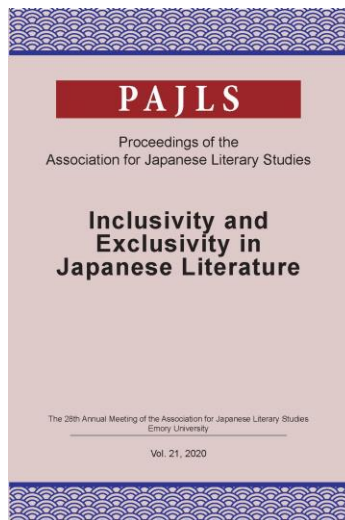


“Countdown to the Demise of Novels for Girls”

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Trans. Barbara Hartley 

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## COUNTDOWN TO THE DEMISE OF NOVELS FOR GIRLS

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### ABSTRACT


In Japan, girls' novels, or "*shōjo shōsetsu*," have been a fixture in the field of popular literature for at least the past century. In recent decades, the principal publisher of this form of narrative has been Shūeisha's Cobalt Library (*Kobaruto bunko*). However, with material no longer being published in print form, and with Shūeisha establishing a new Orange Library (*Orenji bunko*) light novel series to which many previous Cobalt writers have migrated, it appears that the girls' novel genre may well disappear. This article positions the historic and more recent production of girls' novels within the parameters of Japanese society to investigate the apparent demise of works of this nature. In doing so, connections are made between the *shōjo shōsetsu* genre and the gender norms that have marginalized Japanese women in the past and that arguably continue to do so today.

### INTRODUCTION

Read by successive generations, Japanese girls' novels, or "*shōjo shōsetsu*," have given rise to various fads over the course of their more than one-hundred-year history. While seemingly recognized as a Japanese literary genre, *shōjo shōsetsu* now face a readership decline. Parent company Shūeisha has ceased print publication of new titles by Cobalt Library (1976–; *Kobaruto bunko*), the established label in the field, which has moved to an on-line format. Shūeisha has concurrently established Orange Library (2015–; *Orenji bunko*) with a target readership that includes a slightly older age. This has been accompanied by a growing shift by former Cobalt Library writers to the new Orange Library label. Girl readers today seem to prefer a range of easy-to-read books, including the light novels (*raito noberu*) written for boys in their teens and twenties.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> While, of course, contemporary designations resist any binary division of women and men or girls and boys, the gender nomenclature used here corresponds to the

First appearing in the 1990s, this is one of several newer literary genres. Light novels are closely associated with the *raito bungei* (light literature) that has emerged in the twenty-first century as an even newer light novel variant. Although there is significant cross-over between light literature and light novels in that both are written in a casual style, both have unique character portrayals, and both feature accompanying illustrations, light literature places greater emphasis on plot and literary description. Light novels are largely marketed to a readership of young men, while publishers mainly target young women as readers of light literature. In reality, however, light literature has a broad readership that encompasses men and older women also. Although still comparatively new, as the light novel did in the 1990s, the light literature form has gained growing attention during the second decade of the twenty-first century. We might ask whether or not girls' novels will continue to be absorbed into these newer forms and eventually disappear.

The following discussion examines the current state of girls' novels and the social context in which their production is located. Why have girls' novels lost their appeal? How have reading tastes changed among Japanese girls? Does this change extend to views among young people on the idea of romantic love? Since its emergence, the *shōjo shōsetsu* genre has been influenced by Japanese gender norms that work to marginalize women. These norms arguably remain in place today. While examining the shifts that have occurred in girls' novels, the discussion will also explore issues related to the social exclusion of women and girls in Japan.

#### THE DIGITIZATION OF COBALT LIBRARY WORKS

Fans of girls' novels in Japan were devastated when Shūeisha's Cobalt Library, the historic girls' novel publishing house, recently began migrating its archive to digital form.<sup>4</sup> In 2019, Cobalt also ceased producing print publications of new works. Prior to this, in 2016, the print magazine *Cobalt* (1982–2016; *Kobaruto*), which first featured many of the works acquired by Cobalt Library, also became an on-line only publication.

For some time now, on grounds of accessibility and costs, western libraries have moved towards electronic collections and e-books. This shift

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often-strict market divisions instituted by the publishing industry in Japan.

<sup>4</sup> A quick scan of the many blog sites devoted to the genre confirms that fans were truly shocked by the termination of the Cobalt Library book form, with some even concerned that this shift would lead to Cobalt's demise. See, for example: <https://iromame-beans.jp/user/yu2otktk/951a7cb2318af743b02d> (accessed August 18, 2021)

has not yet occurred to such a degree in Japan, where major libraries continue to prioritize print materials. As a result, although new Cobalt Library publications are being distributed incrementally in electronic form, these are not acquired by public collections such as the National Diet Library of Japan. Previously, the National Diet Library acquired Cobalt Library print-form novels as a matter of course. Readers were therefore always able to access these materials at that site. This is not possible with the more recent digitized materials. While it is true that there was always a tendency to regard girls' novels with the same disrespect and disdain as "read-and-dispose-of" magazines, we now find that the digital forms of these works will not be acquired by or made available through public library collections.

It is the case that a number of other publishing house offprints, such as Kadokawa Beans Library (2001–; *Kadokawa bīnzu bunko*), Kadokawa B's-LOG Library (2006–; *Kadokawa bīzurogu bunko*) and Ichijinsha Library Iris (2008–; *Ichijinsha bunko airisu*), continue to release girls' novels in assorted paper formats. However, the departure from the print market of Shūeisha's Cobalt Library, the publisher best known as a purveyor of girls' novels, perhaps heralds the effective demise of the genre in Japan. While the decline of book sales is a matter of serious concern for the Japanese cultural landscape generally, the Shūeisha policy shift suggests that the impact on the girls' novels market has been particularly severe.

Originally, the girls' novels genre represented a distinctive tradition in the modern era in Japan. Following the 1895 publication of *Boys' World* (1895–1933; *Shōnen sekai*), a magazine targeting boys and youths, magazines for girls also began to appear. These included *Girls' World* (1906–1931; *Shōjo sekai*), *Girls' Friend* (1908–1955; *Shōjo no tomo*) and *Girls' Club* (1923–1962; *Shōjo kurabu*). Before appearing in stand-alone book form, many girls' novels were serialized in magazines such as these. Girls' novels enjoyed renewed popularity immediately after the Second World War when even authors who wrote novels for adults published fiction for girls. Holding their popularity in this way for more than a hundred years, girls' novels were eventually acknowledged as a literary genre.

The recent decline in the sales of girls' novels points to the fact that the interests and tastes of the girls who read these novels have shifted towards television drama, film, manga, anime, games and other more audio-visual formats. However, there are also issues related to content. Let us now consider a number of these.

### 1970S GIRLS' MANGA AND 1980S GIRLS' NOVELS

The biggest surge in the sales of girls' novels occurred during the 1980s. The impetus was the fact that, during the 1970s, girls' manga in Japan broke new ground in terms of innovative expression. Liberated in their thinking, a group of young women manga artists, known in Japan as the *24 nen gumi* (Shōwa 24 group, that is, artists born in and around Shōwa 24 or 1949), produced material that had never before appeared in girls' manga. These artists, including Ikeda Riyoko (b. 1947), Ōshima Yumiko (b. 1947), Takemiya Keiko (b. 1950), Hagio Moto (b. 1949), and Yamagishi Ryōko (b. 1947), created manga that ranged in genre from historical tales and science fiction to fantasy narratives. Combining the comic and the lyrical, these works created diverse characters whose psychology the artists expressed with great subtlety. Girls' novels were strongly influenced by these trends.

Between the 1960s and 1970s, girls' novels were referred to as "junior novels" (*junia shōsetsu*). This was a genre in which writers who were quite a lot older than readers produced serious coming-of-age stories with school or family settings. Inspired by the new developments in girls' manga, however, younger writers, closer to readers in age, began to produce lighter works in which high-spirited girl protagonists played an active role. Also following girls' manga, the range of narrative settings broadened to include historical tales, science fiction, and traditional fantasy. In comparison to junior novels, moreover, there was a comic sense of light-heartedness and fun in the written expression of these works and the depiction of the main themes of love and friendship.

Around this time, works by Himuro Saeko (1957–2008), a representative writer of the girls' novel genre, sold hundreds of thousands of copies. Women who were then middle school and high school students tell of girls' novels being passed around and read during class. Clearly, the genre met with wild girl reader approval. In addition to the publication of large numbers of these works, the desire of girls in their teens to consume such reading material led to a stream of young women writers entering the field as authors. Those who later wrote novels for adults include Kirino Natsuo (b. 1951), Iwai Shimako (b. 1964), Yamamoto Fumio (b. 1962), and Kakuta Mitsuyo (b. 1967).

When light novels for boys and youth became popular during the 1990s, however, girls' novels lost a little of their momentum. In spite of this, novels for girls continued to be published in series that featured twenty or thirty volumes, with popular works created even into the twenty-first century. In addition, girls' novels adopted and developed various expressive strategies that were a feature of light novels for boys. These

included loquacious and comical narration by the protagonist and an “afterword” in which authors engaged readers in intimate exchange.

#### **NARRATIVE TEMPLATE VERSUS LIVED EXPERIENCE IN JAPAN**

With this history, why are girls’ novels now facing a countdown to extinction? Some argue that the most significant factor is the growing diversity, previously noted, of entertainment forms enjoyed by girl readers. In addition, however, there is arguably a problem with the narrow narrative template that characterizes novels for girls.

Since the 1990s and especially from the 2000s, the majority of girls’ novels have followed a standardized template that continuously reproduces the same narrative pattern. This basically involves a fantasy storyline that can be set in either an alternative world or a time in the past. The latter might be the Heian era (794–1185) in Japan or the nineteenth century in England. Drawing on slightly unrealistic elements, the narrative builds around elements of mystery or the occult, developing finally into a love story between the girl protagonist and a male with an elite social background. It is generally obligatory that the girl loves a man with higher social standing. In other words, these narratives tell of an ordinary commoner girl who suddenly and unexpectedly is chosen as a partner-in-love by royalty or a member of the aristocracy and who, having experienced various twists and turns, ends up happily married. This so-called Cinderella fantasy (*Shinderera gensō*) template is generally accompanied by an alternative world narrative setting or a setting from the past. One factor behind this tendency is that, since the class system was long ago abolished in Japan, it is no longer possible in contemporary society for a girl to love a young man with both economic power and a royal or aristocratic background.

Although romantic girls’ novels that depict marriage between a girl and a man of a different class background permit the reader to forget everyday life, it is difficult for such works to address the real-life issues that confront girls in Japan. In other words, the inevitably restricted worlds of these fictional girls’ novels are unable to portray either the school or family experiences of the contemporary girl.

The light novels that have targeted boy and young male readers since the 1990s often themselves depict an alternate or fantasy world featuring unusual characters and settings. There are some, nevertheless, that have gained considerable popularity by providing accounts of school life in contemporary Japan. Large numbers of girls’ manga, also, portray love stories set in a school. With some notable exceptions, however, girls’

novels depicted only those worlds that were largely separate from the real-life experiences of the Japanese girl.

Long endorsed by girl readers in Japan, the Cinderella fantasy involves a heroine who obtains good fortune when chosen by a male partner who is markedly superior to her in terms of social status, economic means, and human nature also. However, given the depressed economic conditions that have been an on-going feature of twenty-first century Japan, there is a growing sense of unreality attached to the dream of marriage to a boy from a higher class. Of course, even in 1990s Japan, when these class-difference marriage narratives became the girls' novel staple, there were few men in real life with princely economic power. Nevertheless, at that time there was still a sense that the Cinderella fantasy had a basis. In a Japan where deflation and economic depression have been constants since 2000, this basis has been mercilessly crushed.<sup>5</sup>

While there is undoubtedly a trend in Japan for young women to delay marriage or even not marry at all, subliminal messages from hegemonic social institutions, including the media, continue to create an impression of marriage to a man of means as desirable. This can perhaps be regarded as a residual effect of the bubble economy during which time a woman may have found, at least, economic security with a well-paid man. While the economic bubble has long collapsed, the tax system in Japan continued to favor married couples, with significant subsidies paid in the form of partner allowances to married men with non-working wives. A 2016 Reuters report noted how the Abe administration decided against proceeding with plans to remove that allowance "out of concerns it would upset households with a high income earner and a homemaker" (Reuters Staff).

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<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding real-life trends, significant numbers of women continue to seek, as an ideal at least, married life with a man. Writing in 2016 of the Kirino Natsuo novel, *Happiness*, serialized between July 2010 and October 2012 in the magazine *Very*, Rio Otomo (2016, 180) notes how although Kirino is sympathetic to her characters, "and hence to the readers of the magazine," she is simultaneously "critical of the women's belief in the imaginary values of an elite class and their willingness to submit to the imposed ideology of motherhood." A number of the key mothers featured in the work are women married to men of means. The protagonist of the novel, for example, finds herself relegated to the margins of a group led by "a former cabin attendant, whose fashion sense is chic, mannerism elegant, and husband picture-perfect" (Otomo 2016, 187). While, as Otomo argues (2016, 180), the novel ultimately "repudiates the consumerist lifestyle models constructed for sale through *Very* and the popular media at large," it is a searing confirmation of the fact that some women continue to aspire to lifestyle models dismissed by other women.

In terms of the fall in male income, between the mid-1990s and 2015 the lifetime earnings of a male university graduate fell by 50,000,000 yen or US\$470,000. When considered on an annual basis, this is a fall of 2,500,000 yen or US\$23,000 each year (Rōdō seisaku kenkyū kenshū kikō 2019). With this drop in household earnings, many married women entered the workforce specifically in order to earn an income. By 2019, the number of households with both partners working in Japan numbered twelve million, while households with stay-at-home wives had fallen to below six million, less than half the former figure (Rōdō seisaku kenkyū kenshū kikō). Since a rise in the number of working-couple households can indicate the growth of workplace opportunities for women, in gender terms such a shift can be a marker of social progress. Problems arise, however, with the nature of the work involved. According to a 2019 Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication (Sōmushō) “Workforce Survey,” women comprise almost 70 percent of the 21.8 million workers in irregular and insecure employment in Japan (Sōmushō tōkei kyoku 2020). Of these, more than 70 percent are married (Kōsei rōdōshō shokugyō ante kyoku). Thus, many married women may clearly have difficulty finding work other than that which, lacking a career path, will ultimately serve the purpose of supplementing the family income only. In other words, the statistics cited above suggest that the majority of Japanese women in employment have irregular and insecure positions in which achieving the self-fulfillment that comes with secure employment conditions and fair remuneration is largely impossible.

Harsh economic conditions generally and reduced male lifetime earnings have made it increasingly difficult for Japanese women to follow a dream that involves depending on the financial power of a man. In fictional narrative, too, the Cinderella fantasy of being rescued by a prince whom a girl desires and who will provide a fabulously wealthy lifestyle has faded away. Having become totally remote from social conditions, the Cinderella fantasy now fails to reflect the realities of the lives of girls in Japan. Yet, its demise perhaps highlights the anti-romantic circumstances impinging on Japanese women generally.

#### **THE NEED FOR A NEW INITIATIVE**

The loss of this kind of fantasy, however, has generated the discovery by girls of a new image of masculinity, inspired not by a novel but by characters from an animation. In 2015, Television Tokyo (Terebi Tōkyō) began screening the anime *Mr. Osomatsu* (*Osomatsu-san*), which at the time of writing had run across three series from 2015–2016, 2017–2018 and 2020–2021. Based on a manga originally entitled, *Osomatsu-kun*



(1962–1969) by Akatsuka Fujio (1935–2008), *Mr. Osomatsu* depicted the daily activities of six indolent, unemployed brothers, the grown-up versions of the original manga characters. The series became extraordinarily popular, especially among women viewers.<sup>6</sup> This popularity suggested that, while a useless man may have been socially inferior and therefore looked down upon, the charm of his amusing speech and actions made this figure more valuable as a desirable partner for contemporary women than a man of higher status whom they might revere.

Changes also occurred in publishing regimes. Rather than submitting manuscripts to established publishing houses, for example, writers began to lodge their work with websites such as *Let's Become a Novelist* (*Shōsetsuka ni narō*).<sup>7</sup> Among published works, new narrative templates emerged. Particularly popular were works involving a girl protagonist who was reincarnated within the narrative itself into the virtual world of a “love-game” (*ren'ai gēmu*) targeting women and girls in which players interacted with the game characters to experience virtual love. This girl was not the standard heroine, but a villain from a well-to-do family who nonetheless struggled to survive. A representative work is *I Was Reborn as a Villainous Girl of Privilege Who Was Only Ever Given Destructive Options in an Otome Game* (sometimes translated, *My Next Life as a Villainess: All Routes Lead to Doom; Otome gēmu no hametsu furagu shika nai akuyaku reijō ni tensei shite shimatta*) by Yamaguchi Satoru (b. 1959).<sup>8</sup> With Ichijinsha Library Iris commencing serialization in August 2015, the narrative was adapted in 2020 as a television animation. At the time of writing, the novel continued to be serialized.

In the past, if a character in a love game for girls had been reborn as the heroine, marketplace convention suggests that she would in all likelihood have been surrounded by princes and other beautiful young noblemen. She would then have married the man she desired. However, since the girl above was born into a game world in which each of the young noblemen she met was useless, she could no longer depend on their support. Forced, as she was, to work hard in order to evade annihilation, the villainous girl of privilege reborn into these conditions exerted a positive influence even over the useless young noblemen around her. The

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<sup>6</sup> Series episodes of *Mr. Osomatsu* have limited plot lines. The main focus is the depiction of the six brothers failing and generally demonstrating a lack of social skills. Each brother has a distinct personality that marks him as different from his siblings.

<sup>7</sup> *Shōsetsuka ni narō* (Let's Become a Novelist). <https://syosetu.com/>

<sup>8</sup> Thanks are given to Dr Emerald King, Latrobe University in Melbourne, Australia, and Dr. Anne Lee for their generous advice concerning this title.

addition of these new elements to the original fantasy setting directed at girls saw the creation of a world in which, not only was it difficult for the heroine to meet the usual prince ideal, but in which the prince character himself was subject to some character development. The fact that these additions made Yamaguchi's novel a hit suggests that readers supported narratives in which not only the protagonist but also the young men playing the role of the prince underwent transformation.

*The Twelve Kingdoms* (*Jūnikoku ki*, 1991–), by Ono Fuyumi (b. 1960), is one work published as a series that has enjoyed long-time popularity and that continues to be published in the present day. The work is a grand fantasy that begins with an episode in which a contemporary girls' high school student becomes a king (this specific detail is stipulated in the narrative) in an alternate world. The narrative then provides elaborate detail of the girl's reign of various kingdoms. It was notable that, when the fourth volume was published in 2019 after a break of eighteen years, sales numbers for each volume exceeded 500,000 (“‘Jūnikoku ki shinbun’ gōgai!” 2019). Although *The Twelve Kingdoms* is currently categorized in marketing terms as a novel for general readership across all market categories, this unusually long narrative was first published by Kōdansha's X Bunko White Heart that once issued girls' novels. In 2012, the series was transferred to Shinchōsha and released as a standard *bunko* (paperback), with total sales currently exceeding ten million (Ōmori 2019). While initially conceived as a girls' novel, the work was transformed into a ground-breaking general novel that attracted large numbers of men and adult women readers.

Examples such as *The Twelve Kingdoms* indicate that, once the genre is freed from set images of both the heroine and male characters and also from a fixed narrative template, innovation in girls' novels is possible. Opportunities for diversification arise when a work positively captures the new trends of an era. It is then that works which appeal to a wide cross-section of readership are born. Perhaps the established publishers of girls' novels, however, no longer have the capacity for such change. Ultimately, the genre appears to have diminished through defending traditional narrative patterns.

#### FUTURE OUTLOOK AND RESEARCH TOPICS

Rather than the light novel, in contemporary Japan it is the newer light literature form, known as *raito bungei*, that has gathered force to come more and more to the fore as an alternative to girls' novels. This genre encompasses diverse literary forms that are not limited by being directed only towards girls and that thus stand in opposition to notions of an entire

readership comprised of girls. Based on a less-rigidly prescribed narrative template than the girls' novels of the past, many of these works have also been adapted for anime or television drama. We noted at the outset that in 2015 Shūeisha, the publishing house that produces Cobalt Library, initiated a light literature offprint known as Orange Library. In the six years since its commencement until 2020, the number of all copies published by Orange Library exceeded eight million ("Orenji bunko sōkan 6 shūnen fea" 2020).

*Raito bungei* or light literature has a greater sense of realism in its settings than girls' novels in that these works are able naturally to depict the activities of women and girls in sites that include schools and various workplaces. The inclusion of tales of teenage girls and fantasy-related story-lines nonetheless ensures that light literary novels are regarded as having similar narrative developments as those found in the novel form that evolved for girls. Writers such as Konno Oyuki (the author of *Maria sama ga miteiru* [*Maria Watches Over Us*] series) and Tani Mizue (the author of *Hakushaku to yōsei* [*Earl and Fairy*] series) who once worked with Cobalt Library now publish new works with Orange Library. Perhaps girls' novels are ultimately being dismantled bit by bit in a way that will permit the various component parts to reemerge incorporated into light literary novels.

Girls' novels, however, were a genre that nurtured a sense of solidarity, with girls of the same age having a shared awareness of reading common material together. Prewar girls' magazines promoted and published readers' pages or columns, often referred to as "*Tomo no kai no tsudoī*" (Gatherings of the Friendship Club). Through these columns, readers could connect with editors, writers, illustrators and also with other readers. Furthermore, exchange between members of this reading community developed when readers sent words of support through magazine pages to those whose letters and other contributions were published. This led to the cultivation of collective girls' codes that encompassed language and various behavior norms. It was with the support of these magazine-reading girls, and the codes that they shared, that the girls' novel genre was born. During the boom of the 1980s, girls' novels acted as intermediaries to friendship by being passed around between girls and read during class. In this sense, we will perhaps lose the reading experience tradition that comes with the circulation of novels to which groups of only girls respond with passion and empathy. Why have girls' novels atrophied and fossilized in this way and why do they no longer offer a narrative that fits the contemporary girl? I feel that this is a problem that must surely be investigated in future research.

As a coda and topic for future thought, we might consider boys love (*bōizu rabu*), a sexualized narrative genre defined by James Welker (2015, 42) as “depicting beautiful adolescent boys or young men in same-sex romantic or sexual relationships.” As Welker notes, this genre, which had become a global phenomenon by the second decade of the twenty-first century, first appeared in Japan around 1970 after which it was promoted by young Japanese women themselves in their teens and twenties. Boys love novels remain popular, are published in print form and continue to sell. Rather than specifically seeking a work of same-sex love, however, perhaps the women and girls who read boys love are expressing a desire to distance themselves from the constrictive gender ideals and “femininity” norms of Japan. Such a desire may be related to the demise of the girls’ novel genre. We should therefore interrogate the problems experienced by this genre in terms of the position of women within the gender systems of Japan.

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