

The Anime Companion

What's Japanese in Japanese Animation

By Gilles Poitras

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163 PAGES

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The *Anime Companion* is an irresistible browsing book, whether you're interested in anime or not, whether you're interested in Japanese culture or not. A librarian at San Francisco's Golden Gate College, Poitras has a special concern about how to reach young people intellectually. He is also a self-proclaimed *otaku*, or fan of Japanese animation. In the *Anime Companion*, Poitras combines these two enthusiasms by proposing that one can learn an awful lot about Japanese culture—high and low—by watching anime with both eyes open.

The notion that guides Poitras is that educators can use anime to introduce students to many aspects of Japanese life and culture, and his book is designed as a tool for teachers who are interested in giving this approach a try. The book is clearly geared toward “kids”—adolescents and young adults. Poitras assumes a matter-of-fact, ironic tone (“this ain't no *Speed Racer*” is a heading in the preface) along with a cut-the-bull-and-get-to-the-good-stuff approach, and kids respond to it. Granted, I teach at an art college, but our librarian tells me that this book is extremely popular among our students. (My sixteen-year-old son carried it off to his room as soon as it arrived.) Poitras has a gift for being glib, cute, and current without being condescending or “dumbing things down.”

Poitras has organized his book as an encyclopedia of Japanese cultural tidbits that can be gleaned from watching anime. The visual and conceptual texture of the book are especially successful. He uses icons to identify which realm of culture a Japanese term pertains to—Is it a building? Is it food? Does it have to do with sports, war, home, or mythology? Is it related to geography? He tells us which anime contain allusions to each entry. The text is dense with illustrations from various anime, and includes a wealth of intriguing side bars: “Age Differences in Male-Female Relations,” “Canned and Bottled Beverages,” “Interrogate Your Food,” and “What Is It With All the Money-Hungry Women?” for example.

Poitras cheerfully juxtaposes the sacred and the profane in his romp through Japanese culture. An entry on the twelfth-century



Japanese poet Saigyō is followed by entries on *saikoro* (dice) and sailor *fuku* (a uniform worn by Japanese schoolgirls), not far from a sidebar on the significance of “panties” in anime. An entry on *cha-no-yu* (tea ceremony) comes on the heels of an entry about “chalk marks and illegally parked cars.” Presenting topics alphabetically, and hence somewhat indiscriminately—*sen-to* (public bath) just before *seppuku* (ritual suicide)—tells the ever-skeptical teen that our author thinks baths are just as significant in Japanese culture as ritual suicide—and he is probably right. But this approach also intimates that Saigyō is as potentially interesting and important to understanding Japan as are panties and dice, despite the fact that he is a

poet from some by-gone time.

Though Poitras doesn't shy away from exposing the cyber-generation to classical Japan—he includes entries on Genji, the *koto* (stringed instrument), *hanami* (flower-viewing), *hakamairi* (gravesite visits), *Butsudan* (Buddhist altars), the periods of Japanese history—it may seem that entries on “high culture” have been sneaked in alongside more trendy topics, with the bias clearly toward Japanese popular culture. In some ways this makes the book all the more valuable, however, for both Western students and scholars, neither of whom is likely to know that, say, eel and sour plum are considered “mismatched” foods in Japanese culture (see the entry on “Mismatched Foods”), or that sand composed of tiny carcasses (*hoshi-suna*) is sold in small bottles as a souvenir on the coast of Okinawa.

How about the feasibility of using this book as Poitras wants us to use it? Students do love anime, and after several semesters of showing it to please the crowds, I've become convinced that it has some real artistic and pedagogical merit. Some of our best discussions in a course about contemporary Asian/Western interfaces followed a showing of “Ninja Scroll,” which led us deep into a number of issues about Japanese culture. I can imagine that these discussions might have been even more successful if we had used this book as an interactive tool to decode various aspects of the film. I think it would be superb to use with groups of young people (or adults for that matter!) going to Japan for the first time,

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as a kind of cultural phrasebook to make sense of otherwise incomprehensible phenomena. The book also has the merit of jolting the reader into Japanese language, and it provides an interesting glossary of Japanese and English-to-Japanese terms. Poitras maintains an active Web site (www.sirius.com/~cowpunk/) that would further draw electronically inclined students into the project, for Poitras is clearly a kind of anime guru for other otaku. The Web site includes a guide for teachers using the book, and some of the ideas aren't bad; but the guide is not nearly as sharp or successful as the book itself.

Despite the appeal and potential usefulness of this book, it does have some shortcomings. For example, it includes very little systematic discussion about the significance of anime as a particularly Japanese phenomenon. Even though this may be beyond the scope of Poitras's undertaking, the topic begs to be addressed. While the alphabetical arrangement results in a cool, postmodern pastiche, it makes it deucedly difficult to synthesize anything about Japanese culture or to approach it systematically. It may be great for short attention spans, but it frustrates more concentrated efforts. Poitras never panders with regard to the sexual content of some anime, but he is rather matter of fact about it, and secondary school librarians or teachers might get static for some of the content. ■

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