



Like Saya, the heroine of the moving and beautiful *Cranes at Dusk*, Hisako Matsubara was born in Kyoto, the daughter of a Shinto priest. Distanced by time and a Western education, she has written what seems more like a thinly disguised memoir than a fictional account of the months in 1945 when Japan shifted from war to a conquered peace. The mind's eye has become a telescope, focused on the essentials of this experience, as with sympathetic detachment she follows 10-year-old Saya's passage through uncharted territory.

Kyoto has been spared the horrors of bombing, and peace brings more changes than ever the war did to many of its inhabitants. Heady ideas of freedom threaten the formal structure of a traditional society, and uncertainty and curiosity take the place of fear. Adults seek refuge in extremes of behaviour; Saya's mother clings grimly to the outward signs of dignified living which she equates with life itself; and the Guji drifts far away from everyday realities into the abstractions of the I-Ching after the defeat of Japan has confirmed his predictions.

The past is indeed another country which they still inhabit. What is needed for the brave new world is the adaptability of children like Saya who see changes as challenges. The hunger and deprivations that reduce her mother to degrading deceit serve instead to sharpen Saya's perceptions; secure in her father's approval she faces the new and the old with equanimity, resisting prejudice and emotional blackmail while absorbing unfamiliar notions of religion and culture. She is pure delight.

Saya is saved from being too good to be true – and too clever by half – by her entirely natural relationship with her friends in the town and her entrancing little brother Bo. Nostalgic for many of the old customs, which

Postwar daughter of the new sun

FICTION

Isabel Raphael

CRANES AT DUSK

By Hisako Matsubara

Secker & Warburg, £9.95

DANCING WITH

MERMAIDS

By Miles Gibson

Heinemann, £8.95

BLOOD FOR BLOOD

By Julian Gloag

Hamish Hamilton, £9.95

she describes meticulously and affectionately, Hisako Matsubara remains cool and unsentimental, particularly in her portrayal of the children of Kyoto.

The message of the Jizo festival pervades the book:

All that has form passes away.

One loses that to which the heart is attached.

All that has life will some day pass away.

This is the lesson to be learned by little Saya and by Japan. The author puts it across with consummate delicacy, not minimizing the horrors of war, but looking beyond them.

Miles Gibson, says the cover of his new novel, "spent his childhood in a wet and draughty seaside town". In *Dancing with Mermaids* he is clearly out for revenge. Rams Horn is a nightmare parody of all such resorts, with a cast of characters to match: a medium

who finds Beelzebub squatting naked on her table, a witch who laces her herbal potions with gin, a trio of schoolboys randy with dreams of knickers and knockers. Nasty things happen in Rams Horn, which may make you laugh if you fancy murder and mayhem decked out in fantastic and erotic prose. It is as if Milk Wood had burst forth with those obscene-looking blossoms one finds in sweaty tropical palm houses, strangely at odds with the decorous flower-beds on the other side of the glass wall. Perhaps it is just as well that Dr Beeching axed the railway, leaving the stinking River Sheep to cut off the inhabitants of Miles Gibson's imagination. On the other hand, life in Rams Horn is never dull.

Blood for Blood is another of Julian Gloag's admirable psychological thrillers. Barrister Vivian Winter, known for his successful defence of murderers, is himself murdered in circumstances that suggest that he was not unprepared for such an end. He has bequeathed large legacies to eight women and one man, and, will in hand, Ivor Speke sets out to track down the other beneficiaries in the hope of finding the murderer. In doing so he finds himself, as he contrasts his own reaction to sudden, violent loss – of his beloved daughter as well as of his friend – with the ways that others have dealt with similar experiences. Perhaps this is Vivian's true legacy.

My only complaint is that of the two solutions sought, one is obvious and the other unconvincing. But it is the search that matters, after all, the excursions up exciting tributaries, the unfolding of unexpected routes to a given point. Julian Gloag writes with poise and elegance, revealing just enough at any time to sustain pace and suspense. I confess to reading the whole book at one long, self-indulgent sitting, and put it down purring with satisfaction.