For many years I was enamored of the type of literature that goes by the name “postmodernist.” I wrote my first book on the novelist Shimao Toshio, but I dreamed of someday doing a study of Japanese postmodern writers, a work that would examine the writings of Shimada Masahiko, Takahashi Genichirō, Kobayashi Kyōji, Ogino Anna, Tsutsui Yasutaka, and others. To this end I translated Shimada’s novel *Yumetsukai* (as *Dream Messenger*), wrote essays on Shimada and Takahashi, read extensively in postmodern theory, and taught seminars on Japan and the postmodern. In a word, I was thoroughly fascinated by these writers’ lightning wit, their verbal inventiveness, their iconoclastic outlook on writing, the challenges they threw up to the literary establishment and to received beliefs about what constituted literature. Who could not fall for a story entitled “Yukiguni no odoriko” (The snow country dancer), which playfully brought together characters from two of Kawabata Yasunari’s best-known stories? Or a novel about baseball in which pitcher and catcher engaged in extended debates on Leibnitz’s theory of the monad and how it perfectly describes the art of pitching? I envisioned a study that would, despite the linguistic barriers, convey something of the wit and verbal play of the original texts, and place these Japanese writers squarely in the mainstream (if indeed one can use this term here) of world postmodern literature.

As sometimes happens, though, the romance soured. My reaction was perhaps not as dramatic as that in A. S. Byatt’s novel *The Biographer’s Tale*, where the protagonist one day gives up his studies in postmodern literary theory for a pursuit of the concrete (“I must have things,” he muses), but as time went by I found myself increasingly in agreement with Fredric Jameson’s assessment of much of the artistic product of the postmodern as “depth-
less.” However one wishes to interpret the term and its application to postmodern literature for me it came down to a combined intellectual and emotional reaction: an honest assessment of my reading experience of Japanese postmodern literature left me feeling hollow. In my article on Shimada’s writings I concluded that his work revealed a “slippery stance” toward his subject matter that demonstrated an “ethical moment,” a “continued resistance to fixed identity.” While this type of writing may reveal a clever artistic approach that is enormously entertaining, I found I wanted something more. When I examined my own feelings about literature—why I was drawn to the field, and to Japanese literature in particular—I realized that, if not a total lack of “slipperiness” and a fixed-in-stone identity, at the very least I hoped for an attempt to address, not to defer or to deflect, some of the major issues of life. I wanted to end my reading experience (dealing with texts in a foreign language constitutes an extraordinary investment of time and mental energy) with a sense that the writer had honestly struggled with meaningful areas of life, and had even dared to provide some answers. This is not to imply that postmodern writing does not grapple at times with the meaningful; in a backhanded way its slipperiness underscores the whole question of meaning. What I was looking for, though, was more of a frontal assault on ordinary yet important questions, perhaps even universal ones.

The questions I have always found the most compelling are the spiritual. In postmodern literature spiritual questions are more likely to be deflected into parody. One thinks, for instance, of Takahashi’s discussion of God and baseball; the ending of Shimada’s Dream Messenger, a parody of Genesis; Kobayashi’s character who creates his own deity of unbridled consumption. I wanted to examine to what extent, and in what ways, contemporary Japanese novelists have dealt with a variety of spiritual questions, including the existence of a soul or inner being, of an afterlife, of a god or spiritual forces beyond the everyday; and the possibilities of the supernatural and the miraculous. It is important here that a Western-oriented view of the spiritual not intrude too much on an examination of the spiritual in Japanese literature, except where there is some justification for its doing so, as with a discussion of the works of professedly Christian Japanese writers. Much thought must be given to the context before terms such as kami, tamashii, and tsumi, for example, are translated as “God,” “soul,” and “sin.” One must be sensitive to the ways in which contemporary Japanese writers are often writing in a complex spiritual environment that includes traces of many traditions—Shintoism, folk beliefs, and various sects of Buddhism—but which also, most strikingly in the work of Ōe Kenzaburō, is informed by the study of other spiritual traditions, such as Christianity, Judaism, and New Age spirituality.
The more I looked into these issues, the more I realized (not an original insight, to be sure) how apt a vehicle literature is for their examination. As Murakami Haruki notes in his study of members of the Aum Shinrikyō cult, the role of the novelist and that of the spiritual seeker are not dissimilar; both delve deeply into the unseen realms of the self—in spiritual terms, what might be called the soul, though in Murakami’s terms, something closer to the unconscious. Both literature and the spiritual, too, deal with unseen worlds, in faith and belief in the non-material, the invisible, what exists not in verifiable form but in the individual’s heart, mind, and imagination.

Japanese literature has a long history of dealing with aspects of the spiritual. Indeed Japan’s earliest surviving narratives, those that form the eighth-century A.D. Kojiki, depict the creation of Japan itself as a sacred act of a pantheon of deities (kami). This mythology was revived in the militaristic 1930s and 1940s as part of a “spiritual mobilization” in support of Japan’s colonialist agenda, and it informed much of the literary production of that period. In the late Heian period (794–1186) classic prose narrative, The Tale of Genji (ca. 1001–1014), Murasaki Shikibu depicts in dramatic fashion the existence of spirit possession (mono no ke) and “spirits of the living” (ikiryō) that defy the limits of time and space to possess others. Spirits of the living turned to spirits of the dead in medieval Noh drama, which largely dealt with the revelations of ghosts as they struggle to break free of worldly attachments. Ghost tales were current in Edo period literature as well, as in Ueda Akinari’s collection Ugetsu monogatari; and the continuing influence of Zen Buddhism on the visual and literary arts found expression in, most famously, the poetry of Matsuo Bashō, whose poems have been called “the product of his intuitive and profoundly mystical response to life and nature.” The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a new element in the mix: the significant interest of many emerging writers in the spiritual possibilities of Christianity. As Karatani Kōjin notes, “an encounter with Christianity, however ephemeral, was the point of departure for many Meiji writers,” and he links this encounter to the development of the “practice of confession,” which is the impetus for the rise of the prominent genre of the confessional “I-novel.” Many writers soon turned away from Christian beliefs; for Shiga Naoya, for example, Christianity was partly the impetus to “rediscover his own literary and spiritual roots,” and led to his development of what Roy Starrs has dubbed Shiga’s “Zen aesthetic.”

With the possible exception of some studies of the novelist Endō Shūsaku, as well as studies of Shiga and Kawabata, the connection between literature and the spiritual in the field of modern Japanese literary studies in English has
largely been left untouched. It is as if there is an unspoken agreement among scholars that, with the spiritual “vacuum” following the Second World War and the rise of Japan as the premiere consumerist, materialist—and in many ways postmodern—society, literature that reflects any spiritual elements is largely peripheral. Clearly, though, in the realm of the “new religions” and their successors, the “new new religions,” spiritual pursuits in one form or another continue to occupy a substantial segment of the Japanese population. And in literature, too, a view of the Japanese reading public as unconcerned with the spiritual is belied by the continued influence of such writers as Miyazawa Kenji and Kawabata, whose writings are permeated with a native (i.e., Buddhist/Shinto) Japanese spiritual aesthetic; by the enormous popularity of such openly Christian writers as Endō, Sono Ayako, and Miura Ayako since the 1950s and 1960s; by the popularity of such works as the bestselling nonfiction book Tariki: Embracing Despair, Discovering Peace, by the novelist Itsuki Hiroyuki, about his explorations into Buddhism; and by the New Age–influenced narratives of the pop novelist Yoshimoto Banana.

What really brought the present book together, however, was the literary reaction to the Aum Shinrikyō terrorist attacks on the Tokyo subways in 1995. I was asked to translate both Murakami Haruki’s 1998 Yakusoku sareta basho de (translated as The Place That Was Promised), a collection of interviews with eight Aum members that followed the bestselling book Underground (interviews with survivors of the attack), and Ōe Kenzaburō’s 1999 novel Chūgaeri (translated as Somersault [2003]), which deals in fictional form with the leadership of an Aum-like cult. After September 11, 2001, these translation projects flowered into an interest in exploring connections between terrorism and literature, which in turn led me to consider in broader terms the ways in which religious belief and spirituality have been portrayed in contemporary Japanese literature. A second research interest I had been pursuing was an exploration of Christian writers in Japan (Shimao Toshio, after all, being considered one of the leading Catholic writers), and I decided at this point to weave together the two strands of my research, combining the literary reaction to Aum with an examination of fiction by Japanese Christian writers in an attempt at a broader look at spirituality and literature. The choice of Miura Ayako and Sono Ayako seemed obvious, since, with Endō, they have long been leading figures in Japanese Christian literature, and yet have been virtually unexplored in English scholarship. This aspect of the study I found particularly appealing, as it allowed me, among other things, to examine the themes of self-sacrifice and martyrdom, which have long fascinated me (an interest spurred on by my earlier exploration of Shimao’s own tokkōtai (kamikaze) experience and his later interest in the martyrdom of Father Kolbe at
Auschwitz). It has also allowed me to take the first steps toward an exploration of “popular” or “mass” literature in Japan (e.g., the works of Miura Ayako). Through this study I have begun as well to address the question of why—in the case of such novels as Hyöten and Shiokari tōge—fiction with a fairly open Christian message could be enormously popular in a nation where this message is the voice of such a tiny minority. It is comparable to, say, having a Jain or a Sikh in the United States write a novel about their religious beliefs and then having that novel become a blockbuster. This may be an exaggeration—Christianity has a history in Japan reaching back to the late sixteenth century, and there have been many indigenous Christian movements—but the fact remains that a writer like Miura Ayako has had astounding success with novels underscoring a theology that is still largely unfamiliar to the general populace. How did these openly devout writers balance the sometimes conflicting demands of their personal faith and their literature?

The choice of texts I have made here covers a wide range of writing, from enormously popular fiction (Hyöten, Shiokari tōge, the novels of Murakami), to more problematic, “serious” fiction (Somersault), to nonfiction meditations about martyrdom and miracles (Sono’s Kiseki) and about the dynamics of religious cults (Murakami’s interviews with members of Aum). The works discussed in Spirit Matters are generally presented in chronological order of publication, from the novel Hyöten to Ōe’s Somersault, and cover the period from the Tokyo Olympics (1964) to the end of the millennium. 12

Chapter 1 explores Miura Ayako’s Hyöten (translated as Freezing Point) series: the 1964–1965 novel Hyöten and its sequel, the 1970–1971 Zoku hyöten (Freezing Point II). These works, along with Miura’s Shiokari tōge, are among the best-known Christian novels in Japan. Hyöten, Miura’s first work, which catapulted her to literary fame, centers on the nature of sin, in particular the notion of original sin. In a lengthy, convoluted series of plot twists, involving murder, adultery, deception, and mistaken identities, Miura brings her three main characters (husband, wife, and adopted daughter) to varying degrees of spiritual awakening regarding their own sinful nature. In the process, however, Miura diverts attention from the basic theological implications of original sin, leaving the reader with the impression that sin is less a basic state of being for fallen humans than a case-by-case inherited trait. Further, in Hyöten Miura leaves her characters with little sense of where to go next, a strange turn of events for a writer who sees her literature as an avowedly evangelical enterprise. One must take into account the fact that, as the first novel of a devout Christian trying to carve out a career as a novelist, Hyöten decidedly tones down the Christian ideas at its core in order to operate as a successful—even formulaic at times—popular serialized novel. It is
only in the sequel, *Zoku hyōten*, that Miura, by this time an established literary figure, returns to complete the story begun in *Hyōten*, more openly presenting a tale of sin and forgiveness in accord with the tenets of her faith. A comparison of these two novels, then, leads to a productive consideration of the constraints—self-imposed or otherwise—under which writers of pronounced faith in Japan, in particular Christian writers, must work. Interestingly, when *Hyōten* was translated into English (a co-translation by a Japanese and an American missionary), the missing message in many passages, the hidden Christian element, as it were, is restored for a Western audience that might not fully appreciate the tension between Christian faith and literature in Japan.

In chapter 2 I turn to the question of self-sacrifice and miracles, in particular how these are treated in Sono Ayako’s 1977 nonfiction study *Kiseki* (Miracles), and Miura’s 1968 novel *Shiokari tōge* (translated as *Shiokari Pass*). Self-sacrifice and martyrdom are the very cornerstones of the Christian experience, and here Sono and Miura explore, respectively, the story of a foreign Christian martyr, Father Kolbe of Auschwitz, and that of the much less well-known Japanese one, Nagano Masao, a humble railroad employee in Hokkaido. As the title of her book indicates, Sono approaches the topic from a Catholic perspective, as concerned with the miracles associated with Kolbe as she is with the sacrifice itself. She brings a refreshingly questioning attitude toward the whole subject, beginning her book with an exploration of her long-term doubts about the possibility of the miraculous in the modern day, and ending it with a meditation on her own, idiosyncratic view of the concept of “eternal life,” viewing it less as a gift from God than as a gift between people. In between, in a work situated somewhere between a travelogue and a meditative essay, Sono comes face to face with the quiet yet overwhelming reality of the faith lives of ordinary European Catholics; Father Kolbe is, in the end, but an extreme example of the kind of piety she finds at every turn, and the greatest miracle of all, she concludes, is faith itself. Unlike the often problematic situation for Japanese Christians, always a tiny minority in a country that, if not always hostile to their faith, is at the very least puzzled or indifferent, Sono discovers how, in the lives of European believers, the transcendent and the ordinary are equal strands of the very fabric of life.

*Shiokari Pass* is Miura’s imaginative recreation of the life of an ordinary railway worker known, until the success of her novel, only to a small number of people in her hometown of Asahikawa in Hokkaido. Nagano Masao (Nagano Nobuo in her version) was a young railway worker who organized Christian youth organizations among his fellow workers, and who gave his life in 1909 to stop a runaway train by throwing himself under the wheels. In
Miura’s rendition of his life, Nobuo undergoes a gradual and often tortured spiritual awakening, traveling from youthful antagonism toward Christianity, to adolescent curiosity, to mature faith. Much more than her Hyōten series, Shiokari Pass is Miura’s theological and novelistic magnum opus. It provides readers with a more complete and nuanced understanding of the Christian teachings that motivate her literature. The novel also presents a view of the often radical nature of Christianity in Japan, the way it runs counter to much of the accepted ideology of modern Japan, including the centrality of the family/state. As to the issue of self-sacrifice and martyrdom, Miura, even more than Sono, downplays the drama of her protagonist’s sacrifice, portraying it as a normal outgrowth of one person’s faith.

Chapters 3 and 4, which come closer to the present, might well be subtitled “Literary Reactions to Aum.” Chapter 3 focuses on the work of Japan’s leading novelist, Murakami Haruki, beginning with the 1998 nonfiction work Yakusoku sareta basho de, which makes up the second half of the English book Underground. After interviewing some sixty survivors of the Aum Shinrikyō gas attack in the Tokyo subway on March 20, 1995, Murakami next turned to in-depth interviews with eight ordinary members of the Aum cult. Dubbing Aum a kind of unknown “black box,” Murakami sees his task as “try[ing] to pry open that black box to catch a glimpse of what it contained.” In doing so he uncovers a surprisingly complex spiritual hunger in many younger Japanese, and delves into such issues as the inner dynamics of cults, connections between violence and religious fervor, and the tensions between the individual ego and its suppression by the more “enlightened.” Perhaps most strikingly, Murakami sees the world of cults and the world outside (closed-circuit versus open-circuit worlds, as he later puts it) as engaged in a struggle of competing “narratives.” He writes that it is the work of novelists and other writers to produce narratives that both account for the spiritual thirst so evident among the young—the search for something beyond the gleaming materialism of contemporary Japan—and counter the destructive, apocalyptic visions of a cult like Aum. This is exactly the project Murakami is engaged in his post-Aum fiction. Here I contrast two earlier works—Hardboiled Wonderland and the End of the World and South of the Border, West of the Sun—with his latest post-Aum novels, Sputnik Sweetheart and Kafka on the Shore. While all his works portray disaffected, alienated young people searching deep within themselves, people who have many affinities with those who joined Aum, and also a kind of parallel “this world/other world” division of reality, in the earlier works Murakami depicts the “other world” as ultimately dark and threatening, as a place of no return. In his post-Aum fiction, in an attempt to counter the Aum narrative, Murakami begins
to reveal a different vision, one of a mysterious soul-searching, where contact with the “other world” can lead to personal restoration of a profound kind that ultimately brings people back, transformed, into this world.

Chapter 4 analyzes Ōe Kenzaburō’s own literary reaction to Aum, the 1999 novel Chūgaeri. Ōe’s literature, which deals increasingly with spiritual issues through the 1980s and early 1990s, reaches its culmination in Somersault, to date his most extended exploration of faith and the dangers of religious zealotry. The novel follows the fortunes of a religious cult split asunder by the apostasy of its two leaders (Patron and Guide) and is Ōe’s attempt, in his words, both to penetrate the mind-set of young people who join an Aum-like cult and to trace a scenario wherein followers—and leaders—are forced to confront the relationship between humans and the transcendent following a renunciation of faith. As the novel makes explicit, while directly motivated by Aum and the events of 1995, Somersault raises painful questions for all postwar Japanese, drawing parallels between the apostasy of Patron and Guide and the dilemma this created for their followers, and the Shōwa Emperor’s own “renunciation of divinity” and the ensuing spiritual void.

Somersault is a complex novel weaving together poetry, philosophy, and theology, an attempt at the “new style” of writing Ōe proclaimed as his goal following his own renunciation of novel writing in 1994 (ironically just before he won the Nobel Prize). Ōe devotes one entire chapter, for instance, to a discussion of the poetry of the Welshman R. S. Thomas, a chapter that underscores Thomas’ embrace of the via negativa (i.e., that God is known only through traces and by absence), a stance that Ōe’s novel takes to a more extreme conclusion, namely, that ultimately humans confirm their relationship to God only by, paradoxically, denying God. A second text Ōe explores is the biblical book of Jonah. Here Ōe focuses not only on the apocalyptic visions of destruction the book contains, but also on the potential for a dynamic relationship between humans and God, of human beings engaged in a dialogue with God, pitting their “imagination” against God’s lack thereof.

As a response to Aum, Somersault posits its own counter-narrative, depicting a tortured leader attempting to contain the violence inherent in his apocalyptic narrative.

Though having its genesis in two separate projects—a study of Japanese Christian writers and one of literary reactions to Aum—this book reveals, I believe, a productive dialogue between the two types of writers. The Jungian idea of the unconscious as the “source of religious experience,” that salvation comes only from exploration of the “dirtiest and most mundane part of our being,” which is present in Christian writers like Endō, certainly finds echoes
in Murakami’s work, particularly in *Kafka on the Shore*—itself Murakami’s most extended meditation on the healing found in plumbing the inner self, the “other side.” It is Kafka’s doppelgänger, Crow, who insists that salvation is found only by letting go of the anger and hurt inside. By discovering the power of forgiveness, he holds, one is saved. In a scene reminiscent of Yōko’s forgiveness of her mother in *Freezing Point II*, after an extended journey to the depths of his unconscious, that is exactly what Kafka does.

There are, however, critical differences. In Yōko’s case, at the climax of *Freezing Point II* she feels a “will of something beyond human beings . . . there was indeed a God who could right now truly forgive human sin” (367). For Murakami, forgiveness is found not in an appeal to some higher power but at a human level: unlike Yōko, Kafka does not ask God for forgiveness—he asks his mother. This is not to say that Murakami rejects the notion of a “will beyond human beings”: the pervasive presence of evil in the novel is certainly set out at times as such a will, but the restorative “other side” is portrayed as an internal journey through the labyrinth of the unconscious mind—what some might call the soul—more than as an encounter with a transcendent being. One may argue that this is, in Endō and Jung, a religious experience, but the possibility of its leading to something beyond the plane of mundane existence is uncertain. Kafka is, indeed, reborn into a “new world” in the final lines, though the boundaries of this new world (unlike those of Yōko’s) are left to the reader’s imagination.

Likewise, the centrality of self-sacrifice in Sono’s *Miracles* and Miura’s *Shiokari Pass*, and the very possibility of miracles in the modern day, are taken up in *Somersault* in the notion of the character Kizu’s miraculous cure and Patron’s fiery self-immolation. Ōe’s take on self-sacrifice and miracles, however, is more ambiguous than that in Sono’s *Miracles*. This is not to suggest that Sono has a clear-cut response to these topics; the appeal of her work lies precisely in her questioning nature, in the tension between her faith, her doubts about the possibility of miracles, and whether any ultimate good was brought about by Father Kolbe’s sacrifice. *Miracles*, then, is no simple catechism of faith but a very human, very appealing struggle with belief. Still, for Sono—unlike Ōe and Murakami—the appeal is always to a God who can, in some way, actually connect with the lives of people. The real miracle is the miracle of faith, manifested in the lives of devotion of ordinary followers; this “transcends the realities of human life.” Likewise, though Kolbe’s life and inner motivation remain hidden (“the only ones able to understand Kolbe’s sacrifice are God and the Father himself”), ultimately his sacrifice is done to complete the bond between one man and the Almighty.

What about miracles and self-sacrifice in *Somersault*? In Patron’s world
readers end up with a “real but silent” God, with humans responding to inner 
spiritual needs, knowing that their “deeds of the soul” will not necessarily 
bring them nearer to God. Kizu’s “miracle” is, in the end, left totally undeci-
pherable. He is cured by Patron’s power—yet he once again contracts cancer 
and dies. Susan Napier writes of the trilogy preceding this novel, Moeagaru 
midori no ki (The flaming green tree) that “Ôe gives us a vision of the outside 
world as revitalized by the sacrifice of a body,” but what exactly in Somersault 
has been “revitalized”? Ôe’s notion of “repetition with slippage,” discussed 
toward the end of Somersault, is helpful here as shorthand for the worldview 
the novel leads to. Patron bases his fiery suicide on the idea from Ephesians 
that the “old man” must step aside to make way for the “new man.” While the 
biblical idea is of Christ—the “new man”—reconciling once for all time— 
man to God through his sacrifice, Patron’s sacrifice is of a different sort, revi-
talizing the younger generation only temporarily. In Ôe’s fictional world, rep-
etition with slippage equates to one generation’s continuing to struggle with 
the same issues as the previous one, as today’s new person becomes tomor-
row’s old, with often little sense of progress toward some ultimate spiritual 
understanding. Given the young character Gii’s predilection for mixing vio-
lence and religion, one can almost hear Patron sighing, in whatever afterlife 
he is in, that nobody learns from the past. Patron appears to introduce the 
notion of a kind of linear, forward spiritual progress in the idea of the anti-
christ—the necessity of an antichrist (or many antichrists) as herald of “end 
times”—but this is problematic. The only way to bring about an ultimate 
counter with God, it seems, is to deny him. Ôe’s world is one in which one 
who believes in a god must deny him in order to confirm his existence. It is 
a world of via negativa taken to extremes. The denial of God leads, as in 
Patron’s somersault, both to a paradoxical renewed understanding of God’s 
existence and to the inability ever really to know him. In Ôe’s world, this may 
be as good as it gets.

The present work only begins to examine the relationship between spir-
ituality and modern Japanese literature. It is my hope, however, that the range 
of works covered in this book gives a good indication of the ways in which a 
variety of contemporary Japanese writers of the last half century have revealed 
that spirit does, indeed, continue to matter.