

In the forest of the soul: Oe Kenzaburo at 70

Maya Jaggi

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by Maya Jaggi

When Oe Kenzaburo was 28, and already a cult writer for Japan's postwar youth, his first child was born in 1963 with a herniated brain pushing out of his skull, the "two-headed monster baby" of Oe's later fiction. Corrective surgery threatened brain damage, and for a while the father longed for the infant's death -- a "disgraceful" time, he later wrote in a fictionalised memoir, that "no powerful detergent has allowed me to wash out of my life". Yet a visit to Hiroshima to report on a peace congress, and encounters with atomic-bomb survivors, convinced Oe beyond doubt that his child must live. "I was trained as a writer and as a human being by the birth of my son," he says.

Oe's commitment to Hikari (nicknamed "Pooh" after AA Milne's bear) inspired, over 30 years, a unique cycle of fiction whose protagonists are fathers of brain-damaged sons. That experience pervades his complex vision, in fiction and essays, of militarism and nuclear disarmament, innocence and authenticity, faith and redemption. His translator John Nathan, professor of Japanese cultural studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara, and author of *Japan Unbound* (2004), says that, like Natsume Soseki, the early 20th-century modernist, Oe "created a language of his own, in the manner of Faulkner and few Japanese writers before him. He's excruciatingly self-conscious and aware, painfully looking beneath

the surface of things." Although Nathan feels Oe (pronounced oh-way) has been "undertranslated -- he's terribly hard to do", his work has reached more foreign readers since his Nobel prize for literature in 1994.

Henry Miller likened him to Dostoevsky in his "range of hope and despair", while the late Edward Said, a friend for 20 years, noted his "extraordinary power of sympathetic understanding", particularly across cultures. Who else, Said wrote in a public exchange of letters in 2002, would repeatedly warn of the "danger to Japan of too much imperial swagger and economic delusion?", a peril rooted, for Oe, in a failure to learn from the past. According to the British novelist Kazuo Ishiguro, he has "always been fascinated by what's not been said about the Japanese role in the second world war".

Oe, who was 70 on Monday, is to revisit Hiroshima next month, to give a lecture marking the 60th anniversary in August of the atomic bombing of that city and Nagasaki. Last June he co-founded the Article 9 Association, a group of Japanese intellectuals, all second world war survivors, lobbying to safeguard from revisionist pressures the constitution that renounced war. In December, the Japanese prime minister, Koizumi Junichiro, extended the mandate of the Self-Defence Forces in Iraq, Japan's largest overseas mission since 1945.

Oe, who writes a monthly column in the daily newspaper *Asahi Shimbun*, has long been a target of Japanese conservatives for scourging the emperor system that survived the defeat of 1945. He was physically assaulted while

lecturing at the university of Tokyo after publication of *Seventeen* (1961), a novella whose teenage terrorist was modelled on the far-right youth assassin of Japan's socialist party chairman in 1960. *The Day He Shall Wipe My Tears Away* (1972) parodied the patriotic excess that led Oe's literary antithesis, Mishima Yukio, to commit seppuku (ritual suicide) in 1970 after leading a failed coup. Days after the Nobel, Oe was excoriated for turning down the Imperial Order of Culture on the grounds that he refused to "recognise any authority, any value, higher than democracy". A loudspeaker truck broadcast threats outside his house, he recalls, "but my wife was brave enough to shout back, 'You're wrong'".

Oe and his wife, Yukari, live a "quiet life" -- the ironic title of one of his novels -- with Hikari in Setagaya, a suburb of western Tokyo with tranquil streets and red maple trees. They also have a cottage in the mountains. Their walls in Tokyo are hung with Yukari's watercolours, some of which illustrate her husband's work. They also have a younger daughter and son: Natsumiko, who works in a university library; and Sakurao, a research scientist for an agricultural company, whose wife is expecting Oe's first grandchild in the spring.

Hikari, aged 41, has autism, epilepsy and restricted vision. After exchanging greetings in English, he hunkers down to floor level to peruse CDs. He began to speak only at the age of six, when he startled his father in the woods by identifying birds from recordings he had heard of bird calls. Though his use of language remains limited, he was awakened to Bach and Mozart, learned the piano (though he no longer plays) and musical notation, and developed a remarkable gift as a composer. According to Nathan, Hikari is the "only idiot savant in medical history with perfect pitch, able to compose in his head without first improvising on an instrument". Three CDs of his compositions were released in the 1990s, winning him a top award in Japan for western

classical music. Hikari's first CD sold 400,000 copies, "better than any of my novels", says Oe, "and I'm proud of that". Oe's English is heavily accented, but its rich vocabulary reflects lecturing bouts in the US. He reads in English, French, Russian and Chinese, but has a friend on hand to translate as he slips into his mother tongue.

Somersault (1999), his first novel after the Nobel, was published in UK paperback last year. Though it was begun before the 1995 sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway by the Aum Shinrikyo doomsday group, there are deliberate parallels between Aum and the novel's apocalyptic cult, whose leader, Patron, has painfully disavowed his faith to avert a nuclear terrorist attack by followers. Some British reviewers thought the novel rambling at almost 600 pages, comparing it unfavourably with Murakami Haruki's non-fiction *Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche* (1997). But Fredric Jameson in the *London Review of Books* admired its "'late-style' simplicity, like the architectonics of a Bruckner symphony". Its translator Philip Gabriel, professor of modern Japanese literature at the University of Arizona, says Oe's exploration of a cult leader "living with the emotional consequences of renouncing his faith" resonates powerfully with the Japanese who lived through the war and the subsequent "renunciation of the emperor's divinity"; through Patron's "somersault", Oe revisits the trauma and rebirth experienced by his generation.

Oe was born in 1935 in Ose, a remote village in the forests of Shikoku, a mountainous island in western Japan. He imbibed folklore from his grandmother and mother. When writing he remembers his mother's voice and feels guilty, saying "I must try to write more accurately and honestly". Tales of a saviour in the forest later inspired the redemptive saviours -- and false messiahs -- of Oe's fiction, where a mythical Shikoku recurs. According to Yamaguchi

Kazuto, Oe's editor at the publisher Kodansha in Tokyo, the Shikoku forest is "always a sacred, innocent place for Oe; the birthplace of the soul".

Oe's father was killed in 1944, and his mother saw a flash in the sky when Hiroshima was bombed 100 miles away on August 6 1945. Oe was 10 when Emperor Hirohito surrendered on August 15. The shock of hearing the mortal voice on radio of an emperor whom they had been taught was a living god deprived him of his innocence, as all values were upturned. "But for my experiences of 1945 and the subsequent years, I would never have become a novelist," he has said.

The Allied occupation of 1945-52 brought benign GIs with sweets, but inspired an ambivalence towards the US that Oe has never lost. "I admired and respected English-speaking culture, but resented the occupation," he says. Currency reform had driven his family, wholesalers in banknote paper, out of business. The fifth of seven children, he was the only one to go to college. At Tokyo University in 1954-59 he studied French and earned a living from journalism, but his country accent impressed on him his "always marginal and peripheral" status, fuelling a sympathy with Japan's Korean minority, and the people of Okinawa, site of US military bases, against which he campaigns. Yamanouchi Hisaaki, a student friend, now professor emeritus of Tokyo University, recalls him as shy but brilliant, with an "innocence he probably retains to this day".

His early fiction drew on his wartime childhood. In the 1958 novella *The Catch* (also translated as *Prize Stock*) a boy's wondrous friendship with a black American PoW -- a "splendid guest from the sky", says Oe -- is destroyed by war. For Yamanouchi, the story is an "ironic picture of Japan's relationship with America". It won Oe the Akutagawa prize at 23. The same year, his first novel (translated as *Nip the Buds, Shoot the Kids*), depicted juvenile

delinquents evacuated to a remote village in wartime who are shamefully abandoned by plague-fearing villagers.

In 1960 Oe met Chairman Mao, whose writings he admired ("I was proud of his being Asian"), in Beijing and interviewed Jean-Paul Sartre in Paris in 1961 (a "charming intellectual who kept quoting himself"). He marched with Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir against the Algerian war. He demonstrated against the Vietnam war and joined the huge leftwing protests in Tokyo in 1960 against the renewal of Japan's security treaty with the US. "I respected democracy and the constitution made possible by America," says Oe, "while I was against an America which rejects democratic principles." Yamaguchi says: "After the war, people looked to a hopeful future. But Japan was subservient to the US. Young people protested but were defeated, and Oe expressed their anger and defeat; they'd found a hero for their generation."

Influenced by Sartre's existentialism and Rabelais's grotesque realism, and an American tradition from Twain to Norman Mailer, Oe created anti-heroes who wallow in abject shame and disgrace, disgusted at "civilisation". In his short stories or the novellas *Seventeen* (1961) and *J* (1963), they are lured by political fanaticism, but as likely to end up alcoholics or subway perverts. He twisted the staid conventions of the Japanese autobiographical "I-novel" and assailed the "vagueness" of such predecessors as Kawabata Yasunari (the 1968 Nobel laureate). Critics sneered that his prose "reeked of butter" -- Japanese purity sullied by western syntax. Nathan, for whom it trod a "fine line between artful rebellion and unruliness", says Oe's "entire stance was an assault on traditional values".

In 1960 Oe had married Yukari, the sister of his school friend Itami Juzo (later director of films such as *Tampopo*). When Hikari was born in June 1963, doctors said his only prospect was as a "vegetable", and urged the couple to let

the infant die. In Hiroshima the next month, Oe found pro-Soviet or Chinese peace camps wrangling over who should have nuclear weapons. No one, he says, was supporting the hibakusha (survivors). He visited survivors in the Red Cross hospital, where one doctor told him, "never despair or hope too much". Through the example of the doctors' forbearance, Oe says, "I was encouraged about my own son," whose name means "light".

Oe's private and political "rebirth" was reflected in *Hiroshima Notes* (1965), and the imaginative link he made between his stricken son and those afflicted by nuclear fallout and the novel that brought him international recognition, *A Personal Matter* (1964). His anti-hero Bird, a new father dreaming of escape to Africa, retreats into alcohol and adultery as he struggles with the dilemma facing his "monster" infant, till he resolves to rescue both himself and his child. Nathan, its translator, who found the book "vibrant, headlong and powered by gorgeous energy", met Oe in Tokyo, and was surprised to find an "owlish, pudgy man" with a "round face, sloping shoulders and soft belly. He looked absolutely meek." Later he discerned a "very private sense of humour, of the grotesque; like his writing, he's hysterically funny."

The novel translated as *The Silent Cry* (1967), deemed by the Nobel committee to be his masterpiece, opens with the narrator festering in a muddy pit, a stinking dog in his arms, after his idiot son has been institutionalised and a friend has hanged himself naked. The narrator and his violently action-prone brother ("my two divided selves," Oe has said) return to their childhood home after the war but confront clashing views of family history. After *The Silent Cry*, says his editor, "Oe lost half his readership because the prose got so complicated. He knows it himself, but later he tried to loosen up." Yamanouchi says Oe's prose became simpler after the mid-80s, because "the Hikari in the novels is an incarnation of

innocence".

In the "idiot son" cycle, the Hikari figure is variously named Pooh, Eeyore, Mori or Jin, from the novella *Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness* (1969), in which a man feels his son's pain through their fierce, inseparable bond, to *A Quiet Life* (1990) -- which Itami adapted for the cinema, with a film score based on Hikari's compositions. In the surreal novella *Aghwee the Sky Monster* (1964), a composer who allowed his infant to die is haunted by the phantom of a "fat baby in a white cotton nightgown, big as a kangaroo". As the musician is assailed by his conscience, the baby becomes a giant spectre of all those who die young, innocent of memories -including, perhaps, the war dead.

Oe has said his style has been to "start from my personal matters and then to link it up with society, the state and the world". His work, says Yamaguchi, "always has universality, though it appears on the surface to be personal or private". In *Rouse Up, O Young Men of the New Age* (1983), a father has obscene nightmares as his son, Eeyore, stands on the threshold of sexual maturity. Yet Eeyore is innocent. Rescued after an ordeal, he "looked back at me blankly as always, as though unmoved, but tension melted from his face and body and the soft creature that always appeared in this way rose to view with a radiance that was blinding". Father and son are writing a musical on the "role of the weak in helping avoid the horrors of war". Oe says: "I believe in tolerance, and how the weak can play a role in fighting against violence; that's my persistent concern. The present Japanese government wants to stand up with the banner of the strong. But after the defeat [of 1945] we could have stood up with the weak. That's what Japan should do: the weak are a value in themselves." Oe's novel shows fear of the vulnerable to be a projection of the darkness within ourselves. Nathan, who translated the novel in 2002, rates it among Oe's best work:

"It's a very brave book, in the honesty with which he excoriates himself."

Oe has described his relationship with his son as symbiotic. "Even today that's true," he says. "Reading Blake, Yeats or RS Thomas, I'm always reading as the father of a disabled son." In Nathan's view, Oe has modelled himself on the son. "He even evolved a similar gait," he says. "Hikari, transformed by Oe's imagination into Pooh or Eeyore, has assumed a huge symbolic importance for his father as the embodiment of someone who can transcend everything baleful and problematic, and turn it into something hopeful and redeemed. The archetypal and the real father want to participate."

Before Hikari was born, says Oe, "I married my best friend's sister, and had an ordinary relationship. But everything changed with the birth of my son. My wife and I created an entirely new relationship. Without her support, and without my son, I couldn't have continued as a writer." He has been accused of exploiting Hikari, but says no one in the family agrees. "Our relationship is a real one. It's the most important thing: life comes first, and literature second." In the essays *A Healing Family* (1995), Oe wrote that Hikari's ability to express himself in music had taught his father about the healing power of art. The book sold 300,000 copies in Japan. "People find hope in his writing," his editor says.

Ishiguro describes Oe as "genuinely decent, modest, surprisingly open and honest, and very unconcerned about fame". Nathan reveals that he can be "terrifying and curmudgeonly; he has a temper and cultivates an aloofness. But he's a fabulous teacher; he knows so much." "I have no discipline," Oe claims, "I'm very anarchic", though he is an assiduous member of his swimming club. At home he writes by hand in an armchair, a board resting on his knees. "I have to take care of Hikari-san. Sometimes he watches TV -- classical music or sumo wrestling

-- but I don't mind. I'm always happy to be with him. I can be very lonely and fearful of people. But with my son I'm very free."

Oe's fiction has increasingly explored a yearning for the spiritual, though he does not believe in God. The untranslated *Flaming Green Tree* trilogy (1993-95) is about Gii, a disabled healer, who becomes a saviour to his people. But in the mid-1990s Oe vowed to stop writing fiction, saying Hikari had now found his own voice. He and his wife resolved to sell the house, he says, and "live in a trailer", while he read Spinoza. The Swedish award persuaded him otherwise. "I have to be a Nobel laureate," he says. Yet Oe, who does not own a car, found the Nobel brought hazards. Hikari had an attack recently in teeming Shinjuku station, and "I couldn't make him sit or lie on a bench; he became a statue". A stranger asked, "Mr Oe, what do you think of prime minister Koizumi?" His failure to reply -- Oe mimes his predicament with an outstretched arm around an immobile son's shoulders -- provoked the remark: "Oe's got so arrogant since the Nobel!" He wrings humour from the incident, but shrugs helplessly.

In his Nobel lecture, "Japan, the Ambiguous and Myself", Oe spoke of the "chronic disease" of Japan's vacillation between Europe and Asia since its 19th-century modernisation drive, which, in his view, led to the invasion of its neighbours. In a 1995 foreword to *Hiroshima Notes*, he wrote of the need to recast Hiroshima in the light of Japanese aggression. Because the cold war nuclear deterrent loomed so heavily, Ishiguro suggests, "it was easy to see the Japanese as victims of the first and only use of nuclear weapons in warfare, who came to represent what might happen to us all". The rapid rebuilding of Japan as an ally against communism played its part. Postwar Japan is a success story. Yet, Ishiguro adds, "from a moral point of view, some voices say it's long overdue to look at what Japan did in Asia -- where it's still a running sore."

"Regret and repentance for the war, and the determination that it should never happen again, are enshrined in the constitution," says Oe. "That's why I regard it as so important." He opposes Koizumi's controversial visits to Tokyo's Yasukuni shrine to the war dead, which houses the remains of "class A" war criminals. He also urges official compensation -- recently denied in court -- for the wartime Korean sex slaves known as "comfort women". These injustices, the source of flare-ups with neighbouring countries, "have to be solved in a formal way, between states", he says. "History must be looked at again. If Japan thinks trade and prosperity are enough, that would be totally wrong. I would like to live to see a final reconciliation between Japan, and China and Korea."

Since Somersault, Oe has published in Japanese two novels in a trilogy, *The Changeling*, and *The Infant with a Melancholy Face*. The first novel fictionalised Oe's relationship with his brother-in-law. "Itami was always a very beautiful boy, while I wasn't," he says. "He was intelligent, good and capable, while I was regarded as suicide-prone. Yet I survived and my brother-in-law died." Itami threw himself off a building in 1997, five years after his face was slashed by yakuza gangsters, whom he ridiculed in a film. Speculation followed about a possible mafia role in his death. But Oe ascribes his suicide to media gossip about his alleged extra-marital affairs. "He was an aristocratic type who tended to give up half-way through; he gave up living."

In his previous works, says Oe, "there was always hope and trust in the future. But now I see a dark wall in front of us." The final volume of the trilogy, *Goodbye My Book*, is being serialised in the Japanese literary magazine *Gunzo*, and will be published this autumn. Yamaguchi, the editor of *Gunzo*, describes it as a post-September 11 novel about "catastrophic terrorism in Tokyo". Its hypothesis is that Mishima, whose emperor-worship Oe had

earlier satirised, survived his failed 1970 coup and is released from prison after 30 years to lead a 21st-century cult. Oe, who has described the function of the novelist as being like a canary in a coal mine, is preoccupied with a return of nationalism in post-bubble-economy Japan, where school children must now salute the national flag. "The power of the emperor culture is still alive," he says. "If someone could devise a clever way of combining that with the younger generation, there could be a powerful movement."

Oe is very independent, says Yamaguchi, adding: "For people like Ishihara Shintaro, the conservative, pro-military governor of Tokyo, Oe is a pain in the ass." But for Hoshino v, a novelist in his 30s and winner of the Mishima Yukio prize in 2000, he exemplifies commitment. "It's high time we look back to the era after the war," he says. "My generation has to take up the themes Oe has been wrestling with." Hoshino sees Oe as rewriting the political works of his youth in the light of the "rise of extreme nationalism and yearnings for militarism. He believes literature can act against that future by shedding light on the psychology of those who want to be engulfed in it."

Oe admits to many fears, of "death, and concern for the future of my disabled son, as well as the future of Japan and the world, especially Asia". Yet his son has taught him resilience. "Every three to five years, a new difficulty came up, some unexpected symptom of his illness," he says, "but Hikari always overcame it. We dealt with it together." Some years ago, Hikari's health deteriorated, and he ceased composing. But in the spring of 2003, he began again. His fourth CD will be released in Japan this autumn at the same time as his father's novel, "a far greater event than my 70th birthday."

"I feel human beings can heal themselves; the will to be healed, and the power of recovery,

are very strong in us. That's the most important thing I've learned in my life with my son," he says. "I am not a Christian, but sometimes I feel something very close to grace."

Oe Kenzaburo

Born: January 31 1935; Ose, Shikoku.

Education: 1954-59 University of Tokyo.

Fiction in English: 1958 Nip the Buds, Shoot the Kids; '61 Seventeen; '63 J; '64 A Personal Matter; '67 The Silent Cry; '76 The Pinch Runner Memorandum; '77 Teach Us To Outgrow Our Madness: Four Novellas; '83 Rouse Up O Young Men of the New Age; '84 (ed) The Crazy Iris and Other Stories of the Atomic Aftermath ; '90 A Quiet Life; '99 Somersault.

Non-fiction in English: 1965 Hiroshima Notes; '95 Japan, the Ambiguous and Myself (Nobel lecture); '95 A Healing Family.

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