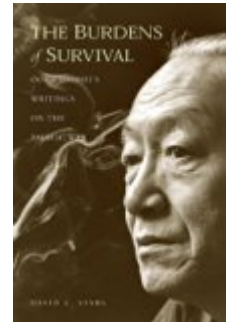


David C. Stahl. *The Burdens of Survival: Ooka Shohei's Writings on the Pacific War.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003. 374 pp. \$49.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8248-2540-9.



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Four quotes comprise the epigraph of David C. Stahl's important new book, *The Burdens of Survival: Ooka Shohei's Writings on the Pacific War*. They encapsulate Stahl's thesis that Ooka Shohei came to terms with his wartime experiences and the wartime experiences of Japan only through his long post-war writing career. The first two, by Kai Erickson and by the theologian Martin Buber, provide the sources of Ooka's inspiration: haunting memory and crippling guilt. The second two, by Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich and by Robert Jay Lifton, suggest that the process of working through even the most crippling guilt can productively enable the guilt-wracked survivor to reintegrate productively with society.

Ooka, who is perhaps best known in the West for the novel *Nobi* (1951), translated by Ivan Morris as *Fires on the Plain* (1957), and the memoir *Tsukamaru made* (1948), epitomized the Japanese recruit of the latter days of the Pacific War; he was ill-trained, badly commanded, and largely abandoned by the central military bureaucracy. Conscripted in 1944 at the age of thirty-five, Ooka received three months of basic training and was

subsequently sent to the front where he served as his battalion's communications man until his battalion was routed and numerous men killed. Captured in late January 1945, he was one of the few who survived, possibly because of his capture and ensuing imprisonment. Survival was very traumatic for Ooka, who was troubled that he, an unworthy soldier, had survived when so many others had not. Stahl's provocative book suggests that Ooka only began to process his guilt feelings in early, overtly autobiographical works, and that this process was actually the theme that grounded his postwar writing career.

Stahl posits that writing became Ooka's survivor mission, allowing him first to process and then to come to terms with his own survival, by working through issues related to the collective Japanese war experience. Stahl structures his argument around works written at different points in Ooka's career: his early reportage and memoirs (1948-50); *Nobi*; *Musashino fujin* (1950, *Lady Musashino*); *Kaei* (1959, translated by Dennis Washburn as *The Shade of Blossoms*, 1998); and the monumental *Reite senki* (1967-1969, *The Bat-*

tle for Leyte Island), serialized for almost three years in *Chuo Koron*. Stahl contends that these works, which also can be seen as a metaphor for various points in the national recovery, reflect the different stages of Ooka's healing process. Although bio-critical studies of this sort are not the most popular approach to literature at present, this kind of approach is useful here because proper appreciation of Ooka's work demands a consideration of his life.

Stahl's methodological approach relies almost entirely on the works of Kali Tal and Robert Jay Lifton, who have written on the literature of trauma and survival. Tal puts forward the idea that personal trauma irrevocably alters the storytelling of survivors, in such ways that it differs radically from trauma literature written by those without personal experience of trauma. Lifton provides the concept of the death encounter. Because survivors have, in some critical sense, faced death, the survivor-narrator experiences "deep-seated feelings of death guilt, self-recrimination and loss" (p. 8). For Lifton, the "survivor's challenge is ultimately to formulate their [sic] traumatic death-encounter in such a way as to reestablish the symbolic connection, integrity, and vitality lost through the extreme experience" by working through specific survivor themes, such as "death imprints, death guilt, bearing witness, impaired mourning and formulation" (p. 9). Using these methodological tools, Stahl examines significant works in Ooka's career to reveal how he, though emotionally scarred by his experience, eventually recovered and ultimately discovered an ethical mission to tell the Japan's war story in a way that fulfilled "his solemn obligations as a survivor to the living and the dead" (p. 13).

Chapter 1 examines Ooka's memoirs and wartime diaries, most written after repatriation. Stahl's discussion revolves around concepts such as death immersion, psychic numbing, death guilt, the need to witness, and impaired formulation. Stahl contends that writing allowed Ooka the

outlet to begin to process serious psychological issues that he had suppressed. By framing his discussion in these terms, Stahl relates the trajectory of Ooka's wartime experiences to his psychological reintegration and gradual emergence as an ethically motivated writer. Ooka's self-critical and highly self-reflexive writing lends itself to this analysis.

The first stage was death immersion. Certain that he would die at the front, Ooka took solace in resignation and an accompanying belief that self-sacrifice in the Pacific War was "devoid of value and significance" (p. 23). To protect himself, Ooka distances himself emotionally from his comrades and, as far as possible, from wartime atrocities. The following quote from one of his memoirs is typical:

"Since death was imminent, I had good reason to try to figure out just what kind of a person I had been.... After examining each moment of my life from youth to conscription, I came to realize that I was a nobody. Eventually, I reached the conviction that I wouldn't be missed when I died pointlessly on this isolated, unknown island in the South Seas. I thereupon stopped fearing death" (p. 27)

Although Ooka's depression deepened as the situation worsened, it was accompanied, almost paradoxically, by the primal urges of his animal body to survive. His behavior, prior to capture, and revisited in a myriad of memoirs, illustrates this. At one point, Ooka, who is recovering from malaria, leaves ahead of three comrades to rejoin the others at company headquarters. This action seals his fate. He never sees his comrades again, as fierce bombardment starts just as he departs, nor can he reach headquarters. He flees into the jungle and prepares to kill himself, delaying his death, only for a last sip of water. He moves further into the jungle when he discovers his canteen is empty. He then decides to alert the enemy, which, he reasoned, would result in his death. However just as an American soldier approached,

machine-gun fire in the distance drew the soldier away, rather than to the tree under which Ooka was sprawled. Finally, unable to put off the inevitable, Ooka makes two failed attempts to commit suicide, first with a dud grenade, then his rifle. He loses consciousness and comes to when he was being taken prisoner. Capture ended Ooka's death immersion but marked, in Stahl's words, "the beginning of an even longer struggle with the burdens of survival" (p. 36).

According to Stahl, Ooka's early tendency to view his survival in terms of luck (*un*) and chance (*guuzen*) allowed him to avoid the complexities of his role (whether passive or active) in his own survival, thus avoiding guilt. Numerous quotations hammer home Stahl's point. Indifference--Ooka's primary coping strategy at the front--served him equally well as a prisoner and immediately after repatriation. Yet, repressed emotions occasionally filter through Ooka's barriers. In these instances, writes Stahl, "Ooka expresses a range of powerful emotions--relief, joy, shame, self-pity..., and grief" which he quickly closes off" (p. 54).

Stahl discusses how in early autobiographical works, Ooka wrote about how ill-equipped he was as a soldier, linking his inferiority as a soldier to natural tendencies, and to the combination of poor training, poor equipment, and poor guidance. While it is tempting to read such passages at face value, particularly in light of other narratives about the arrogance of the Japanese military officer especially in the latter days of the Pacific War, Stahl gently reminds his readers of the constructed nature of confession. By foregrounding his ineptitude and scapegoating many of his comrades, Ooka can absolve himself of guilt concerning his complicity in any war death. In particular, Stahl notes how Ooka is blind to his own instinctual desire to survive, although he easily recognizes survival egoism in his comrade's actions. Psychic numbing, Ooka's immersion in the death experience, and his anxious attempts to avoid guilt,

shape his early writings in a specific way. Stahl shows how Ooka shies away from confessions that will move him to deeper understanding. Nevertheless, Stahl clearly believes that documenting this problematic record was a necessary first step in Ooka's recovery process. Stahl quotes Lifton: "Without guilt-associated struggles around fidelity to the dead and the experience of deadness, and to oneself as a witness, no ... renewal or formulation is feasible" (p. 69). Though Ooka is as yet unable to fully understand his own behavior, he begins to approach greater understanding of the behavior--both laudable and deplorable--of his comrades.

Middle-aged soldiers, like himself, come off badly. In contrast to the idealistic young soldiers, almost all of whom perished, Ooka portrays most middle-aged soldiers as lazy and selfish, lacking in "patriotic spirit and sense of obligation" (p. 73). Stahl's examples include the toadying Yasuda, the corrupt Nakayama, the gluttonous Ikeda, and others. Ooka's dismissal of his comrades allows him to avoid fully critiquing his own behavior, while nevertheless permitting him to begin to bear witness. Stahl rationalizes Ooka's inability to see his own survival egoism in the following quote: "To openly acknowledge the primacy of the instinct of self-preservation in extremity is to deny the viability of human bonds. In Ooka's case, this would have entailed confronting the fact that the ultimate price of human survival in human terms may well have been the lives of one or more of his comrades" (p. 89).

Until he could fully process the conflicting emotions and behavior surrounding his own survival, Ooka could not mourn for the war dead. While Ooka was unable to fully process the war in his early memoirs, Stahl convincingly shows how, over time, Ooka was increasingly willing to consider both his own accountability and the accountability of others. The transition from "static" to "animating guilt" (p. 93) moves Ooka to the sec-

ond step in his survivor mission, which Stahl examines in chapters 2 and 3.

Chapter 2 focuses on *Nobi* (1951), arguably Ooka's most famous work.[1] This work, a technical masterpiece, is a fictional treatment of Ooka's frontline experiences. It contains many episodes that mirror those in his memoirs. Because of the overlap between biography, memoir and novel, there is perhaps a natural tendency to read *Nobi* as a sincere confession. Stahl cautions readers to resist this. "Tamura's memoir," he writes is "an unstable combination of confession, dissembling, omission and concealment" (p. 96).

Focusing precisely on these points, Stahl explores the slippage between truth and fiction that characterizes Ooka's early work. Ooka himself was acutely aware that fictionalizing his war experiences gave him the leeway to explore his own experiences more fully. Unlike "Ooka," the writing-subject of the autobiographical memoirs, who struggles against fully articulating his thoughts and emotions, Private Tamura, the insane narrator of *Nobi* (and Ooka's stated alter ego) appears to welcome this challenge, although the structure of the work calls into question the narrator's ability to tell his story truthfully. Tamura's memoir is compromised by his unstable mental state and his motivations for framing his story in a particular way. Stahl isolates numerous passages that show Private Tamura's tendency to conceal. Yet, in Tamura's fictional memoirs, as in Ooka's factual ones, repressed truths and emotions bubble to the surface:

"Fatal truths ... slip out from behind his carefully crafted veil of fiction. Close examination ... not only facilitates separation of truth from lies, but also articulates why Tamura ultimately fails to accomplish the explicit aim of his memoir--formulating his traumatic battlefield experience in a such a way as to bring about recovery and renewal" (p. 101).

In this light, Stahl examines five critical scenes of atrocity in *Nobi*. Each includes increas-

ingly long periods where Tamura suffers from amnesia. The narrator's amnesia at such critical points is somewhat suspect, forcing the reader to question Tamura's self-presentation. Stahl argues that his amnesia allows him to reject the very real possibility that he had consciously chosen to eat human flesh, or worse, had hunted down human targets in order to survive. These scenes of atrocity are interlaced with scenes making direct reference to Christianity, the religion of the Filipino villagers, and one that had appealed to Tamura as a young man. Stahl suggests that Tamura avoids personal responsibility by framing his experiences in religious terms, with himself first as martyr and saint, doubting faith and troubled by a God who would create such horror, and lastly as the Messiah, God's chosen one, "divinely authorized to punish others for their evil" (p. 113). It is only in Stahl's dismissal of any authentic religious struggle on the part of Tamura that I take exception to his analysis. Clearly, the character's convenient bouts of amnesia and his framing of many of the incidents in religious terms, begs the reader to look behind the silences, but to my mind, there is nothing in the text that suggests that Tamura's religious struggles were entirely fraudulent.

Nevertheless, Stahl's analysis of *Nobi* proves fruitful. The fictional Tamura, like Ooka himself, had suffered from traumatic battlefield experiences. The postwar surfacing of suppressed memories, particularly those concerning cannibalism (the most extreme form of survival egoism), has driven the fictional character insane. Yet, despite Tamura's stated desire to work through the memories to a point of reintegration, his impaired formulation prevents this. Only near the end of the fictional memoir can Tamura articulate--however imperfectly--his debt to those who died. By contrast, Ooka the writer made substantial progress toward survivor formulation by fictionalizing his war experience in this manner. It allowed him to more fully express his confusion and isolation, his psychic immersion in death, and his loss of any purpose other than animal survival. Thus,

through writing, Ooka, progressed in recovering his sense of purpose as a human being with social obligations, and came closer to the point where he could fully mourn the dead.

In chapter 3, Stahl compares *Musashino fujin* (1950) and *Kaei* (1959) to show how Ooka had moved from what Stahl characterized in his introduction as "anxious rejection and scapegoating of his fallen comrades to intimate identification, empathy, and mourning" by 1958 (p. 12). Thematically quite different from Ooka's initial "war literature" (not least because both are set in postwar Japan), both novels nevertheless fit into the paradigm of recovery posited by Stahl. In each, a troubled woman commits suicide. In the first, neither characters nor narrator can empathize with the character who kills herself. The second novel, by contrast, fully humanizes the suicidal character, and sees her suicide not simply as a result of personal decisions or shortcomings, but also as society's tragedy. Stahl believes this narrative shift reflects significant recovery on Ooka's part. In discussing the earlier work in terms of Ooka's survivor mission, Stahl states that, though Ooka's recovery was as yet incomplete, in *Musashino fujin* he "was clearly better able to orchestrate tragedy than he was to merge psychologically and empathize with the woman inextricably caught up in it" (p. 171). In other words, though Ooka's recovery process had reached the point where he was less interested in shifting blame and could see the larger nuances of the web of circumstances, he was still engaged in "defensive rationalization" (p. 171). Thus he employs the ironic and detached perspectives of his male characters and the impersonal omniscient narrator from which to narrate Michiko's suicide.

The publication of *Kaei* followed a pivotal turning point in Ooka's recovery. In 1958, Ooka learned that a ship was going to the Philippines to gather the remains of the war dead. Quite to his surprise, he felt his presence on the mission was essential. The next morning he realized that his

best possible response would be to act as witness for those who could no longer speak. He then wrote a requiem poem, which mentioned his comrades by name and memorialized their lives, suffering, and deaths. In the requiem, for the first time, Ooka accepted his own survival and moved to the open expression of grief and total identification with the dead soldiers. Stahl clearly believes that the pivotal emotional turning point expressed in the requiem indicates that Ooka, the burdened war survivor, had moved absolutely from "static to animating forms of guilt, from passivity to survivor mission" (p. 184).

His changed emotional perspective can be seen not only in the requiem poem, but also in all later works, including *Kaei*. The narrative is much more compassionate toward Yoko, a bar hostess-prostitute than the narrator of *Musashino fujin* is to Michiko, a respectable housewife. Particular circumstances have led to Yoko's life of shame, but the character is neither dehumanized nor treated with cool detachment. While Michiko's preparations for death are narrated from an external (and unknowing perspective), Yoko's are focalized primarily from her own perspective. Moreover, the "narrator psychologically and emotionally joins Yoko, empathizing with her most intimately between the time she takes her overdose and the moment of her death" (p. 201). Consequently, Stahl concludes, "the reader will sense that as when he composed his requiem to his dead comrades, Ooka was quietly grieving as he re-created Yoko/Mutsuko's tragic life" (p. 202). In this manner, Stahl suggests, Ooka is able to portray a decent woman who is destroyed by a callous and egoistical society. By using the image of the fleeting cherry blossom to symbolically represent Yoko's tragic life, Ooka associates her misfortune with the many tragedies of Japan's wartime experience and postwar recovery. In other words, Yoko's death is not just a solitary event, but represents the collective tragedy of all the Japanese people. Stahl believes that the compassion, understanding, and "appropriate blaming" (as opposed

to scapegoating) in *Kaei* reveals Ooka has reached the beginning point of the last part of his survivor mission: to find meaning in deaths of so many, and in the pain and suffering of himself and other burdened survivors.

This survivor mission is at the heart of *Reite senki*, Ooka's "responsible" account of a horribly failed offensive. The work provides a comprehensive in-depth account of the failed battle at Leyte Island, using all resources that were available to him. Stahl states that *Reite senki* and *Minodoroto futatabi* (1969, *Return to Mindoro Island*), a memoir written late in his career, "brought Ooka's formulative journey to a positive vitalizing conclusion" (p. 13). *Reite Senki* shows that many of the Japanese soldiers had fought well, despite numerous irresponsible upper-level decisions. Ooka's primary concern was to tell the stories of those who died; thus, he focuses primarily on frontline experiences in a way which links these experiences to upper-level decisions, thus presenting defeat from three perspectives: "general, specific, and individual" (p. 243). Stahl's discussion of *Reite senki* also reveals Ooka's staggering versatility as a writer. His summary and analysis of Ooka's work provides much to mull over, including a clear presentation of how Leyte Island was lost as a result of the tactics of modern warfare, not in spite of them.

Stahl's conclusion, "Lingering Obligations," recaps his argument succinctly: Ooka, a heavily burdened survivor of the Pacific War, first had to come to terms with his own war experiences through his postwar war memoirs and early novels; then, once he himself reached a point of greater integration and formulation, he could use his knowledge in his survivor mission. Thus through writing, Ooka served as a voice for the dead and those who could not speak and also as a moral conscience for the Japanese people in the process of remembering the war. In the process, Ooka also healed himself.

Stahl's study of Ooka Shohei is long overdue. Ooka is an important writer, whose postwar works successfully span numerous genres. To date, however, English language scholarship is limited; moreover, most focuses on his early masterpiece *Fires on the Plain*. As significant, is the fact that Ooka is a writer whose personal life and work were inextricably linked to war, survival, and recovery. By choosing to foreground the influence of personal history on Ooka's literary output, Stahl makes the reasonable (yet provocative) claim, that Ooka's postwar literary career flourished precisely because he was a survivor. Stahl's readings of Ooka's work reveal his transformation from a guilt-ridden individual into a grateful survivor with a mission. Stahl's close readings are insightful and challenging, and at some points even elegant. They will be of interest to both literary scholars and historians. At times, however, they are frustrating. This was particularly true in the (lengthy) chapter 1, where Stahl presents his methodological approach and attempts to tease out the often-blurred relationship between the "real" and the "remembered" in Ooka's early works. It is not completely fair of me to fault Stahl at this point. The blurring exists first of all in Ooka's work, and his self-reflexivity and conscious overlapping of events (across works, and genres) complicates matters further. Because of this, clear explication of Ooka's memoirs is a difficult task. Stahl's occasionally cautious prose only made the blurred quality all the more apparent. Although Stahl's argument is carefully researched and argued, some of his early discussions lack a necessary sureness. Thus, despite many elegant passages and extremely insightful conclusions, the first part of the book is, paradoxically, a chore to read. By chapter 2, however, Stahl's own narrative voice settles into a confident style that complements the numerous translated passages from the Ooka works under discussion. Despite my minor stylistic quibbles, David C. Stahl has written an important new book, which makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the

works of Ooka Shohei and on our evolving understanding of the Pacific War. This reader gladly welcomes his contribution.

Note

[1]. *Nobi* was translated by Ivan Morris in 1957 as *Fires on the Plains* and made into a haunting film by Ichikawa Kon in 1959. Stahl's discussion of *Nobi* clearly articulates the limitations of both translation and film adaptation. Morris tended to excise passages where the constructed nature of the fictional memoirs was most clearly articulated; Ichikawa's film focuses on one man's futile struggles against the inhumanity of war. As a consequence, both Morris's and Ichikawa's Tamura is far more passive and weak than the crafty Tamura of the original.

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