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*Snow Country* was published as a full novel in 1948, after Kawabata revised the story that had been published in installments in a magazine from 1935 to 1941

# ANALYZING YASUNARI KAWABATA'S SNOW COUNTRY JAPAN'S FIRST NOBEL PRIZE IN LITERATURE WINNER

YOKO MUNAKATA

*Over fifty years ago in 1968, novelist Yasunari Kawabata became the first Japanese writer to earn the Nobel Prize in Literature. Tsurumi University professor Rintaro Katayama recounts Kawabata's seventy-two years of life as well as his masterpieces *Thousand Cranes* and *Snow Country*, which are well known and treasured outside Japan.*

YASUNARI Kawabata winning the Nobel Prize in Literature twenty-three years after the end of World War Two was a sign that the world was taking note of Japanese literature, and caused a great stir within Japan. The Nobel Committee for Literature, remarking on the selection process, praised Kawabata's work for its narrative mastery, which expresses the essence of the Japanese mind with great sensibility.

That sensibility was due in no small part to the author's early years. His childhood and upbringing were both unhappy. Born in 1899, he lost his father,

mother and older sister at the age of ten, and then lost his grandparents who had taken him in at fifteen, becoming an orphan. Raised by strangers, he was always assessing how those around him were feeling, and spent his youth believing that he was not normal.

According to Katayama, “Kawabata’s works reveal a strong influence from the various emotional ripples caused by a lonely upbringing, more so than the upbringing itself.”

*Snow Country* focuses on Shimamura, an “idler and third-rate writer writing about ballet he hasn’t even seen,” a geisha named Komako, who works in a hot springs town, and another girl named Yoko. Kawabata spent 1946 to 1947 revising the story that had been published in installments in a magazine from 1935 to 1941; the full novel was published in 1948. The novel’s famous opening lines are: “The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country. The earth lay white under the night sky.”

Katayama states that *Snow Country* possesses three noteworthy traits. First, while it is written in the third person, the novel’s fantastical worldview is the exact opposite of objective. “You could say that we see all of Shimamura’s delusions, which was an unprecedented way of writing a novel. In the opening scene, we could substitute the word ‘I’ for ‘Shimamura’ and it would still read naturally.”

The second trait is the subtle beauty of the writing style. According to the professor, the beautiful portrayal of each scene is like observing a painting. By watching a world that is very much not reality depicted as if it were, the reader is lured into a lovely fantasy.

The third trait is its eroticism, even though there are no direct depictions of lovemaking in



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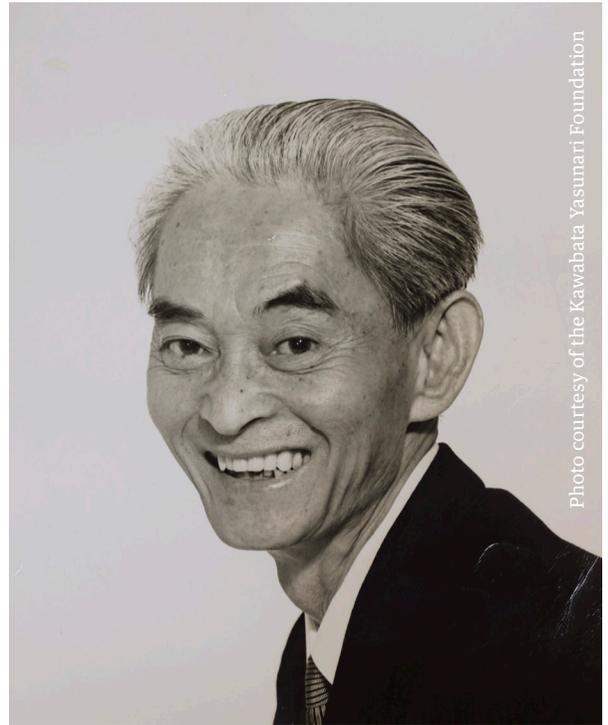


Photo courtesy of the Kawabata Yasunari Foundation

Yasunari Kawabata, the first Japanese author to win the Nobel Prize in Literature

*Snow Country*. That could be deliberate on the part of Kawabata, or he may have wanted to avoid using language expressly prohibited by postwar censors. Instead, he conveys the action to the reader with indirect phrases such as “Now, there was something between the two of them.” In doing so, the reader’s imagination is stimulated and the main characters—especially Komako—appear more beautiful, free and bold.

At the turn of the twentieth century, European novels began to depict the inner workings of the writer’s mind. Kawabata wrote about the inner mind in a way that did not simply mimic the West, and also expressed Japan’s classic, traditional beauty. Westerners responded to this and felt an admiration for the East, which is why Kawabata’s works have been praised as a “a bridge between East and West.”

Sadly, four years after receiving his Nobel Prize, Kawabata took his own life in 1972 in his workroom. But his works live on, and have been translated into English, German, French, Chinese and Korean, among many other languages, and are still read and appreciated by many people outside Japan. If you have not read a Yasunari Kawabata novel, pick up a copy of *Snow Country* and experience its wonderfully dreamlike world. 7