

A Triple Catastrophe Leavened by Beauty and Pleasures

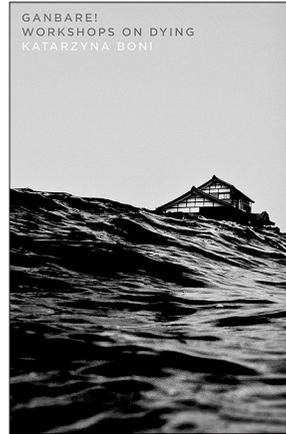
Ganbare! Workshops on Dying

by Katarzyna Boni. Translated from the Polish by Mark Ordon. Rochester, New York: Open Letter, 2021. Sources. Paperback, 296 pp. USD\$16.95.

Reviewed by Beth Holmgren, Duke University, United States

Katarzyna Boni (1982–) represents a new cohort of female Polish reportage writers who now travel as widely in pursuit of their subjects as their male counterparts have for decades. Boni’s first book marks this change in progress: *Kontener* (Container, 2014), which examines the lives of Syrian refugees in Jordan, was coauthored by Boni and Wojciech Tochman (1969–), a well-established reportage writer whose work has led him to the Philippines, Rwanda, and Cambodia. Thereafter, Boni’s solo debut, *Ganbare! Workshops on Dying* (2016), emerged from the several years she spent traveling and doing research in Japan, where, according to her website, she tracked the aftermath of the March 11, 2011, earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi plant. As Boni explains in lieu of a preface, *Ganbare!*—a Japanese exhortation rendered as “Give it your all! Hang in there! Fight! You can do it!”—is “the most commonly repeated word in Tōhoku, the northwestern region of Japan destroyed by the tsunami” (5), featured on billboards, in the press, and public speeches. Boni’s *Ganbare!*, tempered by its sobering subtitle, is at last available to English-language readers in Mark Ordon’s superb translation. The Polish edition netted its author the 2017 Gryfia Prize, a Polish national literary award for women writers.

Boni’s coverage of Japan’s “triple catastrophe” (269) is a remarkable achievement—carefully contextualized, masterfully plotted, and stylistically deft. In contrast to reportage writers who organize thematic mosaics of unattributed quotations from their interviews with witnesses and survivors, Boni strives for a clearly embodied, sensorily rich, regionally attuned presentation of how the Japanese in Tōhoku experienced these catastrophes and coped with their psychological and material losses. In her acknowledgments, the Polish writer thanks a wide variety of Japanese experts and volunteers who helped her in this process, from directing her to specific witnesses to translating copious interviews (269–75). It is as if Boni, an “avid scuba diver,” (<https://katarzynaboni.com/en/about-me/>) has opted to make selective deep dives into topics and stories accompanied by an experienced cohort who know the murky terrain very well.



First and foremost, Boni immerses her readers in the religious culture of northwestern Japan, with its distinctive views on the relationship between the living and the dead. She sets the stage in her brief first chapter, evoking summer nights in Japan's isolationist Edo period (1603–1867) when locals gathered around low tables lit by a hundred candles to play “A Hundred Tales of Horror.” Cooled by the night air and accompanied by “croaking frogs and buzzing cicadas,” each teller of a terrifying ghost story would blow out one candle after their turn: “People believed that the ghosts would appear in their midst when the last candle went out” (11). Lest we dismiss this scene as a parlor trick, Boni's later chapters elaborate on Japanese belief in the importance of the dead's proper burial in order to shut the gate between living and dead (70–74) and Japanese fears about ghosts who may be caught between the two worlds because their bodies have not been found, or they left unfinished business in life, or their loved ones cannot let them go (134–35). Boni relates these beliefs and fears, as well as the existence of *kami* or local deities worshipped in Shintoism, *kami*—local deities worshipped in Shintoism—as matters of fact, without skepticism or sarcasm. She lists the Japanese names for the *kami* and entire categories of ghosts; she meticulously itemizes their physical attributes and superpowers.

Boni also familiarizes readers with the history and landscape of Tōhoku, considered the “back coast” by those in Tokyo, “an agricultural region which has been said to supply the capital with rice, soldiers, and prostitutes” (39). Resisting Tokyo's condescension towards its provincial supplier, she harks back once more to the Edo period, when the famous haiku poet Matsuo Basho finally dared to visit the wild, ungovernable, incomprehensible North in 1689. Boni imagines his reaction through her own observations: “. . . words cannot convey all the views, all the vast spaces, branches twisted in the wind, deep valleys, gentle slopes, forest trails, ragged shoreline, bamboo groves, rice fields in shades of neon green, the stone *torii* gates hidden between the trees, which lead to the Shinto shrines where the *kami* live” (63).

Ganbare! Workshops on Dying is divided into two sections relatively equal in length, followed by a short epilogue that at long last introduces us to the experience of its subtitle. The first section focuses on the tsunami's destruction of people, animals, towns, and forests, and the frantic, and eventually dogged responses of the survivors (11–135). Its chapters portray the desperate hunt for human remains in the sodden wreckage of buildings and deep down on the seafloor; the cherished recovery of objects that attested to the dead's past before the tsunami swept away all its traces (cellphones, business cards, damaged photographs); the survivors' relocation to temporary housing built with plastic windows and shared metal walls that kept out neither sound nor cold; and the efforts of monks from all sects and schools to help the despondent displaced get back on their feet by setting up mobile coffee shops and inviting survivors to complain, talk, and, eventually, grieve.

Boni cleverly shifts from tsunami-related tales to the second section's stories about nuclear power and disaster by revisiting the 1954 screen debut of Godzilla, the monster who breathes fire, shakes the ground, and feeds on radiation. She provides a brief history of Japan's eventual embrace of atomic power energy plants roughly a decade after the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. A chapter titled sim-

ply “Boom!” plays out the intense five-day drama—enhanced by inserted dates and times—of the tsunami’s unexpectedly deadly impact on the Fukushima Daiichi power plant, the consequent meltdown of three nuclear reactor cores, and the release of a radiation cloud that affected villages in a forty-mile radius. Given that the Japanese government and the Tokyo Electric Power Company were long reluctant to disclose this information, Boni’s subsequent account relies extensively on the testimony of activist Kenta Satō. (In her acknowledgments, Boni notes that she talked for more than twenty hours with her obliging source.) Satō loved his village of Iitate in the Tōhoku region and planned to raise a family there so that his kids could relive his own golden childhood. After March 11, 2011, however, he quickly educated himself about becquerels and sieverts, decided to sign up for a Twitter account, and began posting that Iitate and its famous produce, dairy, fish, and wildlife were poisoned by nuclear fallout (203). When Boni met him, Satō had been serving nonstop as a witness about what was happening—at conferences, seminars, workshops, and on radio and television. He longed to found a museum about the nuclear disaster so he would “no longer have to talk about it” (206). (The Great East Japan Earthquake and Nuclear Disaster Memorial Museum was opened in September 2020 in the town of Futaba.)

It bears noting here that the grim, painful aftermath of the triple catastrophe Boni represents in *Ganbare!* is also leavened by her attraction to Japanese beauty and pleasures, and her appreciation for her colleagues’ vivacity and generosity. To a large extent, these feelings shape her choice of narrative construction and style. For example, in both sections, Boni mourns loss with a similar rhetorical format in which her sensorily indulgent evocation of what *was* overwhelms the austere sentence(s) declaring its erasure or contamination. In the first section, the city of Rikuzentakata is richly remembered and summarily canceled (13–15). In the second section, her description of the village of Iitate elicits a natural paradise that we are more likely to remember than the evil, time-limited spell of its radioactivity.

Hillsides, mountain streams, green rice fields, and river rapids in valleys. Wild boars, monkeys, and deer. The air filled with the scent of grass from pastures. Wooden houses with tatami mats and sliding paper walls. Even the cell-phone network was poor here. If you wanted to talk to a neighbor, you would take a walk through the woods rather than pick up the phone. Iitate. One of Japan’s most beautiful villages.

But you’re not allowed to visit it. (192)

Perhaps most moving are Boni’s chapter-long recordings of Japanese interviewees to whom she cedes the microphone. Boni’s most charismatic subject in the first section is Grandma Abe, the woman who runs the temporary fish market in Onagawa after the tsunami. Boni, the reporter, functions solely as Grandma Abe’s guest—plied with the best seafood delicacies along with Abe’s emphatic suggestions on how to prepare them. Here, local food and food culture show Boni (and us) how a resourceful woman is reviving her devastated world and urging customers to savor one consumable pleasure of life. In the second section, an elderly group of *hibakusha* (those who survived the Hiroshima and Nagasaki blasts) treats Boni to the best food and drink in a restaurant, pairing different sakes with delicious hors d’oeuvres (142). Their eager recommendations and consumption at once enable and form an essential

counterbalance to the horrific memories that they almost casually interject between placing more orders.

In the de facto epilogue that introduces section 3 of *Ganbare!*, Boni includes us in a workshop on dying, an exercise in which we symbolically cast off the things, places, activities, and people we most cherish as we absorb a monk's chillingly realistic account of our dying up to the point of death. Yet the many stories that Boni has related, recorded, and arranged for us in her marvelous book perhaps have prepared us to offer well-considered answers to the monk's final questions: "You did not die. That was not your last breath. So what will you do with your life? And what will you do with the twenty treasures that are most important to you?" (264).