Strange Moors
Minae Mizumura reimagines Emily Brontë’s ‘Wuthering Heights’ set in postwar Japan.

BY SUSAN CHIRA

“A TRUE NOVEL” is a riveting tale of doomed lovers set against the backdrop of postwar Japan, with characters familiar to a Western audience: a rags-to-riches antihero, a tempestuous heroine who dies too young, a loyal housekeeper who tells their story. So how does the Gothic excess of “Wuthering Heights” translate to a culture better known for emotional restraint, even repression?

That is the larger concern of the novel, by the Japanese writer Minae Mizumura, who, in adapting Emily Brontë’s classic, has composed a fascinating meditation on cultural borrowing and the dislocation of modernity. Thankfully, Mizumura’s ambitious literary and cultural preoccupations do not overwhelm the sheer force of her narrative or the beauty of her writing (in an evocative translation by Juliet Winters Carpenter).

The novel opens on Long Island, where one of the narrators—a stand-in for Mizumura, the daughter of a corporate executive sent to New York—introduces Taro Azuma, the story’s Heathcliff. Taro is a chauffeur for a rich American but is befriended by the narrator’s father. His mysterious origins, his brooding drive to succeed and his meteoric rise to wealth make him the talk of the expatriate community. The story then shifts to Japan, where Yushke, a young man lost in the woods of a Japanese summer resort, encounters Fumiko, whose own life has been entwined with Taro’s. Fumiko tells of Taro’s abusive childhood and his obsession with Yoko, the novel’s Catherine, who cannot overcome her class differences despite her passionate love for him.

The lovers’ tribulations unfold on a broad canvas—Japan as it recovers from the devastation of World War II and hurtles toward its economic miracle. Fumiko grows up in a Japan that most modern readers would not recognize: poor, rural, circumscribed, yet with its own haunting beauty.

“I heard the high note of the horn in the chill morning air as the tofu seller passed through the neighborhood,” Mizumura writes, in her role as narrator. “I saw my grandmother in her smock crouched outside the kitchen as she fanned life into the coals in the clay stove, the white smoke rising into the twilight sky.”

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When Fumiko moves to Tokyo to make her way, she ends up ensnared in the intimate stories of two households that reflect Japan’s own postwar journey: the aristocratic Shigematsu, on the decline, and the up-and-coming Saegusa, who profit from Japan’s march to wealth. The Saegusa sisters—Yoko’s mother and aunts—hold the stage with the novel’s larger-than-life lovers. Attractive, viva
cious and elegant, they are at times riven with jealousy, regret and vindictiveness. They also serve as the story’s Greek chorus, bemoaning a Japan that has traded refinement for materialism.

Binding the characters together is Fumiko, who, as Japan does, from poverty to middle-class stability. Yet she, like all the characters, is more than an archetype. Her own emotional life is a poignant thread transcending the limits of the Nelly Dean character she is based on, infusing the narrative with tart observations and lingering sadness.

The final character, as one would expect in a novel based on “Wuthering Heights,” is nature itself. The drama progresses, rather than on Emily Brontë’s moors, primarily in the woods of the mountain resort of Karuizawa. The name is instantly evocative to a Japanese reader: Karuizawa is where Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko are said to have met over a game of tennis. It was the playground of both the Japanese and the Western elite, who sought relief there from Tokyo’s sweltering summers. Mizumura reimagines this retreat as a haunted land, replete with mystery, menace and nostalgia: “The madder-red sun glowed in the western sky as though loath to yield its shortening life, while all around him, moment by moment, Yushake could sense darkness rising as if from the ground.”

“A True Novel” makes tangible the pain and the legacy of loss. It is a book of many love triangles, in addition to the one that plays out in plain sight. Indeed, its psychological acuteness, fully realized characters and historical sweep push it out of the realm of pastiche and into something far more altering and memorable.

Mizumura’s great accomplishment is to weave a love story through a serious exploration of themes central to Japan’s political and literary life: the burden of influence from the West and the struggle to retain a Japanese identity. As narrator, she notes that as a girl she resisted learning English even though she was living in New York, and immersed herself instead in Japanese literary classics. And in a digression that is one of the few moments when the novel loses its narrative drive, she notes that Japanese writers have long struggled to balance a Japanese literary tradition of the autobiographical novel with the Western ideal of inventing a fictional world outside one’s own life.

Yet Mizumura has triumphed in taking a quintessential Western Gothic and making it wholly Japanese. Japan has its own traditions of ghost stories, doomed love and the nobility of despair. The violence that booms beneath surface restraint is a motif running through such varied contemporary works as manga or films like “In the Realm of the Senses.” In a way, Mizumura answers one of the philosophical questions she poses in “A True Novel”: At least between its pages, Western tradition does not eradicale Japanese literary sensibility. She has drawn on the West for inspiration but created something indelibly, irresistibly, Japan’s own.