

Japan is his oyster

Decades in Tokyo made Donald Richie the writer he is today



ROBERT FULFORD
Notebook

Donald Richie, who writes shrewd, witty books about Japan, originally settled there because the western side of the Pacific was as far as he could get from Lima, Ohio. When he arrived with the U.S. Occupation in the 1940s he was a melancholy 23-year-old hoping to forget his constricted, loveless background in the Midwest. Japan saved him. It made him a terrific writer and a man of the world. Now he's 80, and his latest book, *The Japan Journals: 1947-2004* (Stone Bridge Press), describes more than half a century lived as an expatriate in Tokyo.

He's known in the West mainly as a film critic, a biographer of film directors and a writer of books like *A Hundred Years of*

Japanese Film. But that's only half his career. He's also an all-purpose cultural commentator, what the Germans call a *Kulturkritiker*, capable of writing on Japanese cookery, Zen gardens, the body-covering tattoos favoured by sushi chefs and (Topic A among expatriates) the Japanese people themselves, individually and collectively. In three visits to Japan I've found no other writer who says so much that's helpful and revealing. And I've encountered nowhere else an author who can negotiate cultural and social mysteries with as much style as Richie.

He's also written novels, taught American literature, subtitled movies into English, organized retrospectives for film festivals, sold advice to Japanese film companies and served as both a ghost writer and an editor. He's painted, performed on the piano and directed plays as well as documentary films.

He long ago learned how to speak Japanese well enough to chat with the empress but, like many foreigners who spend decades in Japan, he can't read or write it. "Lazy," he explains. This means he's unable to read even the local papers, but fortunately Tokyo, always welcoming to foreigners, has four English-language dailies, three not bad and one (the *Japan Times*, for which Richie has often written) pretty good.

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self why, fleeing conformity, he settled in the world's most conformist country. Because, he answers, Japan doesn't require outsiders to obey local customs. The Japanese expect foreigners to remain foreign, which suits Richie. "I am not Japanese. If I were I would never stay here — it is much worse than where I came from."

His sexuality deepens his status as an outsider, though not among people in his profession. As he writes, "many of the foreign Japan specialists living here are homosexual." Early in life, he learned that his tastes were both heterosexual and homosexual. He was married for five years and had affairs with women, but his journals emphasize male lovers.

Love leads him to some curious experiences in several regions of Japanese life. He makes it clear that he's on easy terms with hustlers, labourers and prostitutes as well as film directors, musicians and actors. At the drunken country wedding party of a former boyfriend, a construction worker, Richie sees the bride, a bar hostess, scrutinizing him with suspicion; she has guessed that he was more than a casual friend of her groom.

He's a self-proclaimed non-joiner, anxious not to be classified. When asked why he hasn't publicly declared he's gay, Richie explains that it's stupid to base personal identity on sexual preference. "If a person comes out, he proclaims his belief that he is only one thing, has never been and could not ever be another." Besides, he says, he was never in, so didn't need to come out. He hates the concept of "gay," which he considers tribal.

His journals reflect growing disillusionment with Japan. He was

writer, who staged a melodramatic suicide in 1970, leading a gang of neo-fascists in a hostage-taking before committing *suppuku*. Mishima hated the pragmatic, conciliatory attitudes of modern Japan. He mourned imperial glory even if the emperor didn't. "Japan is gone, vanished, disappeared," Mishima said. "Nothing left to save."

If you take out the part about the empire, Richie sympathizes. He loved poor post-war Japan but found rich, consumption-crazed Japan hard to stomach. He dislikes so much greed and such swift changes. He thinks maybe affection for Japan follows what he calls the three stages of the ordinary marriage: euphoria, disappointment and indifference.

Contemplating Japan's faults can bring out the bore in even a clever observer. On other subjects Richie surprises us with his insights, but when he turns to pining for the old ways he sounds like the dullest cultural attaché in town. If Japan remained unchanged for long he would no doubt complain about its somnolence as much as he complains now about its manic energy.

Experienced Richie readers won't be surprised that he fills his diary with gossip. His genial habit of guiding authors and other eminences around town, which he acquired as a young man in the 1950s, gives him plenty of material. In 1959 he talks to the 85-year-old Somerset Maugham: "I had been told there were two topics not to be even brushed against. Sex and death. He was too far from one, too near the other."

amous writers: Stephen Spender, Angus Wilson and Alberto Moravia. Recruited as their guide, Richie realizes they all want sex homo for Angus and Stephen, hetero for Alberto. His report on their visit becomes a ribald comedy, starring Moravia as a demanding sullen grump. Martin Scorsese whose films Richie loves, gets pinned like a butterfly in his collection: "Intelligent and frantic, all eyes and tics and malaise, smiling, and frowning at the same time."

In the 1990s Richie turns his mind to life's ending. He attends a party for a director who made pretty bad movies but evolved into a grand old man. "If you last long enough everyone becomes a grand old man," Richie says. "I am turning into one myself." He suspects the next stage can't be too far ahead. "We have an allotted time."

He fears hanging around too long; it's like staying late at a party, after the weary hostess has looked at her watch and mentioned a heavy day tomorrow. But how does one control such things? "The only problem is arranging the exit." Is he thinking that this requires a specifically Japanese solution? He leaves us wondering.

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