

The Ethnic Detective and the Atomic Bomb: A Japanese American Mystery series

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By Mark Schreiber

This past summer, I was delighted to discover a new "ethnic detective" character named Masuo "Mas" Arai, an elderly Japanese American gardener whose credentials include a green thumb and a nose for sniffing out criminals. The creation of Los Angeles-based journalist and author Naomi Hirahara, Arai made his literary debut in 2004 in "[Summer of the BIG BACHI](#)." A year later he was assisting the NYPD in "[Gasa-Gasa Girl](#)." This year, he's back cruising the L.A. freeways in his battered pickup truck in "[Snakeskin Shamisen](#)," where a traditional Okinawan musical instrument left at the scene of the crime led him to the killer.



Naomi Hirahara

Arai, on the surface, doesn't have many endearing qualities. He is not adept at any martial arts. He wears poorly fitting dentures, is taciturn, and speaks in the accented English of an immigrant (even though he's American born). His favorite pastime is getting together with friends to play poker. And oh, yes: Arai is probably the first protagonist in a mystery fiction series to have survived an atomic bombing.

Here is author Naomi Hirahara on her creation.

MS: Mas Arai isn't a cop or a private eye. How would you describe his role in your stories?

NH: Mas is a reluctant, reluctant sleuth. He's pretty much like all of us -- we want to mind our business and not get involved in other people's problems. But then something happens to people he loves, and Mas is pulled into crime investigations.

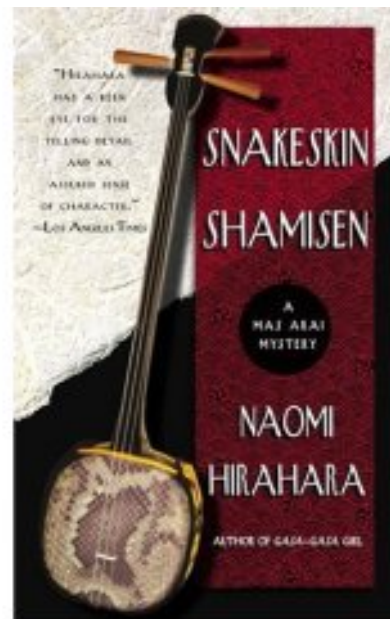
Mas, being a gardener, is also underestimated, especially by people in power. In that sense, he is invisible, which gives him great leeway in looking into suspicious circumstances.

He's also a bit of a cultural detective. In the United States, many Japanese Americans don't know the Japanese language or culture that well. As Mas is a Kibei (born in the U.S., but raised in Japan), he can apply his bicultural intuition in solving crimes.

MS: Arai is a bit hard-headed, self-centered and doesn't seem to be able to express himself very well in either English or Japanese. Do you think it's these eccentric qualities that make him appealing to readers?

NH: I think so. I've been surprised by different reactions to Mas. Some find him unlikable yet strangely compelling at the same time; others tell me he is totally endearing and they "miss" him when the book ends. Truth be told, I think everyone knows a "Mas" in their family or larger circle of friends.

It was important for me to make him Kibei, in between two worlds. That way I could use Japanese and Japanese American phrases without abandon. Mas' world is extremely pungent, and I wanted the sounds and smells of his life to be apparent in descriptions and dialogue. Some readers love this clash; others find it difficult to plow through.

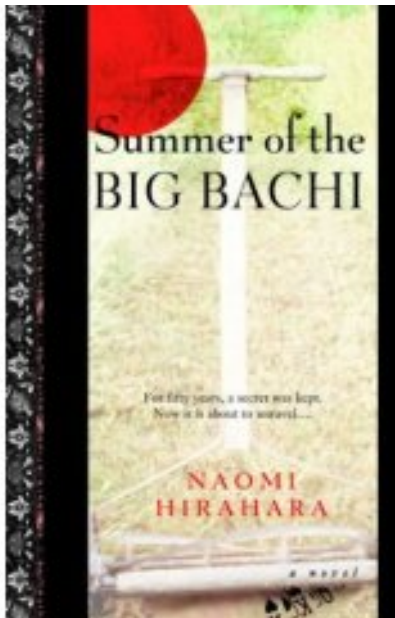


People also have different reactions to dialect. I wanted to show a man who wasn't necessarily verbally skilled, but still has a fine mind. Most Japanese Americans don't speak with an accent, but if one does, it doesn't mean that he's stupid or comical. Since I am a child of an immigrant parent, I've observed first-hand the challenges of negotiating different languages. I'm also fascinated by how the mind thinks and communicates inside itself -- we know so many more things and words than we can express out loud.

MS: What attracted you to the mystery genre as opposed to general fiction? Which mystery authors, if any, did you look to for

inspiration?

NH: Actually, *Summer of the BIG BACHI* was first written as literary fiction. I knew that I had some strong characters, in particular Mas, but my early manuscripts lacked the engine to propel the story properly forward. I was tackling a big topic with my first book, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, and was afraid to expand on a much smaller individual crime because I thought it might be dwarfed by the immensity of the larger theme.



I've always liked mysteries and it was actually a concrete clue -- the drawing of a hibakusha's body by a survivor -- that provided me with the keys to the mystery. Once I had that clue I could start opening all sorts of doors to my story.

The mystery genre is wonderful -- there are so many authors that use mysteries to touch upon social and historic issues. Authors whose works seemed to walk alongside of me in the writing of the first book were Chester Himes, Walter Mosley and Barbara Neely, all

African American writers. I've been very influenced and encouraged by African American mystery authors; I just hope more Asian American writers will produce more work in this genre.



Walter Mosley

MS: Was getting your first work (*BIG BACHI*) published a difficult process? Had you thought about a series from the very beginning, or was it the response to the first book that led to the next one?

NH: Getting *Summer of the BIG BACHI* published was extremely arduous. First of all, it had to be in a publishable state (!) It took me countless rewrites; the first chapter itself was probably rewritten more than 20 times. And as I mentioned early, the manuscript wasn't even structured as a mystery at first, so it took time for me to transform the story into that format. A major character, a young Japanese doctor from Hiroshima, was a casualty of those rewrites. From the idea to published book took me 15 years.

As I wrote and rewrote BIG BACHI, I began to get attached to the characters -- not only Mas, but his friends Haruo and Tug, and wondered what would have happened between Mas and his estranged daughter. I figured that I would write another Mas Arai novel someday, but when my agent sold BIG BACHI, Bantam Dell wanted me to have the second book completed by the following year. As mysteries of this nature (more "cozy" vs. "hardboiled") are sold as series, this was non-negotiable. With some fear and trembling, I entered into this agreement. The last thing I wanted to do was make Mas into a caricature of himself. But with the mystery genre you need to take risks, so I just jumped to see where Mas, the reluctant detective, would take me.

MS: What is your take -- from a general viewpoint -- on portrayals of Asian Americans in contemporary US fiction? I'm talking about fairly recent works like "[Snow Falling On Cedars](#)" or "[The Joy Luck Club](#)" and the like. Do you believe only Asian Americans themselves can convey such stories in a convincing manner?

NH: When you talk about Asian Americans or Asian Pacific Americans, it's such a diverse group now. There are so many more people of mixed ancestry and new ethnic groups that are just finding their footing in this country artistically. There are now "Yonsei" and "Gosei" (fourth and fifth generations) who don't have much contact with other Japanese Americans other than their families. I think the challenge for us novelists is to think beyond their our perspectives and inhabit the lives of people very different than us. It doesn't matter if that character is of the same ethnicity, gender, or age -- it's still a

separate entity from us and as writers, we need to breathe life into that character. Good writing is good writing.

So the short answer is "no," I don't think only Asian Americans can depict Asian American characters convincingly. But I do think more Asian Americans need to be encouraged and nurtured to write novels. The lack of Asian American novelists, in particular Japanese American ones, indicates that we are not making the literary arts a priority. This is a shame because the written word is probably the strongest vehicle for preserving our stories and documenting who we are in a certain time and place.

Although I love history, I think it's important to write contemporary Japanese American stories as well.

MS: I have the impression that most Americans aren't aware of the categories of Japanese Americans such as the Issei, Nisei and Kibei like Arai. Do you feel your books are helping to educate them, in this regard?

NH: Yes, most definitely. I receive e-mails from many people who didn't realize that a cultural divide existed between native Japanese and Japanese Americans. We are seen monolithically, even in places like California, where so many Japanese Americans reside. But I must also add that the terms, Issei and Nisei, have been officially added to the Webster's dictionary, so you might see them on an American spelling bee someday!

MS: Let's talk about Hiroshima for a moment. You yourself are the daughter of a *hibakusha* and the city's remaining survivors constitute a major component in

Japan's antiwar movement. Your descriptions of the bombing and lives of the victims afterward are conveyed realistically, but your main character seems resigned, and keeps his emotions completely bottled up. Would you say this seeming ambivalence is typical among the Hibakusha living in the US? If so, what differentiates them, on an emotional or psychological level, from the Japanese in Hiroshima?

NH: Because Mas is technically an American citizen, his feelings about the atomic bombing are conflicted. If he hates the country which dropped the bomb, then in essence he hates himself, as well as his daughter and friends. I think that is the position of many hibakusha who live in America. Many hibakusha who were Kibei Japanese Americans chose to relocate to the United States, so they cannot demonize their new home, new nation.

In one scene in *BIG BACHI*, Mas's friend Haruo, a hibakusha who lost his eye in the blast, explains how he has stopped telling strangers how he was wounded because talk about the Hiroshima bombing is taboo. I think many hibakusha in the U.S. feel that they need to repress their wartime experiences. This takes a toll on them psychologically. As Haruo observes, "Mas, you're lucky. You have no mark on you." Mas does have scars and wounds, but they have no voice.

MS: Do you get a lot of mail from readers?

NH: Yes, I do get e-mails. They range from a Japanese American who recently wrote that reading [Snakeskin Shamisen](#) was like putting on a pair of comfortable and warm old slippers to others who were unaware of

American hibakusha or about Japanese Americans in general. One person had a gardener named Mas and in the course of discussing my book with him, discovered that he was a Hiroshima survivor. I love it when the books bring disparate people together. It's really beautiful.

Some Sansei have written that the books have been very healing for them. They haven't had close relationships with their parents. There has been a lot of silence in their families. Reading about Mas gives them added insight. Or else they haven't seen their cultural identity mirrored back to them in mainstream culture. The fact that the Mas books have been published by a major New York publisher has been very affirming to them.

Sometimes people ask me why I use Japanese words so much. One reader asked me how I chose the names of my characters; her own father's name is Mas and her mother's, Chizuko (the same as my protagonists').

Some go Mas crazy. They've introduced the series to their book clubs and mailed the books to friends and families. I do dozens of events every year throughout California and I've noticed younger fans -- teenagers. I'm surprised that young people would want to read about a seventy-something-old man, but I shouldn't complain!

MS: Does Arai and his old pick-up truck have enough stamina to keep going much longer? Can we expect a few more books in the current series, or do you have other projects?

NH: I'm currently working on a young-adult novel, *1001 CRANES*, which tells the story of a Yonsei teenager who must live with her

grandparents in Los Angeles one summer while her parents are having marital difficulties. After 1001 CRANES and its sequel, I am thinking of writing a mystery set in a World War II detention camp. And then it'll be back to Mas. I think he'll be fermenting and growing while I work on these other projects. I have ideas for at least three more Mas mysteries. I'd like to end the series in Hiroshima.

Mark Schreiber is the "Tokyo Confidential" columnist, The Japan Times. He is the author of [The Dark Side: Infamous Japanese Crimes and Criminals](#) and compiler of [Tabloid Tokyo: 101 Tales of Sex, Crime and the Bizarre from Japan's Wild Weeklies](#). Portions of the interview with Naomi Hirahara appeared on the Japan Times book review page of October 22, 2006. This article was written for Japan Focus and posted on November 8, 2006.

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