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An introspective look at Shintoism

REVIEW BOOK

CRANES AT DUSK, by Hisako Matsubara, translated from the German by Lella Vennewitz. Doubleday, 253 pp., \$15.95.

By Robert Taylor
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Hisako Matsubara is the daughter of a Shinto priest from Kyoto. Coming to Pennsylvania for graduate work in theater arts, she met her future husband, the German physicist Friedemann Freund, and settled in Cologne where she earned her doctoral degree in the history of thought. She writes in German (three novels, five works of nonfiction), and contributes a weekly column to *Die Zeit*.

"Cranes at Dusk" constitutes, in a sense, a fictional counterweight to Brad Leithauser's recent novel, "Equal Distance." Leithauser's contemporary Kyoto, seen through western eyes, pulsates with rock sounds and the din of electronics game parlors; Matsubara's novel has a delicately introspective autobiographical air (the point-of-view character is 10-year-old Saya, the daughter of a Shinto priest) and the setting is the silk-

weavers' quarter of Kyoto in 1945. History rumbles afar, playing like chain lightning on the fringes of the action. The dreaded Americans, "the hairy ones," bringing change with them, are cheeky soldiers glimpsed riding past in Jeeps, or well-fed occupation officials; this is a narrative, principally, about Japanese family life under stress.

Saya's father, the Guji or high Shinto priest of Kyoto's shrine, has attained through his spiritual disciplines the sanctity of a sage; he has mystical if not prophetic powers; his spirituality has also taken him beyond the values of his wife. In marriage she counted on her husband preserving her family's conservative samurai traditions. Devoted to Ikebana, the art of flower-arrangement, she is acutely aware of society and what society thinks, but her ascetic husband seems oblivious of the things that matter to her. She has been embarrassed by his opposition to the war, and now the occupying Americans have let it be known they deem Japanese Christians the spiritual elite of the nation. Again she feels humiliated. The frictions of the Guji's marriage, symbolic of the upheavals of society, affect and shape the re-



HISAKO MATSUBARA
An autobiographical air

sponses of his children.

The western reader, conditioned to regard Shintoism with its countless gods as a sort of animistic nature religion or as an aspect of state policy, will find "Cranes at Dusk" a useful corrective. With her father's blessing, Saya and her little brother Bo encounter orthodox Christianity and even

take part in a manger tableau, Bo in the role of a lamb.

Another unusual aspect of the story lies in its presentation of the texture of a Japanese community during the immediate postwar period. There are closely-observed character types like the one-legged pawnbroker who sharpens long bamboo spears in anticipation of American invasion; Mrs. Yasumi engaging in conversations with her son, a dead kamikaze pilot; the calligraphy teacher who opens each class by reciting the oath of allegiance to the Emperor "as if she were reciting a romantic poem." It is a time of deprivation, however, of hunger and cold and shabbiness; the overcrowded trains have shattered windows; people carry on, reminding one of the bleak mood of 1945 on the opposite side of the world, of Italian neorealism and of the fatigue of postwar Europe.

Lella Vennewitz' translation (she is the translator of Heinrich Boll) is generally graceful, though either the translation or the writing occasionally stumbles on a plethora of adverbs. Matsubara's is a gentle and poignant narrative, however, which courts sentimentality at the close yet which is also deeply moving because it is willing to take that risk.