

Book Review of Samurai from Outer Space

Written by Michael Potter

Like many anime fans, I first experienced Japanese animation early in childhood in series like Voltron. Last fall, the Japanese Animation Society here at the University of Chicago reintroduced me to anime and I quickly fell in love. But I had a problem: How could I learn more about an art form with such variety and diversity? *Samurai from Outer Space*, a book by Antonia Levi, explores the cultural and philosophical underpinnings of anime and provides many examples of its artistic range.

Perhaps most obviously, anime provides a unique opportunity for cross-cultural exchange. Levi begins her book by exploring how Japanese animation arrived in the United States several decades ago. Early series like *Robotech* and *Star Blazers* were not only dubbed into English but re-cut, forming a new program from the Japanese originals. Such dramatic alterations reflect the distinctiveness of anime made in Japan for Japanese people. Rumiko Takahashi, as quoted by Levi, expresses surprise over the popularity of anime in other countries: "If its true, then I'm truly happy. But I must confess to being rather puzzled as to why my work should be so well received. It's my intention to be putting in a lot of Japanese references, Japanese lifestyle and feelings...I really have to wonder if foreign readers can understand all this, and if so, how?"

Levi examines the influences of Japanese religion on anime as a first fundamental area of cultural exchange. As familiar as Judeo-Christian culture is here in the United States, the Shinto religion provides the Japanese with an equivalently rich literary history. Levi describes Shinto as having "...no set theology, no set scriptures, and no moral code...What Shinto does have, however, is over 2000 years worth of stories about gods and goddesses, heroes and scoundrels, noble souls and tricksters." She also attempts to explain the concept of *kami*, usually translated into English as 'god' but having little in common with the Western idea of a deity.

Relating the unique combination of Buddhist and Shinto traditions in Japan, Levi shows the fascinating integration of other cultures into the Japanese consciousness. A good example of this integration in anime is the appearance of Norse goddesses in *Oh My Goddess!* (Belldandy was originally "Verthandi who symbolized existence.").

Another aspect of anime Levi explores is mortality. Most anime reflects a largely amoral universe in which people can live and do right, and yet still experience pain or unhappiness. Such a position shows acceptance of a view only beginning to enter Western morality through such books as *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People* by Harold Kushner. Anime presents death as the end of existence, in contrast to the Western ideal of heaven, intensifying the meaning of life. Cutting that life short by suicide, present even in anime, is a serious matter and Levi examines this through many examples.

In discussions about morality, she also explores the general Japanese attitude towards life. Some of the examples Levi gives show heroism in death, especially when it results from a hopeless conflict between honor and duty or a sacrifice to protect friends or humanity. Levi theorizes that heroism in Japan comes from individual commitment rather than commitment to the right cause: "The Japanese hero is defined by motivation. The ideal Japanese hero is not only brave and self-sacrificing, but selfless and unconcerned with personal gain or survival...The hero's willingness to give his or her all is what counts." Other areas Levi investigates relating to Japanese philosophy include gender and technology; however, she is unable to find a consistent position in these areas and, thus, just describes the breadth of perspectives that anime presents.

Samurai from Outer Space includes an extended discussion of anime style throughout the book. Of course, Levi begins by contrasting the shojo and shonen, or girl and boy, manga styles, although she does conclude that neither category accurately describes the story-telling in animation. Also, story development in anime follows a serial order - a single overall plot over many episodes -- rather than the disjointed episodic structure common in American television.

Artistic styles like exaggerated facial features and still frames are readily apparent in anime even in the first viewings. This impressionism allows Japanese animators to maintain some 'aesthetic distance' between the audience and characters. Characters that are not strictly realistic allow for a more complete symbolic representation of emotion and comfortable dealings with unpleasant topics like death. Levi asserts that this distance allows empathy without blurring the distinction between real life and fiction. All these complex stylistic issues are explored using many famous anime series like *Urusei Yatsura*, *Tenchi Muyo!*, *Oh My Goddess!*, and *Ranma 1/2*.

Antonia Levi tackles the huge task of explaining how anime works and is structured. Exploring cultural and philosophical aspects, Levi relates the richness of Japanese

animation that the novice otaku may not know. The increasing popularity of anime in America and now of American animation in Japan reflects a true cross-cultural exchange with the possibility of a deeper understanding and respect between the two countries.

I heartily recommend *Samurai from Outer Space* to any one intrigued by anime, although the information may already be familiar to long-time otaku or those well-versed in Japanese culture. Levi includes a small anime resource list ("How to Become an Otaku") along with a Japanese glossary.

Samurai from Outer Space by Antonia Levi

Published by Open Court Publishing, ISBN 0-8126-9332-9 \$20