

**Translating Science Fiction: Judith Merrill, Kaributsu Ba' in Japan**

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This paper looks at the influential work in sf translation of the American-Canadian science fiction writer, editor, and anthologist, Judith Merrill (1923-1997). In the early 1970s, Merrill spent two brief periods in Japan, learning something about Japanese language and culture, assisting with the translation of her own critical writing and anthologies of sf stories into Japanese, and interviewing individuals on Japanese culture for a series of free-lance radio broadcasts in Toronto. Most interesting was her experimentation with new approaches to translating Japanese sf into English, for an American-published anthology of top Japanese sf stories. Translation of Japanese sf stories is said to be difficult because of the lack of a future indicative tense in the Japanese language, and because of the invented nature of the language and landscapes used in sf. Merrill did not know Japanese but she was good at learning syntax, so quickly learned the construction of Japanese language. Between that, her dictionaries, and her expertise in science fiction writing, she was able to establish and work with a team in Japan.<sup>1</sup> Although her formal obligation to produce what she and the Japanese translation team with whom she collaborated called 'The Book' failed, her longer-term impact on Japanese sf translation and Japanese avant-garde writing can be judged a success. In a sense, Merrill was 'in' Japan long before she first visited in the early 1970, in the translation of her early science fiction stories, and her critical writing and anthologies, into the Japanese language, and because these respected publications remain in print and

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influential in Japan to this day, she is there still.<sup>2</sup> But she also had an obvious impact in Japanese sf circles, connections that endured long past her tenure there.

For her circle of Japanese translator friends, she was Kaributsu Ba'asan - 'Monster Grandma.' The name encompasses multiple meanings, projects a mixed message. The translators say that grandmothers are highly respected in Japanese culture, and that 'monster' stands in for the sf genre. But the designation might also stand for her impact - both beloved and frustrating - on Japanese sf circles.

Judith Merrill believed in the power (and obligation) of science fiction to imagine alternate/probable futures. Asked during her working visit to Tokyo in 1972 to write on translation for the Japanese *SF Magazine*, Merrill realized that she was a translator in everything she did: between 'counter-culture' and 'establishment,' between Canadians and American political refugees in Canada, and between late sixties visions of possible futures in North America, the UK, and Japan. 'Before that,' she writes, 'when I was writing s-f, I was in a sense trying to translate visions of possible futures for people trapped in concepts of the past--or trying to translate what I perceived as realities of the present (by means of images of the future, cast in literary forms of the past!) to people whose present-realit[ies] were different from mine.'<sup>3</sup>

After a hiatus from her role as the premier editor in the American sf scene in the 1960s, The Book in Japan project, which was initiated in 1970, re-connected her to science fiction, overcoming her skepticism about its relevance in coping with (more translating) contemporary world problems.<sup>4</sup> In moving to Toronto from the US in 1968, over the US policy in Viet Nam, she had consciously turned away from American sf genre. But her encounter in 1970 with Japanese language, culture, and science fiction

writers and, in particular, translators changed all that. Initial attraction, she writes in her memoir, was a unique chance to meet Russian sf writers.<sup>5</sup> She wrote to her old sf writer friend, Katherine MacLean when she returned from the Japanese International Symposium in 1970, that she was only 'sort of' back:

I am only 'sort of' because I found an awful lot I didn't want to leave so soon in Japan. Like a language with no way of making a categorical statement about the future (can only express intention, wish, probability, etc. No way to say 'The sun will rise tomorrow'), also with no concept of 'either/or' or 'instead'—no words for the idea, apparently...it all adds up to a relativistic culture: lacking both absolute and dualism in its basics.<sup>6</sup>

And in her memoir she wrote that English translators of Japanese refer to a Japanese future tense but it is really a subjunctive: 'You cannot say directly that something will happen. You can say it should happen, you will make it happen, or it will probably happen—depending on the context in which you use the verb. The only way to be definite about the occurrence of an event is to use the past tense [or even the present tense] alongside the word tomorrow...this happens tomorrow, or even this happened tomorrow.'<sup>7</sup>

The implications of these fascinating cultural differences drew Merrill into a translating project that held for her many exciting prospects in connections between peoples and cultures: 'The whole idea that there is no future certainty in the culture fascinated me.'<sup>8</sup> She was from the start more interested in the translation aspect and its larger context than the science fiction itself. As she later described it:

In the broad sense, the idioms and images of science fiction have proved one of the best means of 'translation', between traditional and emergent cultures in North America. In the specific sense, I suspect s-f can now provide the best opening channel for meaningful values-and-concept exchanges between Japan and North America.<sup>9</sup>

This 'very mutual-causal group project,' *translation*, was the key element that sustained her interest.

Her involvement with translation began with in a typical Merrill way, helping a colleague, as she reveals in an interview she conducted with a Japanese translator by the name of Muto in Japan in 1972. She recalls that before returning home after the International Science Fiction Symposium in 1970, she found herself helping one of the Japanese delegates, a translator by the name of Saito, re-evaluate the work of a young English woman he had hired to polish his English translation of a Japanese science fiction story by Hoshi Shinichi. Merrill thought the English fine, but she could see why it would be thought it a poor version of the original, noting:

She'd done a beautiful job, and I could see why she had done it, because she was trying to make sure that everything that was there to start with was clearly there in the story, and of course unless you can to it by evocation and suggestion, you're not translating Hoshi.<sup>10</sup>

Although Merrill had not read Hoshi, she had spent time with him at the Symposium, so was familiar with his 'very, very simple' style. In polishing the English of the rough translation, the woman had produced 'a sort of Wellsian story', quite 'Victorian in style'. So, in search of that ephemeral 'evocation and suggestion' Merrill and Saito recruited a

second translator and started again from the original version of the story, searching collaboratively for exact meaning and making it sound like something Hoshi Shinichi *would* write.

Their process, which was slow and laborious, was also invigorating: Merrill would identify each phrase that seemed wrong, 'And I would just say what else, you know, give me some other meanings for this, and then they would give me some, and I would eventually come up with an English phrase which they both would like and say 'yes, that's right.'...and at the end we were all tremendously excited, you know....'<sup>11</sup> This is the seed from which she got interested in the specifics of translation, getting at the nucleus of the author's intent, rather than just the surface language. As she described it:

It's a matter of the Japanese translators working with me until they feel reasonably sure that I know, not just what is said, but what was meant. And what the character or the personality of the story or the writer is and so forth. And then I write it in English, not polishing something but writing it, and then they reread it and where they are dissatisfied I try to find something else. And it keeps going until they're satisfied and I am, so it's very slow, but we think we're actually getting translation. Not just information translation, but the best quality and style and cultural translation as well.<sup>12</sup>

Her methodical, interactive translation practice proved to be complex and time-consuming: the exercise with Hoshi's story required two hours to translate three paragraphs. Nevertheless, it was a process with which she was more than passing familiar, a direction she had been heading in for years. Merrill's approach always was to get at the heart of meanings, stemming from her work offering ways to read sf texts in her

book columns in the magazine of *Fantasy & Science Fiction* in the 1960s. As she reflects in her 1972 essay on translation for the Japanese *SF Magazine*:

The first step, I believe, is learning to travel in more than one direction, and think in more than one pattern, at the same time: learning to sustain awareness on many different levels of perception, and to communicate across all artificial barriers.

I could say I first learned these values in science fiction. Or I could say it was an unconscious approach to these values that first drew me to s-f. I doesn't matter which way I say it.<sup>13</sup>

The Japanese translators she worked with also used Merrill's ways of reading to further their own methods of deeply reading the works they translated. This was especially so in the case of Norio Ito's translation project on Samuel R. Delany's mid-sixties sf novel, *The Einstein Intersection*. He notes in his tribute to Merrill in 1997:

The reason [I consulted Judy] was that I could understand that mysterious novel to some degree only after my second try, in 1971, a year after Judy returned to Canada [after the Japanese international sf symposium]. I did not realize it at the time, but perhaps something had greatly changed inside me after I attended the SF symposium and encountered Judy. Whatever that change was, I used her influence to approach Delany's writing. It was no coincidence that the main discussion of my translator's afterword for Delany's *Nova* and *The Einstein Intersection* began with a quote from a long passage of Judy's. As a matter of fact, as in the afterwords I wrote, I adopted Judy's point of view when I faced Delany's work myself.<sup>14</sup>

Ito and Merrill 'shared bad habits,' as she puts it, of falling years behind in their translation projects (it took Ito more than a decade to finish translating Delany's *Einstein Intersection*), and also a reputation for a particularly intellectual and philosophical approach to meaning in translation – the latter commitment in part responsible for the former impediment. Ito addresses the issue in his remarkable translators 'Afterword' to *Einstein Intersection*:

One may say it is a 'crime' if a translator hangs onto an unfinished work and does not translate it. I have no response to that. I could not give up on this translation project because I had had a strong desire to translate this novel myself and to deepen my understanding of it beyond the shock it gave me when I was young.<sup>15</sup>

As it turned out, Merrill would have to deal, like Ito, with the 'crime' of 'hanging on to an unfinished work.' We hear the same thoughtful search for meaning at any cost—even at the cost of all breakdowns in communication--in Merrill's letters to her translator-collaborators over the years, as she struggles to repeatedly pick up the pieces of Japanese sf stories in various stages of translation. As she put it, it was 'One of those build-down things, where delays lead to silences creating blockages which create further delays and make communication IMPOSSIBLE—etc.'<sup>16</sup>

In a letter to one of the translation group, Asakura Hisashi, she amplifies the process (translator's block?) in painful detail. Asakura had after a lengthy silence on Merrill's part written asking that she at least drop them a postcard to say 'hello.' Merrill was forced to confess that it was not quite that simple:

I can not tell you how many times I have picked up one of your New Year's messages, and sat down to reply, and found myself burdened down with the

weight of (increasingly) overdue obligations and explanations to everyone, so that to write even one small postcard seemed to mean having to write a whole host of explanatory letters, which would grow to mean first having to complete at least one final draft of a story, which would---  
---would usually send me back to work for a while on [translating] a story, for which I lacked sufficient time-and-concentration—so a little more would get done, but you would not be answered.<sup>17</sup>

A visit in Toronto from another member of the translation group, Ito, in 1975 sent her rushing back to work on *The Book*; she referred to it in one letter to a North American friend in Japan as re-establishing “direct communication with that corner of my life.”<sup>18</sup> But the circle of collaboration was not sustainable at this distance and this point in her life.

In the end, after five more years of her guilt-ridden letters of apology for delays and her promises that things are or are about to move forward, Merrill failed to complete the planned anthology of translations – a letdown of the Japanese sf community she was to feel keenly over the years. Members of the Japanese Science Fiction Writers Club led by Tetsu Yano had counted on her skill and reputation as an sf anthologist of cutting edge speculative fiction to showcase the best, original Japanese work for English-speaking audiences. It was a golden opportunity for them in the early 1970s to turn around what had apparently become in the post-war era a one-way street - flooding Japan with translations of English-language literature, especially American literature. Wrote one Tokyo writer, Aritsune Toyota: ‘I am very much obligated to your kindly cooperation to make the Japanese sf Anthology. It is an epoch-making project for this country... A



hundred thousands of American sf have been translated and introduced to us, yet none of us to Americans.'<sup>19</sup> Although Merrill would place several of the translated stories in individual magazines and anthologies<sup>20</sup> and a translated anthology of Japanese science fiction stories was eventually published in the U.S. in 1989,<sup>21</sup> none of this added up to the original objective: to showcase outstanding, original Japanese science fiction stories produced in the heady days of the 1970s to American readers. Merrill's transgression meant that Japanese science fiction would simply not receive the international recognition that it might have.

Yet warm memories remained of Merrill's attempts to bridge the cultural gap in her own person and presence. Her nickname of Kaributsu Ba'asan - 'monster grandma' - is perhaps better seen as a mentor who caused much trouble and was much loved. When news of Merrill's death in 1997 reached Japan, the three key, surviving translators of the 'translation team' published tributes to her in the top Japanese SF magazine. In their tributes the emphasis is on her six-month visit to Japan in 1972 to work on *The Book*, and not her failure to produce it. Asakura - whose first exposure to science fiction was through reading Judith Merrill's 1950 anthology, *A Shot in the Dark* (Bantam) and who told me that in the 1960s he could hardly wait for her Books columns for *F&SF* to appear - remembered Merrill and her 1972 visit as a source of inspiration, even identity:

Looking back, I think that six months was an exceptionally fulfilling period in my empty life. I could have the precious experience of asking Merrill to clarify points in her works as I translated her critiques into Japanese. I also had fresh inspiration from her that made me feel, 'Ah, I am doing SF'.<sup>22</sup>

Tetsu Yano was the sf fan/author/translator with the greatest stake in *The Book*. He had met Merrill at the celebrated 1953 WorldCon in Philadelphia. He is remembered as the co-founder of the Japanese Science Fiction Writer's Club in 1963 and the one 'who almost single-handedly brought SF to the attention of the Japanese reading public after World War II...[and] translated over 350 books.' In his memorial tribute to Merrill Yano made touching remarks despite his anger at being let down by Merrill's failure to complete their anthology. He conceded (while not necessarily including himself in the pack) that 'because of her beautiful English and pronunciation, as well as her affection for the Japanese, Merrill became a wonderful friend, and also a teacher, to many translators. In the end, even though she caused considerable trouble on the Japanese side, she left Japan on a ship from Yokohama leaving behind many cherished memories among translators and writers.'<sup>23</sup>

In the end, Merrill's influence and effect was not solely - or even much at all - in the actual, fairly meager number of finished translations but the personal relationships made within the Japanese sf community. She saw the potential of the Japanese project in its ability to bridge – translate – cultures, making real human connections; as she declared: 'translating not just 'stories', but underlying assumptions about non-linear thinking processes as a model for the future, not just 'language', but heart.'<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>We are most grateful to Dr. Kenichi Matsui for his translations of the Japanese memorial tributes to Judith Merrill and other Japanese language materials used in this paper, and for his research assistance and interpretation work for the interviews Dianne Newell conducted with his assistance in Tokyo and Yokohama, December 2004. Hisahi Asakura, one of Merrill's triumvirate of Japanese translators and her most faithful correspondent, generously assisted with editing the Matsui translations and organizing the Tokyo interviews, and by answering many questions and providing copies of Japanese translations of Merrill's writings.

Merrill introduced the subject of her work with the Japanese translators of science in 'Japan Future Probable,' which appears as chapter 19 in her co-authored memoir, *Better to Have Loved: The Life of Judith Merrill* (Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 2002).

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<sup>2</sup> Judith Merrill, *SF-ni naniga dekimusuka (SF – What Can You Do With It?)* edited and translated by Hisashi Asakura (Tokyo: Shobunsha, 1972); Judith Merrill, ed., *The Year's Best SF*, 12 annual volumes, 1956-1968, translated by Hisashi Asakura (Tokyo: Sogen SF Books, various. years).

<sup>3</sup> Library and Archives of Canada [hereafter LAC], Judith Merrill Fonds, v. 33, 'Science Fiction. Judith Merrill, Afterword' [typescript], 1972, 4a.

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<sup>5</sup> Judith Merrill, 'Japan Future Probable,' in Merrill and Pohl-Weary, *Better to Have Loved*, 210.

<sup>6</sup> NAC, Merrill Fonds, v 10, Merrill to MacLean, 12 Oct 1970).

<sup>7</sup> Merrill, 'Japan Future Probable', 213.

<sup>8</sup> Merrill, 'Japan Future Probable', 213.

<sup>9</sup> 'Science Fiction. Judith Merrill, Afterword', 4a.

<sup>10</sup> NAC, Merrill Fonds, v. 30, 'Language', Merrill interview with Muto, 1972, section 6, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Merrill interview with Muto, section 6, 1-2.

<sup>12</sup> Merrill interview with Muto, section 7.

<sup>13</sup> Merrill, 'Science Fiction. Judith Merrill, Afterword', 5

<sup>14</sup> Ito, "Regret" in "Tribute to Judith Merrill (1923-1997)" Japanese *SF Magazine* (December 1997), 100-104, translated by Kenichi Matsui, with Dianne Newell, 2004. Typescript in possession of the author. Ito had translated two of the four short stories by Merrill's to appear in Japanese publications: "So Proudly We Hail" ("Warera ga Hokorashigeni Utau"), originally published in F. Pohl, ed., *Star SF Stories*, no. 1 (New York: Ballantine, 1953), for the first issue of the *Seiun* magazine (Dec. 1954), and revised the translation as "Warera ga Hokorimote Utau" for the Japanese *SF Magazine* (c 1964), and selected Merrill's story, "Survival Ship" (originally published in *World's Beyond* (Jan. 1951)) for the SF section of a special edition of the *Hoseki* magazine that featured SF by female writers. He wrote a commentary for the Asakura Japanese translated editions of Merrill's best of the year anthologies.

<sup>15</sup> Ito, "Regret."

<sup>16</sup> Merrill Fonds, v 32, Merrill to David Bloggett, 1 Oct 1975.

<sup>17</sup> Merrill Fonds, v 32, Merrill to Asakura Hisashi, 10 Oct. 1975.

<sup>18</sup> Merrill to David Bloggett, 1 Oct 1975.

<sup>19</sup> Merrill Fonds, v 29, Correspondence and Reference Materials, 1970-1972, Aritsune Toyota to Judith Merrill, c. 1971.

<sup>20</sup> 'The Sunset, 2217 A.D.' (with Tetsu Yano), by Ryu Mitsuse, in Frederik Pohl, ed., *Best Science Fiction for 1972* (New York: Ace Books, 1972); 'The Empty Field' (with Kinya Tsuruta), by Mono Kita, in Roger Elwood, ed., *Omega: A Collection of Original Science Fiction Stories* (New York: Walker & Co., 1973; Fawcett Gold Medal, 1974); 'The Savage Mouth' (with Tetsu Yano), by Sakyo Komatsu, in Lee Harding, ed., *Rooms of Paradise* (Melbourne: Quartet, 1978; New York, St. Martin's Press, 1979); 'The Road to the Sea' (with Tetsu Yano), by Takashi Ishikawa, in Richard S. McEnroe, ed., *Proteus: Voices for the Eighties* (New York: Ace Books, 1981).

<sup>21</sup> John L. Apostolou and Martin H. Greenburg, eds., *The Best Japanese Science Fiction Stories*, with a foreword by Grania Davis (New York: Dembner Books, 1989). Grania Davis and Judith Merrill are listed as contributing editors. Arriving 15 years after Merrill had signed the contract with Bantham for *The Book*, the Apostolou and Greenburg collection is a compendium of available translated stories that amounted to too little, too late. I am grateful to Dana Lewis for sharing her insights on the 1989 publication. Dianne Newell interview with Dana (David) Lewis, Tokyo, December 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Hisashi Asakura, "Tribute to Judith Merrill." In "Tribute to Judith Merrill (1923-1997), Japanese *SF Magazine*, Dec. 1997. Translation by Kenichi Matsui with Dianne Newell, 2004. Transcript in possession of the authors.

<sup>23</sup> See "Tetsu Yano [1923-2004]," in "Obituaries," *Locus* (December 2004): 78; Tetsu Yano, "Pope's Magazine and Merrill's Prostration," in "Tribute to Judith Merrill," Japanese *SF Magazine*, Dec. 1997. Translation by Kenichi Matsui with Dianne Newell, 2004. Transcript in possession of the authors.

<sup>24</sup> Merrill, 'Science Fiction. Judith Merrill, Afterword', 7.