

# Disabilities in Contemporary Japanese Literature

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Disabilities have recently become more relevant in society and (labor market) politics debates, due to Japan's low fertility rate and labor shortage. In the public discourse, diversity and equality play an ever-important role.

At the same time, disabilities are becoming more visible, e.g. in the context of the Tokyo Olympics/Paralympics 2020 and in literature and the arts.



**Small, Slow But Steady (ケイコ目を澄ませて, 2022)**  
by MIYAKE Shō

The internationally acclaimed film is based on the autobiography of OGASAWARA Keiko. It tells the story of a strong-minded and sensitive deaf female boxer.

© Happinet Phantom Studios Corporation

The project takes a cultural studies approach to disability. It understands disability as a heuristic moment through which cultural practices and social structures that would otherwise remain hidden can be examined.

### Research Questions

1. How are disabilities depicted in contemporary literature of Japan? Which narratological strategies are applied?
2. How do literary works contribute to constructing disabilities?

### Disabilities in Literature

Disabilities have been addressed in literature since its beginnings. While initial social science research on disabilities in Japan is already available, representations of disabilities in Japanese literature have hardly been researched yet. A study on literary representations of disabilities within the context of labor has not yet been published. This project aims to contribute to closing this gap and to provide a Japanese perspective on interdisciplinary literary disability studies.

### Labor Matters

Labor is of particular importance concerning disability. As a socio-cultural phenomenon, disability is intertwined with labor, with forms of its organization, and with prevailing perceptions and norms:

1. Labor has a formative effect on almost all aspects of an individual's life, meaning, and identity.
2. It is currently of particular significance — both against the background of recent debates (e.g. about digitalization, shortage of professionals, or work-life balance) and in light of the substantial number of recently published works of Japanese literature dedicated to the topic of labor.
3. Our current understanding of disability, its rise as a term and concept, is closely intertwined with modernization processes and, in particular, with the normative notion of a self-sufficient individual capable of working.

### Works

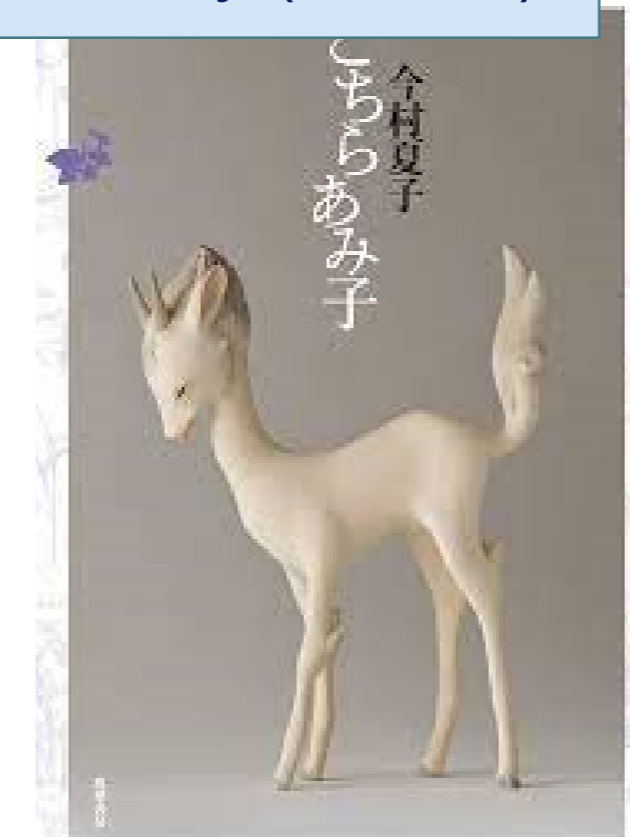
Drawing on literary disability studies, this project examines representative works of fiction that depict disabilities.



Learning disability



Psychological disability (autism)



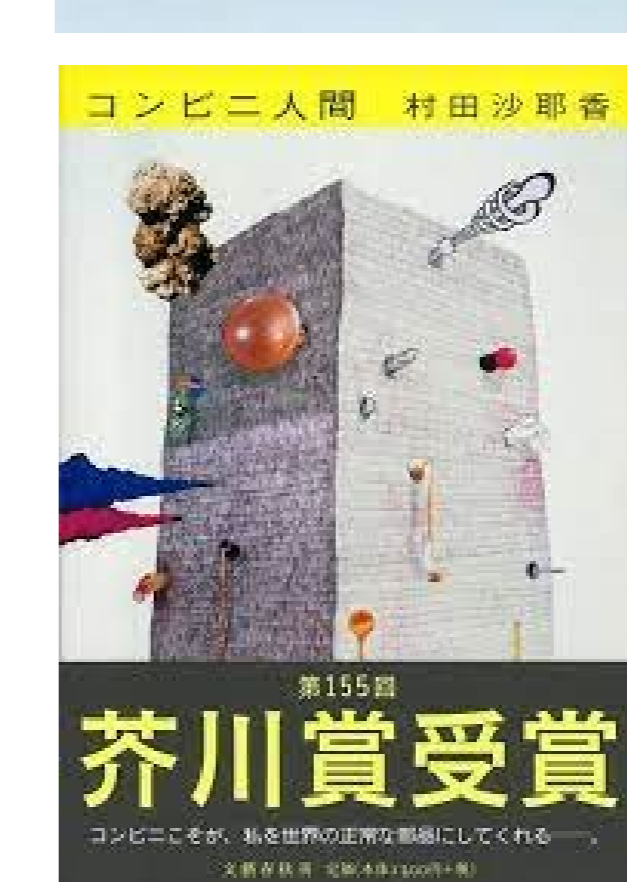
The novel *ハンチバック (Hunchback, 2023)* by ICHIKAWA Saō tells the story of a physically disabled woman who imagines other possible lives through writing and questions prevailing assumptions about disabilities.



Blindness & mental disorder



Blindness



The protagonist of *コンビニ人間 (Convenience Store Woman, 2016)* by MURATA Sayaka exhibits conspicuous features that can be read as signs of autism and thus of a psychological disability.

© Shinchōsha, Kōdansha, Budōsha, Chikuma Shobō, Bungei Shunjū, Gentōsha, Kadokawa, Bungei Shunjū (from up to down and left to right).

### Initial Findings

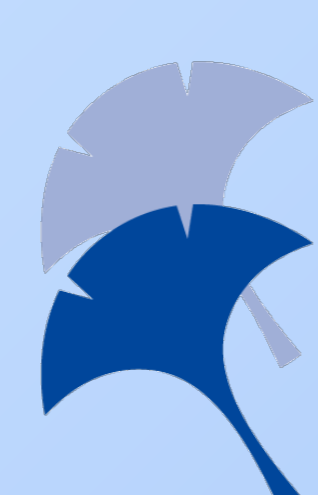
1. In contemporary Japanese literature, disabilities are represented in all their diversity.
2. Literary representations of disabilities are often, but by no means always, written by those affected (*tōjisha* 当事者).
3. Literary works use disability as a narrative device or offer the reader insights and information about disabilities.
4. Recently, many literary works have been published that shift focus from the affected individual to systemic conditions (such as norms and adaptation mechanisms).

### References

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Ishikawa, Jun / Nagase, Osamu et al. (eds.) (1999): *Shōgai-gaku e no shōtai: Shakai, bunka, disuabiriti*. Tokyo: Akashi Shoten.



More about this project

