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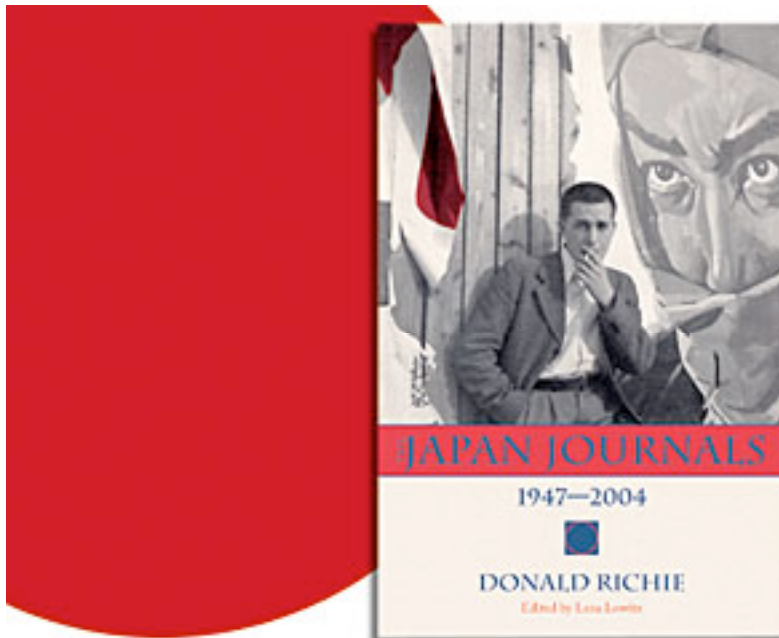
FROM THE MAGAZINE

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Delightfully Displaced

As a perennial outsider at loose in Japan, writer Donald Richie captures the joyous freedom of being foreign

BY PICO IYER



The expatriate in Asia is often a complainer: things are so different there from the way they are in wherever he thinks of as home that he feels aggrieved, ripped off, patronized or left out. The complaint takes different forms in India, Hong Kong and Japan, but the expat often stresses the ex part, as if he's more aware of what he's left behind than of where he's landed. The foreign observer is likely to be happy only if he sees his foreignness as an adventure, and recognizes that he has given up a sense of belonging for a sense of freedom, traded the luxury of being understood for that of being permanently interested.

It is his wise acceptance of these realities that has made Donald Richie the philosopher-king of expats in Asia for the past half-century. He arrived in Tokyo in 1947 as a typist with the U.S. government and never really left, writing dozens of books on Japanese movies, temples, history and fashion, while enjoying himself as an actor, musician, filmmaker and painter. *The Japan Journals: 1947–2004* is a monument to the pleasures of displacement. Richie watchers can observe, more intimately than ever, a man who is generally happiest observing. Newcomers to the "chronic non-joiner" may be tempted to turn to two essential, and more formal, companion books also published in recent years: *The Donald Richie Reader* and a reissue of his haunting travel-memoir, *The Inland Sea*.

In his first year in Japan, the open, young American met, by chance, both Yasunari Kawabata, who later won the Nobel Prize for Literature, and the great Zen scholar, D.T. Suzuki; and a little afterward he found himself on a set where Akira Kurosawa was directing Toshiro Mifune in *Drunken Angel*. Very soon, every foreigner who landed in Tokyo—Somerset Maugham, Tom Wolfe, Richard Avedon, Philip Johnson—was calling on him to be shown around. Richie's shrewd, but forgiving, fascination with human quirks there gives us Truman Capote buying an "imitation geisha wig" and Kurosawa taking in a Fellini film without subtitles ("Gets in the way of the picture," the master pronounces). Francis Ford Coppola is "like a little boy, living entirely in his imagination with the difference, the great difference, that with Francis images always come true."

It is typical of what the Japanese call *en*—a kind of providence—that it was Richie who was enlisted, in New York City, to show Yukio Mishima a gay bar. Soon the two aesthete-philosophers became intellectual companions, and Richie, back in Tokyo, was introducing his restless contemporary to Suetonius.

Richie has known everyone. But what elevates his writing is that he is equally interested in the cabaret doorman, the homeless straggler, the aging streetwalker he engages in conversation. A man of huge cultivation, he clearly models his journals on Proust and Boswell: thus silvery evocations of the musical soirées of Tokyo high society are followed by disheveled erotic adventures in the park on the way home. Richie's especial fascination seems to be

with faces and deceiving surfaces, designs and strategies, and he is always wise to his own acts. "Another country, I am discovering, is another self. I am regarded as different, and so I become different—two people at once." One self almost compulsively lusts after the foreign; the other sees such Romanticism as illusion and a form of imperialism. As Japan comes to resemble more and more the Ohio he has fled, as old friends die and he goes gray—half of the items in the journals come after he is 65—the entries become more melancholy. Even so, another longtime American expat in Tokyo is still, typically, shouting at Richie, four decades into his Japanese sojourn, "You will not allow yourself to be furious with these people."

He won't. Taking in the new snootiness of sex clubs and the sight of a couple playing a video game called Cop Killer on Valentine's Day, Richie, who is now 80 and still living in Tokyo, is a Rousseau of Kabukicho. "Life here means never taking life for granted," he writes, "never not noticing"; to some extent beauty lies in the eye of the outsider. A whole group of travelers, often sexual outlaws, has trenchantly mapped the exile's world: Paul Bowles in Morocco, Christopher Isherwood in California, Maugham in the south of France. Donald Richie in Asia goes even further in arguing that expatriation is not just an escape, "it is an embracing, a reaching out, a moving into as well as a moving away from." The pursuit of that embrace is what has made Richie modern Asia's most enduring and humane elegist.

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