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## Book Review: Modern Girls, Shining Stars, the Skies of Tokyo: Five Japanese Women by Phyllis Birnbaum

Susanna Fessler PhD

*University at Albany, State University of New York*, [sfessler@albany.edu](mailto:sfessler@albany.edu)

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**Review: Modern Girls, Shining Stars, the Skies of Tokyo: Five Japanese Women. By PHYLLIS BIRNBAUM. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999. xvii, 240 pp.**

**Susanna Fessler  
University at Albany**

This text presents five short biographies of twentieth-century Japanese women who, as the author tells us, are chosen as subjects because they "did their best to stand up and cause more trouble than was considered proper in Japanese society." The group includes two actresses (Takamine Hideko and Matsui Sumako), two writers (Uno Chiyo and Yanagiwara Byakuren), and one painter (Takamura Chieko). With the exception of Uno Chiyo, these five women are largely ignored in the Western press and Birnbaum has thus shed new light on some intriguing lives. The essay on Takamine Hideko is perhaps the best. Except for a slight problem of conflating the actress with the characters she plays, Birnbaum profiles her subject sympathetically but objectively. We learn much about a famous and well-loved actress who otherwise would remain in obscurity in the West. Birnbaum's writing is lively and engaging, and she draws the reader into her subject. Fundamentally, however, it is important to note that this book is a collection of journalistic essays and not an academic text. Indeed, two of the five chapters appeared first as articles in *The New Yorker*. Consequently, there is not a central thesis as such to the book, and each chapter can easily be read apart from the rest. The journalistic form, meant for a general audience, has other effects on the text, too: although there is a brief "bibliographic note" section at the end, there are no citations for direct quotes in the text. All the chapters have a limited scope and often omit information that one may consider standard in a biography—such as birth and, where applicable, death dates. The titles of many films are mentioned in English translation but not given in romanized Japanese, making it impossible for a film buff to track down a copy if he/she were interested in learning more. The least satisfying aspect of the book is the strong flavor of authorial intent. Birnbaum tells us that she approached her project with the intention to express admiration for her subjects, but found that existing biographies were less than complimentary. Instead of reassessing her initial admiration in the face of contrary evidence, she writes that she was "tempted to ignore these opinions.... In creating my portraits, I sought the freedom to live within my imagination, to fashion nothing but the truth itself—but at home, where I would commune only with the mist and my muse" [italics mine]. But even a journalist should know that one cannot "fashion the truth"; it is what it is, and opinion cannot change that. She "slog[s] through" the existing material, but her anger and disappointment at not finding what she wants is evident in the first two chapters. Here, Birnbaum uses much supposition: she imagines Matsui's detractors' grumbling (p. 7), a performance "must have come as a great shock" (p. 27), many things "surely" happened [italics mine]. Finally, she tells us that Matsui's story, "if handled adroitly," could be an inspiration. Birnbaum makes little effort to hide her revisionist agenda—at one point she writes "the biographer seeking to revamp the image of Matsui Sumako cannot help noticing other chroniclers' similar desire to interpret the facts to suit higher purposes" (p. 23).

Unfortunately, so little concrete evidence is provided that in the end the reader is left wondering about the veracity of all the material. For example, the second chapter on the poet Takamura Chieko proposes that her insanity and consequent death were caused not by a congenital condition as biographers have heretofore stated, but rather by an uncaring and insensitive husband who denied her the freedom from housework that she needed in order to pursue painting. This is an intriguing hypothesis, but for lack of evidence it lacks substance. Moreover, in this case Birnbaum makes mention of the evidence to the contrary without explaining why it is invalid, thus undermining her argument. In sum, this book makes interesting, sometimes provocative, reading but it is not suitable for classroom or academic use. The essays are actually musings and the theses laid forth are not convincingly argued.