

# Book Review

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## Tokyo Days And Nights

*Donald Richie skewers some cultural hotshots who have visited Japan.*

### THE JAPAN JOURNALS, 1947-2004

By Donald Richie.

Edited by Leza Lowitz.

Illustrated. 494 pp. Stone Bridge Press. \$29.95.

By LESLEY DOWNER

**I**N 1955, Donald Richie, a gregarious 31-year-old who had been living in Japan for eight years, was asked to show Truman Capote around Tokyo. Capote was there to interview Marlon Brando, who was filming a movie near Kyoto. Like the characters in Sofia

Coppola's film "Lost in Translation," Capote had little interest in this exotic country and mostly hung around his hotel room, complaining of boredom. Richie, as he recalls in his journal, ran out of patience: " 'I don't see why you came here anyway,' I finally said. He looked at me, wonderingly. 'Why to do Brando, of course.' 'Not to see Japan?' 'Why no,' he said, as though mystified that anyone should think anything so unlikely."

Richie has been engaged in the "unlikely" pursuit of seeing Japan for nearly 60 years now. In fact, as "The Japan Journals, 1947-2004" (edited by the writer and translator Leza Lowitz) makes plain, he has become that country's foremost foreign-born observer. Richie knows or has known nearly every great Japanese cultural figure of his era, from Yasunari Kawabata to Akira Kurosawa — as well as most eminent Westerners who happened to be passing through. He has shared regular gym workouts with Yukio Mishima, attended a geisha party given by Francis Ford Coppola and taken Susan Sontag to a live sex show (which she declared to be "about as erotic as a cake bake-off"). Everyone who is engaged in a cultural way with Japan — myself included — has spent time in the company of this wise, irreverent, hugely knowledgeable and charmingly modest man.

Japan is the material out of which Richie fashions his art. He has written dozens of books, including travelogues ("The Inland Sea") and novels ("Memoirs of the Warrior Kumagai" and "Tokyo Nights"), and he is an authority on Japanese film. In volumes of essays, he has described some of the extraordinary people he has met and has shared his insights into his adopted country — but in his journals these observations have an added immediacy.

When Richie arrived in 1947 with the American occupation forces, Tokyo was in ruins. Although he was employed as a typist and then writer and film critic for The Pacific Stars and Stripes, he soon discovered that he much preferred mixing with the "indigenous personnel" to sitting through "movies with the G.I.'s and bingo night at the American Club." The fact that fraternizing with the Japanese was forbidden only made it more attractive. Eventually, the restrictions of the occupation eased, and when most other Americans left, Richie stayed on. Japan became his home.

In the early years, he was frequently called upon to entertain visiting cultural luminaries, almost all of whom took the Capote approach, treating Japan as a stage on which to parade their egos. In his journals, Richie pinions them with wicked precision: there is the novelist Angus Wilson, a twittering Mad Hatter; the poet Stephen Spender, a tormented Shelley figure worrying about the Japanese lover he is about to desert; the catlike Igor Stravinsky; Madame Nijinsky, in hot pursuit of a pretty Japanese dancer; and Alberto Moravia, sulking when he is torn away from the cashier he is courting in Tokyo for a tour of "the real Japan" that Richie had organized in the wake of a conference.

In all the years Richie has lived in Japan, he has never lost his curiosity and freshness of vision. His journals are wonderfully evocative and full of humor, but also honest, introspective and often poignant. Growing older, he finds himself examining just what it is that has kept him for so long in a country where he will forever be seen as an outsider. To be *in* a country but not *of* it breeds loneliness, but also bestows freedom. In Japan, it seems, Donald Richie has discovered a place where he has been free to be himself. □



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