36 VIEWS OF MOUNT FUJI

On finding myself in Japan

CATHY N. DAVIDSON

With a new afterword by the author

PRAISE FOR CATHY N. DAVIDSON'S *36 VIEWS OF MOUNT FUJI*

"Appealing . . . No one could have tried harder to fathom Japanese culture [than Davidson]. The result is a series of illuminations not unlike the sudden break in the clouds that finally lets her glimpse Mount Fuji from the window of a bullet train."—Francine Prose, *New York Times Book Review*

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"This book is honest and even-handed, respecting the complexity of the mystery that is Japan. . . . It is a book that should be read by anyone serious about learning more of this fascinating country."—*Lincoln Journal-Star*

"Delightful . . . Reads like a wonderful, intimate letter from a friend. . . . Davidson's book is brimming with understated emotion . . . and insightfully plumbs the spiritual dimensions of both cultures." —*Virginian-Pilot* and *Ledger-Star*

"Top drawer . . . grows like a novel and takes on unusual richness as it keeps reinvesting itself in earlier scenes and people."—*Kirkus Reviews*

"Parts of this very personal American teacher's Japanese memoir, like the delicate chapter about her Nigawa neighbors' reactions to a Christmas season death in her husband's family, had us crying. . . . Trust us. Try it."—*New York Daily News*

"Beautifully written . . . *36 Views of Mount Fuji* is not a travel book in the usual sense. . . . It is a book about a much deeper process, the way in which another culture can infiltrate us and make us different people. . . . It opened my eyes to the beauty of another culture and also made me appreciate aspects of my own."—*Raleigh News and Observer*

"Evocative . . . A revealing mosaic of word-pictures of Japan and the Japanese. . . . Here are cameos of friends and acquaintances, a wealth of experiences, some funny, some tragic, all revealing, moments that interpret and explain, or surprise and bewilder."—*Anniston Star*

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For Ichirō, Naomo, and
Maryvonne Nagel Okamoto,
tomodachi,

and for the Japanese friends
who, though pseudonymous
here, inspired every page

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A NOTE ON JAPANESE NAMES

In Japan, the genderless suffix *-san* is appended to names as token of respect. It is roughly the equivalent of *Mr., Ms., Mrs.*, or *Miss*. Many of my Japanese friends compromise between formal Japanese address and the informality of English by calling me "Cathy-san," and I call a number of my friends by their first names, "Kiyomi-san" or "Tomoe-san." Some Japanese who have spent time in the West drop the *-san* suffix entirely. I have rendered these levels of formality (and Westernization) in this book situationally, mainly according to the terms I would have used in Japan. Also, I have given the family name last here (although in Japan it would go first).

In my phonetic transcription of Japanese words and phrases *(rōmaji),* I have used a macron to indicate long vowel sounds except in the case of a long *i* (which is indicated by a repeated letter, as in *hazukashii*). I have also followed the usual practice in English-language publications of omitting the macron in common Japanese place names such as Osaka or Kyoto.

A "Glossary of Japanese Words and Expressions" can be found at the back of this book.

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All illustrations come from Katsushika Hokusai's *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*. Courtesy of the Honolulu Academy of Arts.

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PREFACE

The title of my book, *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*, comes from the series of woodblock prints done by Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849) near the end of his long life. In these brilliantly colored prints, as well as in a black-and-white sequel that he called *One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji*, Hokusai portrays the different, even contradictory, aspects of Japanese life. There is tremendous variety and vitality in both series—aristocratic courtiers, humble workers, carefree picnickers, devout pilgrims. The only constant is Mount Fuji, symbol of that which is permanent or unchanging in Japan. Hokusai does nothing to reconcile contradictions, but the presence of the mountain suggests that all of the views, taken together, make up Japan. In one woodcut, a weary traveler pauses for refreshment, and is surprised to find Fuji reflected in his tiny sake cup. In another, boatmen row madly to escape a fearful storm, too concerned with survival to notice Fiji, calm in its indifference, beautifully framed within the curl of a towering wave.

My version of *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* focuses on individual encounters, intimate moments, and small revelations that helped me make sense of Japan. If a theme underlies the memories in this book, it is what I learned from the rituals, celebrations, customs, and traditions through which the Japanese cope with life—both its joys and its pains. More than that, my Japanese experiences prompted me to come to terms with painful events in my own life, events whose emotional impact followed me all the way across the Pacific or whose consequences brought me home again.

In the largest sense, celebration and mourning have spiritual dimensions, dimensions also present in Hokusai's Fuji prints. For all his exuberant zest for life, Hokusai was a holy man. In old age, he returned repeatedly to the subject of Mount Fuji, seeking to communicate something of what the mountain represents in symbolic or metaphysical terms. One meaning of *Fuji* is "not two" or "peerless one," that which is constant—one—in the midst of life's

changes. Another reading of *Fuji* is "not death," "undying." In an almost literal way, Mount Fuji is the soul of Japan.

Not until my fourth trip to Japan did I see Mount Fuji for myself. On the first, in 1980, I was in Japan as part of a faculty exchange program, teaching English for a year to Japanese students at Kansai Women's University. Some of my students invited me on an outing to climb Mount Fuji during the brief period in summer when the mountain is officially open. That year's rainy season seemed interminable, and, with reluctance, we canceled our trip because of continuing bad weather. On various excursions to Tokyo by plane or train, I watched anxiously from the window, hoping for a glimpse of the majestic mountain. Shrouded in clouds every time, it withheld its secrets.

In January of 1983, my second time in Japan, I missed Fuji four times, twice by plane and twice by *shinkansen* (bullet train), and I began to feel jinxed. "It's good that you still haven't seen Fuji-san," Professor Sano, my department head at Kansai Women's University, assured me as we bid one another goodbye at the airport. "It means you have a reason to come back to Japan again."

Yet when I did return, for another year of teaching, in 1987–88, I declined an invitation to join the hundreds of thousands of Japanese who make the pilgrimage up Fuji each summer and went instead to Oki, a remote island between Japan and Korea. Saddened by the recent deaths of several friends and by my grandmother's lingering final illness, I needed the solace of Oki. I spent days snorkeling off the coral reefs, looking at beautiful seascapes through my diving mask, and evenings talking and laughing again among friends.

I finally had my view of Mount Fuji late in 1990, ten years after my first *Oshōgatsu* (New Year's) in Japan. I was looking forward to two carefree months in Japan without teaching or other responsibilities. Yet it turned out that on this fourth visit several of my friends were facing crises of their own. I tried to comfort them with what American consolations I had to offer—talk that went late into the night and the occasional un-Japanese hug. En route to Tokyo to visit one friend, I saw Fuji from my train window. The disembodied voice of the conductor came over the P.A. system. It was a seductive voice—the kind that begins like molasses and ends with a whisper—and everyone in the train car, both men and women, seemed to sit expectantly, waiting for the conductor to purr the name of each stop. As we came abreast of Mount Fuji, he told us in a tragic voice that it was too rainy today to see Fuji-san, directly to our left. Then his murmur changed to a gasp of wonder: *"Subarashii!"* he exclaimed (Spectacular!). For one moment, the leaden clouds parted and there stood Mount Fuji, snowcapped and gleaming.

The scene was an update of Hokusai: dark storm clouds perfectly framing Mount Fuji, admired by travelers pressed against the window of a bullet train hurtling toward Tokyo. In another second, the clouds closed back over the mountain and all was gray again. We turned to each other then, as if to reassure ourselves that we had really seen what we had seen. We bowed to one another; several people came forward to shake my hand. *"Subarashii,"* we repeated, in whispers.

I'm convinced that moments like the one on a bullet train to Tokyo illuminate a culture as much as do larger historical or social events. Sometimes it's the odd or even quirky encounter that is most revealing, like clouds parting to show the mountain hidden within. The idiosyncratic, the piece that doesn't quite fit, is often what makes one understand the dimensions of the puzzle, as Hokusai must have known when he included forty-six views of Mount Fuji in his famous series. If the artist threw in more than the thirty-six he promised in his title, who's to complain of the unexpected bounty? After four visits to Japan, I've come to see this oddity—an acquiescence to the incongruous—as "typically" Japanese.

In some of Hokusai's woodcuts of Mount Fuji, the mountain is seemingly not pictured at all. The events in these pictures take place on the mountain itself, reinforcing the basic Buddhist (and quintessentially Japanese) idea that the person closest to a subject or event can never really see it. Sometimes it is the person passing through and at a remove who has the clearest view. As an American writing about Japan, I'm hoping that Hokusai is right.

Except for the Afterword, the pages to follow were written in 1993. I have made only a few small corrections in the text but otherwise have left this the perspective of 1993, looking back on my first four extended trips to Japan.

36 VIEWS OF MOUNT FUJI

1 SEEING AND BEING SEEN

I dreamt Japan long before I went there. Moss gardens, straw-mat rooms, wooden bridges arching in the moonlight, paper lanterns with the fire glowing inside. Whenever I paged through photography books of traditional Japan, I found myself gasping with appreciation. Three rocks, a gnarled pine tree, raked white sand: awe. Pictures of Windsor Castle or the fountains of Versailles have never left me breathless.

But what struck me as we drove away from Osaka International Airport was the unattractiveness of the scene. Forget rocks and raked sand! Neon everywhere, billboards as far as the eye could see, concrete apartment blocks

dingy with pollution. Even the details radiated a sense of urbanization run amok. Whereas other affluent nations bury power lines and strive for at least some sense of visual harmony, Japan seemed to be clotted with the cables and wires of modern life. Looking out the car window at gray buildings with rusting metal roofs, the power lines crisscrossing bizarrely overhead, I was reminded of some grim old photograph of a nineteenth-century immigrant ghetto, zapped by late-twentieth-century electronic overload.

My husband, Ted, and I were in Japan to teach English. Michigan State University, where I taught at the time, had established a faculty exchange program with Kansai Women's University. A Japanese professor would teach my courses at MSU while I taught hers at KWU. Ted took an unpaid leave from his liberal arts college in the States and accepted part-time jobs at both KWU and a larger, coed university in a nearby town. It had all happened fast—a note in the faculty mailboxes one winter day inviting applications, a few hasty lessons in conversational Japanese, and then, in March, we were there.

"Is it what you were expecting?" Professor Sano, the department head at KWU, asked as we drove from the airport to Nigawa, the suburb where we would be living for the next year.

I knew that Japan wouldn't look like the picture books but I was surprised at how different it really was. I joked that I had thought the streets of Japan would be paved with gold.

He laughed and said that many Americans had that reaction. Then, nodding at the passing scene, a particularly drab stretch of warehouse-like buildings, he added more soberly, "We Japanese like to say that we have a great sense of beauty and no sense of ugliness. You'll find a lot of Japan is like that."

The beauty is still there, he explained; one just has to look for it. What happens outside, in the world, is chaotic, contingent, filled with speed and accident. But, as we would later see, bleak stretches of urban sprawl are punctuated by exquisite Buddhist temples set off from the city, sometimes by stark clay walls or elaborate wooden gates, a separate peace within the chaos. On national holidays, Japanese go to these temples en masse to recharge, and they become as packed as a rush-hour subway train. We'd see the same thing soon in cherry-viewing season, he said, when everyone sets aside the tragedies or just the predictable dailiness of life to picnic and party beneath the fragile blossoms.

He described one of his favorite places, a busy intersection in a nondescript area of Kyoto where a simple carved stone Buddha, much beloved by the residents, smiles enigmatically amid the carbon monoxide and the car horns.

Professor Sano dropped us off at the Western-style home of an American couple who taught at Kansai Women's University, a kind of halfway house between the two cultures, where we spent our first night in Japan. The next day the couple showed us around the local grocery store, explained how the train system worked, and delivered us to our apartment building in Nigawa, an affluent suburb between Kobe and Osaka, about half an hour by train from either. They told us that, before the War, Nigawa was a sleepy resort town, with *ryokan* (inns) and country villas, and long before that a stop for pilgrims on their way to Kabuto-yama Daishi, a Shingon Buddhist temple built in the ninth century on the helmet-shaped mountain a few miles beyond Nigawa. Carrying our suitcases up the three flights of stairs to our apartment, we heard the low, somber gong of the temple bell mingled with suburban sounds of commuter trains and mopeds.

We lived on the top floor of a "mansion," the Japanese term for a modern ferro-concrete apartment complex. Kansai Women's University owned our apartment and two others on the floor, each a 2DK—two rooms plus a galley kitchen, with a dining area large enough for a table and four chairs. The Western-style living room was furnished with small brown tweed couches and a coffee table. The bedroom was more traditional, with tatami (green-gold straw mats) on the floor and walls covered in a rough ocher paper that recalled the clay walls of a tea house. We had been asked if we wanted a double bed and declined in favor of the traditional futons. A bed would have filled the entire room. With futons, what was a bedroom by night became, with the futons folded away, a study where I worked on the floor, Japanese-style, breathing in the incomparable fragrance of rice straw.

A few days after our arrival, I set out for my first official visit to Kansai Women's University. Our American colleagues had drawn us a map of Nigawa that included two different routes to the university—a direct one along well-marked streets lined with apartment buildings and expensive suburban houses and a more circuitous scenic route past the last thatch-roof building in Nigawa, by a few remaining old *kura* (storehouses), over a small stream, and then up a path that led through a rice paddy at the very top of a hill. On clear days, they said, we'd be able to see Osaka. Beyond the smokestacks, factories, and oil tankers, we'd even glimpse the fabled Inland Sea.

Of course I took the scenic route, noticing, with anticipation, that the cherry trees arching over one part of my walk were in bud. On campus, a few early trees were already in bloom. The students were blooming, too, hundreds and hundreds of them, looking fresh and lovely.

In the English Department office, I met various new colleagues, most of them Japanese but also a few *gaijin* (foreigners), from the United States and the United Kingdom. I heard again how happy everyone was that I was able to come for the year. The auto industry in 1980 was suffering its worst crisis in history, and anti-Japanese feelings ran high in Michigan. I liked to think of myself and the Japanese exchange professor as minor goodwill ambassadors.

As my new colleagues hurried off in the general bustle of starting another school year, I stayed behind in the main office, sipping a cup of green tea that one of the secretaries had offered me. I browsed through the mail that had accumulated in my box, mostly institutional memos about commencement, class lists, and other official matters. There were a number of notices in Japanese that the secretary told me not to bother about and then a brief note in both English and Japanese announcing that "everyone should please try to have the health examination before the beginning of classes."

I was puzzled. We didn't get memos at Michigan State that told us "please try" to do things. And what kind of health examination? My doctor had given me a complete physical before I left the United States, but I wasn't sure whether that counted or not. I'd been told I would be covered for the year by Japan's national health plan and supposed that this physical was part of the plan. I also suspected that the vague wording in the memo might be an example of *tatemae*, the form of a polite suggestion masking the substance *(honne)* of an explicit order. I'd read about this Japanese habit of indirect expression in all the travel guides.

"I guess I should take this health exam, shouldn't I?" I asked one of the secretaries who spoke excellent English.

She nodded agreement and told me that it was being given right now in the auditorium in the next building. I could just follow all the young women who were walking in that direction. I thanked her, bowed, and headed off for my first all-Japanese experience.

The room was filled with students, most of them from the high school and junior high that are also part of KWU. As far as I could see, there was only one other faculty member present. I wasn't at all sure what to do, but took heart when I noticed that the youngest girls, probably away from home for the first time, seemed every bit as bewildered as I. I smiled at them and drew startled, wide-eyed expressions in return. It occurred to me that some of them had probably never been this close to a foreigner before. I bowed. They bowed. We waited in line together and were handed plastic slippers and hospital gowns as well as small baskets for our clothes and shoes. We then

waited in another line to enter a room where, presumably, we would have our medical examinations. A tiny girl, smaller than her friends, gazed up at me with a look somewhere between excitement and fear. I introduced myself to her in formal Japanese, just as I had learned in my first lesson in conversational Japanese. She broke into giggles, then bowed and solemnly introduced herself to me, her friends still giggling behind hands held to their mouths.

My determination to act confident and congenial wavered as soon as I entered the next room and realized that there were no private changing areas, no discreet doctor's cubicles. I was going to have to slip into my hospital gown out in the open, in a room filled with curious Japanese schoolgirls. Still worse, as I unfolded the gown I saw that it was intended to fit a Japanese junior high girl, not a tall *gaijin* woman.

I'd read about the Japanese virtue *gaman* (perseverance, endurance). In the *gaman* spirit, I decided I'd get through this as best I could. I started to take off my blouse and skirt, then noticed that the Japanese were disrobing differently. Somehow they managed to get out of their clothes and into the hospital gown without revealing an inch of extra flesh. It was impressive to watch: a flurry of arms and *voila!* The gown on, the clothes off, the underwear zipping out from underneath to go folded neatly, with everything else, into the mesh basket. Maybe it was a skill learned long ago in cramped living quarters or something you practiced before taking a communal Japanese bath. My American body didn't know how to do that Houdini bit with the underwear, especially with some two hundred pairs of eyes taking in my failure.

I felt my *gaman* slipping.

I had an unusually brief interview with the doctor. He knew as much English as I knew Japanese. When he pantomimed that I should open wide, I volunteered *"Ahhh!"* the way I would in America, and he almost fell off his chair.

"Why you *do* that?" he asked, sounding both hurt and offended.

I learned later that the whole process is quieter in Japan. With visible relief, the doctor waved me on to yet another line.

This was for chest X-rays. Two young men with fashionably permed hair, probably in their early twenties, had the dream job of administering the X-rays to hundreds of nubile schoolgirls. And to me. Once again it became clear that my prior education had been incomplete. The girls went up to the X-ray machine, pressed against it, then opened their hospital gowns, with nary a hint of indiscretion. I could tell by anxious glances in my direction that they expected I would again embarrass myself and them when it came