who we finally learn has a name: Katsumi. Their affair soon gets messy, as Kumiko also strikes up a relationship with Katsumi's wife, Ayako. She and Ayako join The Veggie Club, which on paper appears to be a way to buy and share organic produce. In practice, however, it feels like a cult, complete with obsessed devotees and members who zealously attempt to recruit more members. Kyoko watches in horror as her friend storms headfirst into this couple's life and it is clear that it can't end well.

The stifling atmosphere from the beginning of the book lifts in the second half, and the author introduces an array of characters who have names and stories. As Kyoko interacts with her varied women friends, she scatters astute observations of the role of women in Japanese culture. The author paints a particularly sympathetic picture of Yoko, whose life is balanced on a cliff, both in the figurative and real sense.

I have to admit that my lack of exposure to Japanese culture limits my understanding of the symbolism in this novel. For example, the characters often go to the mountains and forests to see new building projects, and while there they also visit archaeological excavations of ancient Jomon sites. This is not simply a commentary of the current population's expansion and destruction of nature, but also of their moving into areas last inhabited thousands of years ago. The author is clearly making an important connection between the Stone Age Jomon and the modern Japanese, but I'm not sure exactly what it is. And although I puzzled at some of the things that the author includes (such as an amusing and detailed two-page description of the narrator's childhood experience with roundworms) and conversely, the things she excludes (location names,

for example, are referred to as K— or Z—), I found this look at Japanese life fascinating and enlightening. *Building Waves* was specially selected for the Japanese Literature Publishing Project, an endeavour with the goal of demonstrating the richness and diversity of modern Japanese literature.

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