

Literature critic John Nathan dissects Japan's Nobel Prize laureates

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John Nathan

There is one critic of Japanese literature that towers above the rest: professor John Nathan, erstwhile associate of Yukio Mishima, Kenzaburo Oe and Kobo Abe. But he's not only a respected critic, Nathan's extraordinary career has seen him in the roles of film director, scriptwriter, novelist and memoirist, and his translations of Oe's novels did much to assist that writer on his path to receiving the Nobel Prize in 1994.

Now aged 75 and living in Santa Barbara, California, Nathan has a long career to look back on. I ask him about his early days in Japan in the 1960s and '70s, his role in helping to establish the reputations of many important Japanese writers in the West and, of course, the Nobel Prize.

Some suspect that in order to win the prize, translators and publishers have to woo the Nobel Committee on behalf of their author. I was surprised to discover that Nathan had hardly been in contact with Oe in the decade before the award was announced.

“Though I can’t say this with certainty, it is my strong sense that the Nobel Prize Committee is impervious to lobbying,” Nathan says. “Why was Oe chosen? Perhaps because the committee had been able to sample his work up to ‘The Silent Cry’ in relatively flavorful translations. Luckily for Oe, the ghastly translation of [his first full-length novel] ‘Pluck the Flowers, Gun the Kids,’ came later.”

Woe betide the author or translator — regardless of reputation — who fails to measure up to Nathan’s exacting standards.

Nathan’s first major literary translation, published when he was only 25, was Mishima’s “The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea.” Delighted with it, Mishima wanted Nathan to be the translator who would help him win the Nobel Prize and was crestfallen when Nathan decided to translate for archrival Oe instead.

The relationship between Mishima and Nathan was abruptly severed, but four years after Mishima’s death in 1970, Nathan published a classic biography of the controversial writer. I wondered whether Nathan felt that Mishima might not have taken his own life had he won the Nobel Prize.

“I somehow doubt it,” Nathan says. “After all, the prize did not prevent [Yasunari] Kawabata from taking his own life, and Mishima certainly hadn’t lived his life without recognition, yet none of the lavish international

attention he had garnered had enabled him to feel whole or fully alive. I believe he was devastated when his mentor, Kawabata, won, though he hid his feelings about it. That scalding disappointment may have contributed to his descent into self-destruction. I'm not sure that winning would have had the opposite effect."

I wondered then, which of the great Japanese writers did Nathan think *truly* deserved to win the Nobel Prize.

"The Nobel Prize selection process is highly subjective and produces hit and miss results," he says. "One must wonder, for example, about recent winners such as Gao Xingjian, Alice Munro, and Tomas Tranströmer. On the other hand there are laureates on the list who seem beyond question: Thomas Mann, Saul Bellow, Steinbeck, Faulkner, Gunter Grass, etc."

For Nathan, these writers not only produced hugely important novels but are immortal because they continue to show us who we are.

"I don't think Mishima belongs with the greats," he says. "He was prolific — one measure of genius — clever, brilliant even. But in my view his work was marred by a certain artificiality: Mishima characters tend to dangle lifelessly from the strings of his ideas about them — they aren't genuine or true to life and consequently they mostly fail to move us."

Kawabata doesn't measure up to Nathan's standards either.

"The great novelists are great architects," he says, "their best works are grand edifices brilliantly envisioned and designed. Kawabata was a miniaturist: his work could be inscribed on the head of a pin. Western readers were beguiled by what they took to be the quintessence of 'Japaneseness' in his art, its indefinite, implicit, shadowy nature — think of 'Snow Country.'" "

And Oe? Nathan was an avid Oe reader and the potential he saw in the writer left him breathless — he once believed Oe would evolve into the Faulkner of

Japan.

“Alas, he never managed a novel equal in scale and dramatic power to ‘Light in August,’” Nathan says. “Nonetheless, his early works in particular, ‘Prize Stock,’ ‘Pluck the Flowers, Gun the Kids,’ ‘A Personal Matter,’ etc., were stunningly original, vividly imagined, great. So on the promise of this early work I think the (Nobel Prize) committee made a choice the world can accept.”

And then the conversation turned to newer writers. Would Haruki Murakami ever win? Nathan concedes that Murakami is prolific, original and a grand designer.

“But why can’t I shake the feeling that he’d rather be clever than profound?” Nathan asks. “He could easily win the prize and is certainly a more important novelist than many others who already have.”

Nathan berates me for failing to ask about Natsume Soseki, the great Meiji Era (1868-1912) author whose final unfinished masterpiece “Light and Dark” has recently been translated by Nathan into English, and he is also working on a biography of the writer.

“You didn’t ask, but I will say that in my view, Soseki was a greater writer than any of these others — *he* deserved a Nobel Prize.”

Damian Flanagan is the author of “Yukio Mishima” published by Reaktion Books and “Natsume Soseki: Superstar of World Literature” published in Japanese by Kodansha International. This is the second installment in a three-part series on Japan’s Nobel Prize winners.