



Japanese Readers Turn to Classic Literature, Sci-Fi Amid Coronavirus Pandemic

Amid the chaos stirred by the new coronavirus crisis, *The Betrothed* (published by Kawade Bunko), a 19th-century Italian classic literature regarded as a “hidden masterpiece,” is garnering attention in Japan. The novel, written by Alessandro Manzoni (1785~1873), illustrates the fear and anxiety society faced during the plague that struck Italy in the 17th century. It is becoming a hot topic because of the story’s many similar depictions and lessons which reflect our world today.

Other classic literary works that deal with plagues, as well as Japanese novels with unknown virus themes, are also being read.

A Work of National Literature

“I believe *The Betrothed* is the most interesting novel ever written,” says Sukehiro Hirakawa, professor emeritus at the University of Tokyo, 88, who translated the Italian novel.

The Betrothed tells the story of Renzo, who attempts to marry his fiancée, Lucia, but a feudal lord who wants Lucia for himself threatens him, saying that he “will not live if he weds her.” The two lovers flee the town and set off on an escape journey full of hardships.

Although it is a tumultuous love story, it also paints a vivid picture of social conditions and the lives of people during the 17th century. The novel’s depiction of the plague-stricken society falling into panic overlaps with current scenes of the worldwide coronavirus pandemic that continues to spread across the globe.

Hirakawa, who is known for his translation work of Dante’s narrative poem, *The Divine Comedy*, received the Yomiuri Prize for Literature for his Japanese translation of *The Betrothed*, which was first published in 1983 (1989 in Japanese). Including the paperback edition, which was published in 2006, the book’s total circulation was just over 40,000 copies. In Japan, it was regarded as a “hidden masterpiece.”

However, it is a completely different story in the author’s homeland of Italy. According to Hirakawa, in Italy the novel is considered to be a national literary work of art that stands parallel to *The Divine Comedy*. He states that the work is so well-known that “there is not a single Italian who has never read the book.”

The novel recently became a hot topic because of a message that was projected in Italy, where presently the country is suffering deeply from the massive outbreak of the coronavirus disease.

Book Out of Stock in Stores

In late February, Domenico Squillace, the principal of Volta High School where Milan’s brightest attend, published a letter addressed to the students on the school’s website. Squillace quoted excerpts from *The Betrothed* and stated the similarities between the social order of the past plague and the situation at hand.

[GO TO THE NEXT PAGE]

“The conviction in the danger of foreigners, the relentless search for the so-called patient zero, the contempt for experts, the groundless rumors, the raid on basic necessities… The chaos in the 17th century, which was illustrated in Manzoni’s *The Betrothed*, seems to have emerged from the very pages of our newspapers today,” Squillace wrote.

Moreover, he addressed his students, saying, “Modern medicine is on our side. Let us believe in it and let us use rational thought so that we may preserve our social structure.”

Through SNS, Squillace’s message circulated around the world. The novel is selling out in bookstores across Japan, and reservations for the book are accumulating in some libraries. In response to this situation, Japanese publishing house Kawade Shobo decided this month that they would print an additional 4,500 copies of the three volumes of the paperback edition. Because of a string of inquiries from bookstores and readers, the publishing house is considering further additional reprints as well.

Hirakawa says the novel’s vivid description of the plague is written with great influence from *The Decameron*, a collection of novellas from the 14th century. The latter book, written by medieval Italian author, Giovanni Boccaccio, is a story containing 100 humorously told tales, narrated by a group of 10 men and women who fled plague-ridden Florence. It tells their story of attempting to keep each other company while fighting off the shadow of death during their time of seclusion.

Hirakawa, who also translated *The Decameron*, says, “Although the book also contains erotic scenes, it illustrates conflicts with existence, and provides a superb description of the complex nature of human beings who tend to want to laugh when facing troubled times. There is so much we can learn from classic literature that people have been reading for centuries.”

Sales Soaring for ‘The Plague’ and ‘The Pandemic’

Many are also picking up French novelist Albert Camus’s 1947 book, *The Plague* (Shincho Bunko). The novel tells the story of doctors and their struggles and achievements in a port town in Algeria, which has been quarantined due to the plague. Shinchosha Publishing Co, Ltd. decided to print a total of 34,000 additional copies in three segments after mid-February.

Furthermore, 5,000 additional copies will be printed of English writer Daniel Defoe’s 1722 work, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (Chuko Bunko), which tells the lives of citizens living in London who have been placed under extreme conditions due to the Great Plague of London.

A Japanese novel with an unknown virus theme is also going viral. First published in 2010, Tetsuo Takashima’s *The Pandemic* (Shuto Kansen, Kodansha Bunko publisher, digital or paperback in Japanese), will also have an additional 34,000 paperback copies printed.

The novel is about a deadly flu-like virus with a fatality rate of 60% that developed in China during the soccer World Cup games. China tries to contain the virus but fails, and it spreads to Tokyo, finally bringing the city into a lockdown. Word got around on the internet that the details in the book were similar to the current global situation. The book is hard to get a hold of, having already sold out in some stores.

[GO TO THE NEXT PAGE]



In late February, it was also announced that a natural disaster mystery novel by Ryo Honami, *Fly Me to the Earth* (Tsuki No Otoshigo, Hayakawa Shobo publisher), will also be reprinted. The book is about an astronaut who contracts a deadly unknown virus. As he is flying a lunar explorer spacecraft, the astronaut loses control and crashes into a residential skyscraper located in Funabashi City, Chiba Prefecture. The shocking story sees the division of society as the disease spreads. The book won the 2019 Agatha Christie Award, a mystery novel rookie of the year award in Japan, and continues to make sales steadily around the Chiba vicinity.

Representatives of several of the publishing houses expressed the sentiment that the sudden burst of interest in the books was “honestly unexpected,” or that they had “mixed feelings” about it. However, they also pointed out several positive factors, including the universal appeal of these works, the trend toward “an opportunity to learn from history,” and the fact that people can acquire a sense of “salvation” from reading the books.

Source: **Japanese Readers Turn to Classic Literature, Sci-Fi Amid Coronavirus Pandemic**
<http://japan-forward.com/japanese-readers-turn-to-classic-literature-sci-fi-amid-coronavirus-pandemic/>

新型コロナ拡大で注目されるイタリア古典文学 変わらぬ人間心理の妙

新型コロナウイルスの影響で混乱が続く中、日本では「隠れた名作」とされる19世紀のイタリア文学「いいなづけ」（河出文庫）が注目されている。作家アレッサンドロ・マンゾーニ（1785～1873年）が書いた同作は、17世紀のペスト流行に伴い社会が不安に襲われる様子が描かれ、現代に通じる描写や教訓が多いと話題に。同じくペストを扱った古典作品や、未知のウイルスをテーマにした日本の小説も読まれている。

「国民的文学作品」

「私は『いいなづけ』が一番面白い小説だと思っていますよ」

同作を翻訳した東京大名誉教授の平川祐弘さん（88）はこう語る。

主人公の若者レンツォがいいなづけのルチアと結婚式を挙げようとするが、横恋慕した領主に「式を挙げれば命はない」と脅される。ひそかに村を脱出した2人は、苦難に満ちた逃避行に出る。山あり谷ありの恋愛物語である一方、当時の社会情勢や人々の暮らしも活写。とりわけ、ペストによりパニックに陥る大衆の姿は、世界規模で広がり続ける現代の新型コロナウイルス感染下での風景と重なってみえる。

ダンテ「神曲」の翻訳などで知られる平川さんは、平成元年刊行の「いいなづけ」の翻訳で読売文学賞などを受賞。ただ、18年刊行の文庫版を含めても、同作の累計発行部数は計4万部超。日本国内ではあくまで「隠れた名作」扱いだった。

しかし、本国イタリアでは状況は全く異なる。平川さんによると、イタリアで同作は「神曲」と並ぶ国民的作品。「読んでいないイタリア人はいない」といえるほどの作品だという。

同作が最近話題になったきっかけも、現在新型コロナウイルスの感染拡大に苦しむイタリアでの、あるメッセージだった。

書店の在庫切れ相次ぐ

「外国人を危険だと思い込むこと、感染源の（執拗な）搜索、専門家の軽視、根拠のない噂話、必需品の買いあさり…。マンゾーニの『いいなづけ』に記された17世紀の混乱は、まるで今日の新聞のページから飛び出したようだ」

ミラノの秀才が集まるボルタ高校のドメニコ・スキラーチェ校長は2月下旬、同校の公式サイトで同作の一部を引用し、過去のペスト流行時と現在の社会状況に通じる点があると指摘。そのうえで、「今の私たちには進歩した現代医学がある。これを信頼し、合理的思考で社会を守ろう」などと学生に呼びかけた。

このメッセージがSNSなどを通じて世界に拡散。日本の書店でも在庫切れが相次ぎ、一部の図書館でも予約が集中している。こうした状況を受け、河出書房新社は今月、文庫版（計3巻）の4500部の増刷を決定。書店や読者からの問い合わせが相次いでいることから、増刷の上乗せも検討しているという。

平川さんによると、「いいなづけ」作中のペストの描写は、14世紀の物語集「デカメロン」に強い影響を受けているという。中世イタリアの作家ボッカチオが記した同作は、ペストの流行から逃れたフィレンツェの男女10人が、面白おかしい話で迫りくる死の影を追い払おうと100の物語を語り合うという内容。

《次ページに続く》



同作の日本語訳も手掛けた平川さんは、「エロチックな場面もあるが、生命に対する葛藤や、つらい時だからこそ笑いたくなる」という複雑な人間心理の妙が見事に描かれている。何百年も読み継がれる古典から学ぶことは多い」と話す。

「ペスト」「首都感染」も売れ行き好調

仏作家カミュの「ペスト」（新潮文庫）も今読まれている。同作はペスト感染により封鎖されたアルジェリアの港町で奮闘する医師らの活躍を描いた小説。新潮社は2月半ば以降に3回、計3万4千部の増刷を決めた。また、極限状況下におかれたロンドン市民らの姿を描写した英作家デフォーの「ペスト」（中公文庫）も、約5千部の増刷を決めた。

未知のウイルスをテーマとした日本の小説も話題に。作家の高嶋哲夫さんが平成22年に発表し、文庫化もされた「首都感染」（講談社文庫）は、計3万4千部の増刷を決めた。

同作は、サッカー・ワールドカップが開催された中国で致死率60%の強毒性インフルエンザが発生し、中国当局の封じ込めが破綻。東京都内にも患者が発生し、ついに「東京封鎖」作戦が始まる」という内容だ。現在の状況と似ている点もあることがインターネット上で話題を呼び、書店によっては売り切れで購入できないケースもある。

災害ミステリー「月の落とし子」（穂波了著、早川書房）も2月末に重版がかかった。同作は、正体不明の致死性ウイルスに感染した宇宙飛行士が乗る有人月探査船がコントロールを失い、千葉県船橋市のタワーマンションに直撃。ウイルス渦が広がり、人々は分断される」というショッキングな内容だ。昨年のミステリー新人賞「アガサ・クリスティー賞」受賞作で、千葉を中心にじわじわと売れ続けている。

各社の担当者は「正直、想定外です」「複雑な気持ちですが…」と戸惑いながらも、これらの作品が持つ普遍的な魅力や、「歴史に学ぶ機運」の高まり、作品を読むことで「救い」を得られる点などを指摘している。

出典:新型コロナ拡大で注目されるイタリア古典文学 変わらぬ人間心理の妙

<http://japan-forward.com/japanese/新型コロナ拡大で注目されるイタリア古典文学%e3%80%80/>