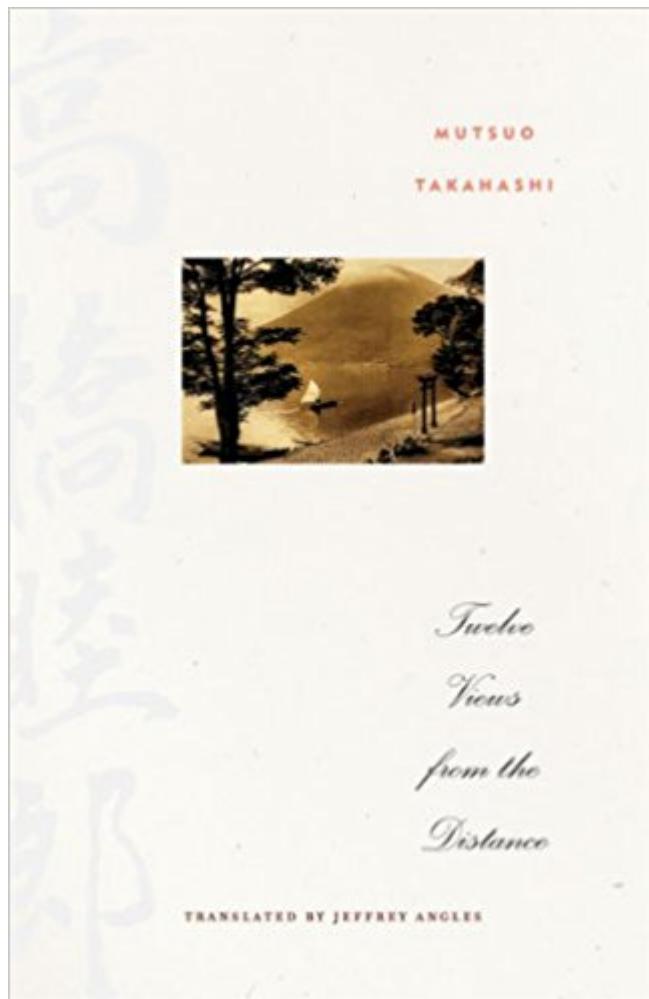


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Twelve Views From The Distance



Synopsis

From one of the foremost poets in contemporary Japan comes this entrancing memoir that traces a boy's childhood and its intersection with the rise of the Japanese empire and World War II. Originally published in 1970, this translation is the first available in English. In twelve chapters that visit and revisit critical points in his boyhood, *Twelve Views from the Distance* presents a vanished time and place through the eyes of an accomplished poet. Recounting memories from his youth, Mutsuo Takahashi captures the full range of his internal life as a boy, shifting between his experiences and descriptions of childhood friendships, games, songs, and school. With great candor, he also discusses the budding awareness of his sexual preference for men, providing a rich exploration of one man's early queer life in a place where modern, Western-influenced models of gay identity were still unknown. Growing up poor in rural southwestern Japan, far from the urban life that many of his contemporaries have written about, Takahashi experienced a reality rarely portrayed in literature. In addition to his personal remembrances, the book paints a vivid portrait of rural Japan, full of oral tradition, superstition, and remnants of customs that have quickly disappeared in postwar Japan. With profuse local color and detail, he re-creates the lost world that was the setting for his beginnings as a gay man and poet.

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Customer Reviews

"It is magnificent that in this book, *Twelve Views from the Distance*, the poet Mutsuo Takahashi has managed to achieve firm prose that, while unmistakably the work of a poet, shines with a black luster much like a set of drawers crafted by a master of old. This book is a magnificent collection of

sensations and of memories, much like the toys we might find in a dark closet. The part toward the end in which the theme of his *Search for a father* crystallizes in a copy of an erotic book radiates a certain tragic beauty." Yukio Mishima

Mutsuo Takahashi is one of Japan's leading living poets. He has published more than three dozen anthologies of poetry and is a prolific essayist, literary historian, and critic. Jeffrey Angles is associate professor of modern Japanese literature and translation studies at Western Michigan University. He is the author of *Writing the Love of Boys: Origins of Bishonen Culture in Modernist Japanese Literature* (Minnesota, 2011).

This book is an excellent example of how an author and a translator can create a beautiful work. No matter how good the work being translated, it is only as good as the translator's skills in conveying it in English. In this work we see the sad but poetic youth of Takahashi and details of Nippon culture that are delightful and entertaining. Even if you know nothing of Takahashi, read this book and enjoy a wonderful trip to Nippon of the 1940's and 50's.

Not sure if this was quite what I expected - focuses on his youth - but without a clear path to his later life. The recounting of activities during the war are very good, however.

Mutsuo Takahashi knows how to make beauty from suffering. What skill could be more urgently needed now? How lucky that this book, originally published in 1970, has at last been translated by Jeffrey Angles in poetic language that is as gorgeous as it is precise. Raised in poverty by day laborers, Takahashi appears to be one of those rare persons able to use every misery as fuel for insight. The twelve chapters of this book are indeed "twelve views", or angles, and the perspective gained thus of violence, sexuality and rural Japan is complex and unflinching. "I have been loved by many different spirits," Takahashi writes. This book preserves an understanding of "places outside the world we cannot see with eyes alone" that seems to have been eradicated in modern Japan as surely as the rivers have been lined with cement. "Spirituality" is what it usually gets called but it is a spirituality devoid of wishfulness and precise as cartography. The only other book I've found that conveys this level of (how to say it?) rural Japanese spiritual acumen is Michiko Ishimure's *Lake of Heaven*. Of the twelve views, the view of sexuality is certain to grab one's attention. (You are also unlikely to find another truly compelling literary depiction of sex with chickens.) But, besides the understanding of "communities outside the world", what I find most stunning about the book is its

deep understanding of violence. After describing a beating at the hands of his mother, Takahashi writes, "It sounds strange to say this, but when adults behave violently toward children, they always seem much sadder than the children they mistreat. Children do not fail to notice that, even as they tremble in fear." Justly lauded for his translations of Tada Chimako and other Japanese poets, Jeffrey Angles is able to render Mutsuo Takahashi's swirling, image-saturated poetic prose in English that is both clear and full of emotion. Indispensable for anyone interested in Japanese literature, rural Japan, or the lives of gay men, this book deserves to be widely read for its profound understanding of the unseen world, the nature of violence, and the transformation of suffering.

Katsushika Hokusai is best known for "The Great Wave Off Kanagawa," a masterpiece of Japanese woodblock prints, ukiyo-e. And even though "The Great Wave" was a part of a series, Thirty-Six Views of Fuji, it has almost eclipsed the rest of Hokusai's work. Similarly, the poet Mutsuo Takahashi is best known for his homoerotic poetry, particularly the thousand-line "Ode," which has drawn comparisons to Walt Whitman's work for its merging of the sacred reverence and corporeal pleasure. But as powerful as "Ode" is, it shouldn't necessarily cast a shadow over Takahashi's other work, particularly his newly-translated collection of essays, *Twelve Views from the Distance*. And although Takahashi's examination of sexuality doesn't start until 3/4ths of the way through the collection with "The Shore of Sexuality," his work (ably translated by Jeffrey Angles) shows a lyrical sensuousness throughout that hint at his sexual awakening. Interestingly enough, he connects early childhood games with his relatives—the equivalent to saying "Airplane" to his burgeoning sexuality. These games would soon escalate to more explicit adolescent explorations, but sexual feelings, explains Takahashi, "connects the individual to the outside world." In other words, sexuality is not merely an internal expression, but an outward expression bridging him to humanity at large. The flipside of that bridge, however, is violence. And while much of the violence that Takahashi relates is on a personal level—fights with his classmates, for instance, or beatings from his mother—it reflects the violence wreaked upon Japan itself both during and after the war, recalling, for instance, the leftover mines that would occasionally break apart a ship. The pieces

collected in *Twelve Views from the Distance* originally appeared sequentially in a Japanese periodical, and, as such, don't have the narrative cohesion that one expects of a memoir; instead, each essay is discreet and thematic. And although the essays have a chronological flow starting with his earliest memories and moving to his later ones—the chronology is never strict, and Takahashi freely moves back and forth in time not only within the collection, but at times within the same essay. The earlier essays, as well, have a more abstract feel to them. Immediately, with "The Snow of Memory," Takahashi interrogates the trustworthiness of his recollections, and the subsequent essays center upon certain constants: his grandmother's house, for instance; Japanese folklore and legends; and Japanese spiritual beliefs. But as the collection progresses, Takahashi is able to draw upon memory more reliably, and the essays become more concrete and narrative-oriented. The constant in these essays, however—much like Mount Fuji in *Thirty-Six Views of Fuji*—is Takahashi's mother. Widowed at a young age, Takahashi's mother left him in the care of his grandparents to work in China, and soon thereafter, take up with a lover. When she later returns to claim him, they begin a relationship fraught with both love and confusion, amidst crippling poverty. His mother's presence permeates the book; she, herself, is a paradoxical figure, someone who both physically intervenes when someone threatens the young Takahashi as well as visiting her own violence upon her son. Takahashi's mother animates the book as much as Takahashi's prose does. And while there's no "Great Wave" to overwhelm them both, the views that Takahashi offers here are at once touching and troubling.

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