
Literary Responses to Disaster

Responses to Japan's earthquake and tsunami, 5 years on



This year marks the **5th anniversary of the magnitude 9.0 quake** which struck northeastern Japan on March 11, 2011, causing the nation's biggest tsunami in centuries and the subsequent explosion of a nuclear power plant. This triple disaster is known in Japan as "**3.11**". **Tamaki Tokita**, a doctoral candidate at **University of Sydney**, is about to complete her PhD on literary responses to 3.11. Five years on, she provides insight into how the disaster affected the **literary world in Japan**.

The literary response to 3.11 was almost immediate. Five days after the disaster, Fukushima poet and high school teacher **Ryoichi Wago** began to share glimpses of his experience as a nuclear evacuee from tsunami-ravaged Minami-Soma City on **Twitter**. "Radiation is falling. It is a quiet night."

Working with Twitter's 140-character limit, Wago's posts transcended the cold facts and figures of media coverage in the immediate aftermath: his pithy yet powerful vignettes laid bare the complex emotional responses of someone who has suddenly found themselves in the heart of a disaster. Transmitted instantaneously via social media at a time when Japan was still raw and reeling, his words resonated with his four followers at the time, who shared them. His followers grew and his Twitter poems quickly spread across the nation: Wago

became the representative voice of the disaster zone, and is now followed by 26,561 Twitter users.

In the months and years that followed, literary responses continued to emerge. But unlike Wago, the majority of the writers were from Tokyo and had little to no first-hand experience within the disaster zone. This speaks to a strong sense of proximity to the disaster among people in Tokyo, although they were unharmed by the tsunami and over 200 kms away from the mandatory evacuation zone. There was an especially significant response from fiction authors, who reimagined the disaster in terms of scale, context and consequence. To date, at least 38 books inspired by 3.11 have been commercially published in Japan, and 25 of these are novels.

Says Tamaki Tokita, “What’s interesting about 3.11 literature is not only the volume and speed of literary responses to the disaster, but also the nature of the responses. After the last two major earthquakes in Japan—the Hanshin earthquake in 1995 and the Kanto earthquake in 1923—Japanese literary responses were mostly limited to non-fiction works which sought to document people’s first-hand experiences. However, with 3.11, the responses are more imaginative: what we’re seeing most is fiction, with narratives centering on either dystopian futures or Shinto-inspired ideas of divine retribution.”

“Following 3.11, nuclear power experts described the disaster as “unforeseeable”, or “beyond imagination”. It was observed that perhaps such experts lack the imagination to foresee and prepare for large disasters. The imaginative nature of post-3.11 literary fiction allows it to contribute to the debate on how Japan should move forward from the disaster or prepare for a similar one in the future, in a way that is not possible in factual discourse.”

*Tamaki Tokita will give a free public talk, [‘3.11 in Literature and Film’](#), at The Japan Foundation, Sydney on **April 15 (Friday), 6:30pm – 7:30pm**, exploring how 3.11 has manifested in the popular imagination, and giving insight into the latest literary developments in Japan.*

*This talk is part of a broader event program titled, [After 3.11: Have you met the new Japan?](#), commemorating the 5th anniversary of the earthquake and tsunami. **After 3.11** runs March 1 – April 15 and includes an exhibition, film screening and further talks.*

PROGRAM DETAILS

After 3.11: Have you met the new Japan?

[EXHIBITION]

March 1 – April 15 *Icons of Time* by Tomohiro Muda

Gallery Hours

Monday – Friday: 10am – 6pm

Selected Saturdays (March 19, April 9): 10am – 3pm

Closed Sundays & public holidays

Admission is free.

[DEMONSTRATION]

March 10 **Obori Soma Ware: Rebuilding Kiln & Kin**
Masanori Sue (Ceramicist) & Takeshi Matsunaga (Speaker)

6:30pm – 7:30pm (doors open 6pm) @ The Japan Foundation, Sydney.

Admission is free. RSVP essential (via website).

[TALKS]

March 18 **AfterLandscapes: Designing in Uncertainty**
Marieluse Jonas (RMIT University)

April 1 **The New Wave of Activist Culture in Post-3.11 Japan**
Akihiro Ogawa (Melbourne University)

April 15 **3.11 in Literature and Film**
Tamaki Tokita (University of Sydney)

6:30pm – 7:30pm (doors open 6pm) @ The Japan Foundation, Sydney.

Admission is free. RSVP essential (via website).

Free CHOYA tastings available at venue.

[FILM]

April 8 ***Tell the Prime Minister*** (2015; 109 mins; Japanese with English subtitles)
Feat. Q&A with director Eiji Oguma

6:30pm (doors open 6pm) @ University of Technology Sydney (Bldg 2, Lecture theatre 3.02)

Admission is free. RSVP essential (via website).

Venues: [EXHIBITION, DEMONSTRATION & TALKS]

The Japan Foundation, Sydney
Level 4, Central Park (access via lifts)
28 Broadway, Chippendale NSW 2008

[FILM]

University of Technology, Sydney (UTS)

Building 2, Lecture Theatre 3.02 (via UTS main entrance, Broadway)

Admission: Admission is free.

RSVP essential for talks, film and opening reception.

RSVP via website.

Enquiries: reception@jpf.org.au / 02 8239 0055

Website/RSVP: www.jpf.org.au



Free CHOYA tastings available on talk nights

ABOUT TAMAKI TOKITA



Tamaki Tokita is a postgraduate teaching fellow in Japanese Studies and Comparative Literature at University of Sydney. She recently submitted her PhD thesis on 3.11 literature, examining representations of the Japanese national character in Japanese, English and French literary responses to 3.11. Prior to her PhD, Tamaki worked on several research projects at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, and also has extensive experience as a Japanese-language translator. She is currently working on a book on 3.11 literature.

ABOUT RYOICHI WAGO

Ryoichi Wago was born in 1968 in Fukushima City, Fukushima Prefecture, Japan. He was a high school teacher at a school in Fukushima's Minami-Soma City at the time of 3.11. Minami-Soma City was one of the areas hardest hit by the tsunami, and was designated as a mandatory evacuation zone following the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant explosions. Wago was a prize-winning published poet prior to the disaster, having released his first solo anthology in 1998. His 3.11 poems have since been released in book form in Japan. Find more information about Wago's 3.11 tweets [here](#).

ABOUT 3.11

On March 11, 2011 a magnitude 9.0 quake struck Japan, causing the nation's biggest tsunami in over a millennium. The wave hit the northeastern Tōhoku region, destroying thousands of homes and sparking the explosion of a nuclear power plant in coastal Fukushima. This triple disaster of earthquake, tsunami and plant explosion is known in Japan as "3.11". Five years on, the effects still echo in the physical, civil and artistic landscape. The *After 3.11* program shines a spotlight on some of these changes.

3.11 LITERATURE BOOK LIST (ENGLISH)

Below is a list of works on 3.11 in English, from both Japan and abroad. Note that the majority of works available in English are non-fiction.

A Tale for the Time Being (Ruth Ozeki, 2013; fiction)

Granta 127: Japan (Spring 2014; fiction & essays)

Japanese Earthquake, Tsunami and Nuclear Meltdown (Elmer & Karashima (eds), 2012; non-fiction)

March was Made of Yarn: Reflections on the Facing the Wave: A Journey in the Wake of the Tsunami (Gretel Ehrlich, 2013; non-fiction)

Bending Adversity (David Pilling, 2014; non-fiction)

Strong in the Rain (Lucy Birmingham & David McNeill, 2012; non-fiction)

3.11: Disaster and Change in Japan (Richard J. Samuels, 2013; non-fiction)

ABOUT THE JAPAN FOUNDATION, SYDNEY

The Japan Foundation, Sydney is the Australian arm of the Japan Foundation, which was established by the Japanese government to promote cultural and intellectual exchange between Japan and other nations. It runs a diverse range of programs and events, including exhibitions, talk events, grant programs and Japanese language courses for all levels from beginner to advanced. The Japan Foundation was established in 1972 with a global network of 22 offices in 21 countries. The Australian office was founded in 1978.



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For more information please see www.jpf.org.au or contact:

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