

# The Timeless Appeal of *Narayama Bushi-kō*

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## ABSTRACT

The following essay is a reflection on the widespread appeal and enduring significance of Fukazawa Shichirō's debut novel *Narayama Bushi-kō* (檜山節考, *The Ballad of Narayama*). A brief introduction of the novel's historical background is followed by an examination of its main characters and themes in the light of Fukazawa's character and philosophy of life. Some parallels with modern society are then suggested before concluding with a short discussion of Fukazawa's unique storytelling techniques.

## INTRODUCTION

A hundred years has passed since Japanese writer and musician Fukazawa Shichirō was born in Yamanashi Prefecture on 29 January 1914, and it is well over half a century since his acclaimed debut novel *Narayama Bushi-kō* won the 1956 Chūō Kōron Shinjinshō (award for the best new novelist of the year).

Based on a well-known Japanese legend, *Narayama Bushi-kō* is set at an indeterminate time in the past in a nameless, remote, impoverished Japanese mountain village. Food is so scarce in “Yonder Village” that infanticide is common practice and custom dictates that the elderly, on reaching the age of 70, must be accompanied by a family member on a “pilgrimage” to Mount Narayama and left there to die. The narrative focuses on grandmother Orin's preparation for the pilgrimage in the months leading up to her seventieth birthday and culminates in her son Tatsuhei's solitary return from the Mountain to the family home, where Orin's personal belongings have already been claimed by her grandchildren.

Since its publication in the influential literary magazine *Chūō Kōron* in 1956, when *Narayama Bushi-kō* rocked the Japanese literary world with the raw immediacy of both its style and subject matter, the novel and its film adaptations have continued to fascinate a wide spectrum of readers and cinema-goers throughout the decades into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The novel has not only been reprinted many times in Japanese, but two English translations have been

published<sup>1</sup> and French and German translations are still readily available. In addition, the story has twice been made into a feature film for the cinema. The 1983 Imamura Shōhei version – an adaptation of *Narayama Bushi-kō* combined with its sequel *Tōhoku no Zummutachi* (東北の神武たち, *The Men of Tohoku*, 1957) – won international acclaim as the recipient of the Palme d’Or at the 1983 Cannes film festival, while a restored blu-ray edition of Kinoshita Keisuke’s 1958 film was released as recently as 2013.

What is the secret of the tale’s enduring and universal appeal, and what meaning does it hold for us today?

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

It is hardly surprising that *Narayama Bushi-kō*, with its poignant depiction of communal life and familial bonds, struck a responsive chord in Japanese hearts in the mid-1950s, when rapidly advancing industrialisation was causing an exodus from rural communities toward urban centres. Far removed from the protection of extended family and community, many newly arrived city-dwellers were struggling to recreate their identity based on Western ideals of individualism and independence. These displaced souls harboured a nostalgic longing for the rustic simplicity, traditional values, communal identity and motherly love they associated with their *urusato* (native village or home). In fact, this strong sense of nostalgia for an idealised past or *urusato* is still very much in evidence throughout Japan today and may account in part for the story’s continued appeal in Fukazawa’s homeland (Kanada 13-14).

Nostalgic sentimentality was not the only reason for the novel’s initial success, however. While the Japanese media dutifully greeted it with praise for the protagonist’s unwavering faith in traditional customs, the judges who selected *Narayama Bushi-kō* for the Chūō Kōron best-new-novelist award read a little more into the story. They recognised its importance in highlighting two conflicting value systems that were causing political and social turmoil in Japan at the time: the dilemma of nationalist adherence to the tradition of sacrificing individual interests for the benefit of the group as opposed to new democratic ideals of modern humanism (Mishima 1956: 201-203 in Lee).

Whether the judges’ interpretation was an accurate reflection of the author’s intentions remains a matter for speculation. Fukazawa Shichirō was, by all accounts, an unpredictable and contrary

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<sup>1</sup> Bester, John, *The Oak Mountain Song*, Japan Quarterly vol. 4, no. 2, April-June 1957, pp 200-233, Tokyo: 1957.

Keene, Donald, *The Songs of Oak Mountain, The Old Woman, the Wife, and the Archer*, pp 3-50, Viking Press, New York: 1961.

character. Those who knew him well described him as a nonconformist with nihilistic and anarchistic leanings – an eccentric individual who flouted tradition and authority and lacked all social graces and pretensions. In the light of his subsequent short story *Fūryūmutan* (風流夢譚, *An Elegant Dream*, 1960), a gleefully anarchist fantasy describing a left-wing revolution in Tokyo in which the entire Imperial family are beheaded, one might assume that his sympathies lay with the liberal thinkers and their modern democratic ideals. Fukazawa, however, denied having any political affiliation and claimed to have written *Fūryūmutan* “just for a laugh” (Sōma 81). According to a close acquaintance, “Shichirō was crazy about rockabilly music at the time and had absolutely no convictions one way or the other; . . . he just went along with the side that was making the most noise” (Hamano 114).

Fukazawa no doubt had various motives for writing *Narayama Bushi-kō*. In addition to its supposed social and political message, the novel is a heartfelt portrayal of the human condition. It may also have been a tribute to Fukazawa’s beloved mother who passed away in 1945, not to mention an enjoyable exercise for its author in musical composition, songwriting and storytelling. In any case, *Narayama Bushi-kō* certainly managed to capture the interest and imagination of a broad spectrum of the Japanese public in the troubled social and political context of postwar Japan.

What accounts, however, for the novel’s enduring popularity several decades later, not only in Japan but also in the Western world?

### **ORIN - VICTIM OR VICTOR?**

An English-language review of Kinoshita Keisuke’s 1958 film adaption of *Narayama Bushi-kō* describes it as “a haunting and deeply affecting portrait of love and humanity struggling against the rigidity of tradition, obedience and sense of duty [that inevitably becomes] a haunting allegory on the perils of blind allegiance, martyrdom, and repression – a humanist reflection of the profound introspection, cultural erosion, and ideological ambivalence of postwar Japan” (Strictly Film School).

While there is no arguing with the validity of these observations, *Narayama Bushi-kō* may also be seen as an inspiring tale of self-realisation. One of the keys to the tale’s universal and timeless appeal is surely the philosophical truths that the elderly protagonist, Orin, embodies and the hope she inspires through her determination to orchestrate her own destiny regardless of the constraints she must endure. By acting according to her own set of values, even while adhering to cultural and social norms, she lives and dies in a manner that brings her fulfillment and peace. Strange though it may seem considering the traditional Japanese context of Orin’s story, the

classic American song “My Way”<sup>2</sup>, a celebration of a life lived with personal integrity, springs to mind.

Orin’s approach to life also recalls “The Serenity Prayer”, a formula for achieving “reasonable happiness” in this life and “supreme happiness” in the next:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
The courage to change the things I can,  
And the wisdom to know the difference.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout history, thinkers of diverse cultural, religious and philosophical persuasions have reached the same conclusion: It is not what life deals out to us, but the way in which we perceive and react to our circumstances, that determines our level of happiness.

Orin embodies the wisdom of this philosophy in that she accepts the sacrifice the village demands of her, not with reluctance and trepidation, but with courage, dignity and self-determination. Far from seeing herself as a helpless victim, she commits herself wholeheartedly, even enthusiastically, to organising her final days so as to ensure the best possible outcome she can imagine for herself and her family. Thus, Orin ends her life not as a tragic victim, but as the triumphant heroine of her own life story. If anyone is seen to suffer, it is her son, Tatsuhei, as he struggles with the inevitability of his beloved mother’s fate and the harsh reality of his filial obligation to act as accomplice to her death.

In her daily life, too, Orin is quick to distinguish between what she can and cannot change and to act accordingly. While she goes to great lengths to change what she can – even going so far as to bash out her front teeth on a stone mortar in order to look suitably old and frail for the pilgrimage to the Mountain – she is quick to accept and adapt to circumstances beyond her control. After a momentary outburst of anger, she makes no objection to her grandson Kesakichi’s marriage and she welcomes his graceless young wife, Matsuyan, into her home even though they can ill afford another mouth to feed. Neither does she resent the young couple when she learns that Matsuyan is pregnant. She simply adapts to the situation by bringing the date of her departure forward in order to protect herself and her family from the accusations of lustfulness and “excessive fecundity” that a great-grandchild, or “rat-child”, would be sure to invite if it were born in her lifetime.

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<sup>2</sup> “My Way”: composed by Paul Anka for Frank Sinatra, who released the song in 1969.

<sup>3</sup> These first three lines of the 14-line “Serenity Prayer”, attributed to twentieth century American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, became widely known after Alcoholics Anonymous adopted the prayer in 1941.

## **PATHS TO HEAVEN AND HELL**

The fate of Orin's elderly neighbour, Matayan, provides a chilling example of the miserable consequences of resisting the inevitable. While Orin sits shrouded in pure white snow, serene and dignified, intoning a prayer on her new straw mat in a spot she has chosen for herself on the Mountain, Matayan, who has repeatedly refused to make the pilgrimage, is dragged up the path by his son and kicked screaming off the mountainside, trussed hand and foot, to be dashed on the rocks in the dark valley below. While either of these extremes is unthinkable in modern times – and, despite numerous legends, folklorists mostly agree that this kind of geronticide was not actually practised even in early Japan (Danely 11) – there is no disputing the fact that death will catch up with us all eventually. The difference lies in how we choose to receive it. Orin and Matayan's contrasting fates illustrate how, regardless of race or creed, our destiny in this life and beyond is dictated by our own attitudes and actions. Heaven or Hell, enlightenment or darkness, peace or despair – they are all ultimately of our own creation.

## **EXISTENTIALISM AND AUTHENTICITY**

“We don't live; we are just alive. Human life amounts to nothing more than just being alive for no reason . . . like maggots or caterpillars” (Tsunazawa 7). Fukazawa's reflections on life recall the existential nihilist precept that life is without objective meaning, purpose or intrinsic value. Furthermore, whether or not he intended it, Orin and Matayan are model examples of an existential heroine and anti-hero – Orin in her determination, and Matayan in his failure, to rise above the meaningless. Alternatively, we might see the two characters as representing complementary aspects of human nature – dignity and ignobility, courage and cowardice, selflessness and self-preoccupation – and the potential that every human being has to grow in either direction.

Existentialism, a philosophical movement that became popular in the years following World War II, is based on the precept that life has no intrinsic meaning or purpose and that religion and all the trappings of society that regulate our lives are illusory.<sup>4</sup> Born into an irrational and meaningless world, each individual – not society or religion – is seen to be solely responsible for giving meaning to his or her life by living it as passionately and sincerely, or “authentically”, as possible. An authentic life is defined as one that is lived in personal (psychological) freedom, according to one's own values and in accordance with one's own nature, while at the same time assuming responsibility for one's actions and commitment to one's fellow human beings.

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<sup>4</sup> It is understandable that existentialism might have struck a chord with the Japanese in the years following World War II, with their Emperor stripped of his divinity and authority, their political system in turmoil, and the traditional social codes and norms they had lived by for centuries challenged by new Western ways of thinking.

Although the undisputed presence of a god on Mount Narayama lends a note of religious solemnity to Orin's pilgrimage, she lives, nonetheless, in the here and now. While she is deeply concerned for her descendants' wellbeing, she has no apparent expectation of an afterlife for herself. She gives meaning and authenticity to her life by fully assuming her commitment to her family and community while striving to attain her personal goals within the framework of her environment and allowing those around her the freedom to do the same. Ironically, she is the most productive and dynamic member of her family. From fire-lighting to fishing, she is a capable and willing worker who gains satisfaction from passing on the knowledge she has accumulated during her lifetime and providing for the seven family members who will survive her.

Matayan, on the other hand, as a result of his refusal to sincerely commit to his own life and death or assume responsibility for either himself or his family, remains to the end the pathetic victim of a meaningless existence, alienated from the community and despised by even his own flesh and blood.

Orin is authentic not only in her honest approach to life and death, but also in the sense that she is a credible character – a fallible human, not a saint. While we cannot help but admire her courage, self-reliance, humanity and dignity, we can empathise at the same time with her vanity, pride and willfulness. Her concern with her appearance and reputation, her gleeful pride in the feast she has prepared for her family to enjoy after she is gone, her disgust with the cowardly Matayan and her stubborn insistence on departing earlier than planned for the Mountain in order to avoid the shame of the rat-child – it is these human foibles that endear Orin to us and enable us to identify with her.

### **THE DEATH TABOO**

Considering the universal nature of the themes of *Narayama Bushi-kō* – tradition, family, community, responsibility, duty, self-realisation, sacrifice and mortality, to name a few – it is not surprising that the story has spanned cultures and generations. Perhaps the most important subject on which it invites candid discussion is that of dying, death and bereavement. While we must all confront the reality of our own mortality sooner or later, and most people can readily identify with the pain of losing a loved one, death is still something that many of us are apparently reluctant to discuss. American Chaplain Paul G. Durbin elaborates on the subject:

Though we see death (real and fictitious) on TV many times a day and read about it each day in our newspapers, death is still a morbid subject. We tend to ignore death until death comes knocking at our door. We don't talk much about death except in quiet voices or in jokes; neither do we talk much about the mourning and grieving process. It has been said

that while sex was the taboo subject of the first half of the 20th century, death has been the taboo subject of the second half. (Durbin)

In Britain too, according to a 2011 survey, although the majority of people think that talking about death is less of a taboo than it was 20 years ago, two thirds of those surveyed agree that people in Britain are still uncomfortable discussing dying and death (Dying Matters Coalition).

In Japan, even the medical profession has been notoriously reluctant to address the subject. According to a survey conducted in the mid-1990s, only one out of five cancer patients was honestly told of their diagnosis. Japanese expectations with regard to full disclosure have changed in the past few decades, however. In a study conducted in the 1990s, 60% of the people surveyed said they would want to be told by their doctor if they were diagnosed with cancer, while in a 2004 survey, 86% of the participants wanted full immediate disclosure. (Hoang)

So, while it remains a sensitive issue, there are positive indications that the death taboo may be gradually lifting as we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, particularly in Japan. According to Durbin, this is a sorely needed development:

Dying, death and bereavement are fundamental and pervasive aspects of the human experience. We can only achieve fullness of living by understanding and appreciating these realities. The absence of such understanding and appreciation may result in unnecessary suffering, loss of dignity, alienation and diminished quality of living. Though education about dying, death and bereavement should be an essential component of the education process, it has been greatly neglected in both formal and informal education.

Perhaps *Narayama Bushi-kō* can help fill the education gap by providing food for thought and discussion, not only on death and dying but, even more importantly, on the intimately related issue of “fullness of living”.

## **PARALLELS WITH MODERN SOCIETY**

Although the primitive setting of Yonder Village may seem worlds away from our ‘civilised’ 21st-century morality, it takes only a small stretch of the imagination to draw some pertinent parallels. If we open our minds and look beyond the confines of our own civilisation, we may find we have more in common with Fukazawa’s villagers than we thought. Real life is, of course, much more complex than the following simplistic arguments could even begin to describe, but *Narayama Bushi-kō* certainly provides food for thought and reflection on not only some controversial issues but also some widely accepted social norms.

### **Elder Care**

Danely (14) notes that Kinoshita Keisuke sought, in his 1958 cinematic adaption of *Narayama Bushi-kō*, to comment not only on “ideas about the nature of death and dying”, but also on “the condition of elder care in Japan and the need to value elders”. This issue is all the more relevant today as demand increases in developed countries for services and healthcare provisions specific to the so-called “silver tsunami” of our aging populations. Of course we would never dream of condemning our aged parents to a cold, lonely death on a mountaintop. But, while the terminology and range of options have changed with the times – “old folks homes” have become “assisted living communities” – is the concept behind our popular modern Western solution really so fundamentally different? To isolate our elders in a “senior living residence”, separated from their family and community and often stripped of their dignity and autonomy – can we be sure that this is not simply a more socially acceptable way of abandoning our senior citizens once they are no longer seen to be useful or productive?

### **Death with Dignity**

The controversial issues of euthanasia and assisted suicide – with their associated religious, moral, ethical and compassionate arguments – also spring to mind. Although in excellent health, Orin can be likened to someone who is terminally ill in that she has a predetermined life expectancy. She chooses to bring the date of her departure forward, however, in order to avoid becoming a great-grandmother, an indignity that would blight her vision of the ideal death she has planned for herself. Although it is painful for her son, he agrees to accompany her to the Mountain on the day of her choosing, not out of indifference or blind obligation, but out of love for her and respect for her wishes. How does this compare, we might ask ourselves, with the questionable morality of prolonging the life and suffering of the terminally ill, even contrary to their wishes?

### **Corporal and Capital Punishment**

Life is simple in Yonder Village. The laws stem from one necessity: survival. Theft of food is therefore a very serious offence, punishable by severe beating and even death for repeat offenders. However, there is no system of law enforcement: no police, no jail, no judge, and no executioner. The villagers have no choice but to take the law into their own hands. An entire family of twelve is therefore obliged to run for their lives in the dead of night, never to be seen again, after they are found to be in possession of stolen potatoes. Primitive and barbaric perhaps, but should we not at least give the villagers credit for their authenticity? How many advocates of the death penalty would have the courage of their convictions if they were obliged to enforce the law with their own bare hands? Would we be quite so keen to see justice served if we didn't have someone to do the job for us, out of sight and out of mind? On the other hand, can those of



us who stand up against corporal or capital punishment be sure that we would behave differently from the villagers if we found ourselves in similar circumstances? Would we still be just as lenient if our own life were at stake?

### Abortion

Neonaticide, or *mabiki*, the fate that is in store for Orin's great-grandchild, is a subject to which Fukazawa later devoted another highly acclaimed story, *Michinoku no Ningyōtachi* (みちのくの人形たち, *The Dolls of Michinoku*, 1979). *Mabiki*, a Japanese term that literally refers to thinning out plants or young trees in order to make room for the growth of others, is believed to have persisted in Japan until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In *Michinoku no Ningyōtachi*, Fukazawa invites the reader to reflect on whether the custom really has died out, even today, or whether abortion is not simply an alternative means to the same end, adapted to suit modern values and practices. Fukazawa was not alone in this observation. In 1983, for example, two Japanese sociologists published a book on the subject, in which they refer to the legal recognition of abortion of eugenically 'defective' children as "intellectual *mabiki*" (Chiba et al: 2). In *Narayama Bushi-kō*, while Orin's insolent grandson and his self-indulgent young wife may indeed seem callous when they speak of their plans to "get rid of" their baby as soon as it is born, their actions highlight once again the authenticity of Fukazawa's villagers in the context of their environment. Before we judge them too harshly, we might ask ourselves whether every child that is aborted today is sacrificed for reasons as compelling as theirs: to ensure the survival of others.

### Competition

Competition for money and status is omnipresent in the world today. On reflection, is this not also a kind of *mabiki*? Whether competing for food and survival, vying for a place in a prestigious school, or striving at the office for performance-based rewards, the principle remains the same: in order for some to win, others must lose. Just as the villagers' survival depends on the sacrifice of the oldest and youngest members of their community, success in almost every domain of our fiercely competitive modern society is inevitably bound to the failure of those who are less able or fortunate. This concept appears to have been fundamental to Fukazawa's philosophy of life, and it is a recurring theme in his literature. When *Michinoku no Ningyōtachi* was selected for the 1979 Kawabata Yasunari Award for Literature, Fukazawa even went so far as to refuse the award, ostensibly on the grounds that his acceptance of it would have deprived someone else of the honour (Fukazawa 1980: 144).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Fukazawa had another, less noble, motive for refusing the award, however. He despised the elegant literature of Kawabata Yasunari, whose Nobel Prize money financed the award. He told a friend that the prize money of one million yen would not compensate for having to bow down to Kawabata forevermore (Arashiyama 123-125).

### **Pressure to Conform to Social Norms**

Even Orin's self-mutilation – the act of bashing out her front teeth in order to look the part for the pilgrimage and put an end to insinuations about her unseemly appetite – is easily comparable to modern practices. Of course, our ideals are different these days. Far from removing perfectly good teeth in order to look older, we are much more likely to replace unsightly or unhealthy teeth with more attractive or functional ones in the pursuit of youthfulness and our perception of beauty. But, in most cases, our motivation is the same as Orin's: the desire to conform to society's standards of beauty or normalcy in order to elicit approval and avoid criticism and ridicule. Unlike Orin, however, most of us will never have to resort to painful self-mutilation in order to rectify nature's imperfections. This is simply because we have access to an ever-expanding multi-national, multi-million-dollar beauty industry, abounding with dentists and hairdressers and beauticians and cosmetic surgeons and weight-loss experts who are only too willing to assist in our transformation. In fact, Sakamoto Sumiko, the actress who played Orin's role in Imamura's film, had some of her upper front teeth removed for exactly the same reason as Orin – in order to look the part – the only difference being that the actress had modern technology and medication at her disposal.

### **CULTURAL RELATIVISM**

The parallels drawn above are intended neither to condemn nor to condone the behaviours or norms of any society, real or fictitious, past or present. On the contrary, they illustrate the concept of cultural relativism – the idea that our ideas and conceptions are true only so far as our civilisation goes and that a person's beliefs and behaviour should be understood in terms of his or her own culture. In *Narayama Bushi-kō*, by engaging us in situations beyond our experience or imagination, Fukazawa invites us to put aside any preconceived ideas, reserve our judgement, and simply to share his sense of the purity and humanity that exists in even the commonest specimens of mankind. Describing the inhabitants of a village in Yamanashi Prefecture on whom the characters of *Narayama Bushi-kō* are thought to have been based, he writes:

The people of this village knew how to live as human beings in the most natural way without any kind of artifice. They lived without imitating anything, as if they had sprung forth naturally from the earth. I came to love these people . . . because I found in them the very extremes of human warmth and tradition; I could sense in them the lingering essence of the origins of mankind. (Fukuoka 81)

### **MUSIC TO OUR EARS**

No discussion of *Narayama Bushi-kō* would be complete without acknowledging the impact of Fukazawa's inimitable writing style. No matter how compelling a story may be, its ability to move an audience depends largely on the skill of the storyteller. And Fukazawa's mysterious

ability to weave a spell around his readers and draw them into his tale is certainly one of the keys to the enduring popularity of *Narayama Bushi-kō*.

My own experience is testimony to the fact that it is not necessary to have excellent Japanese language skills or a comprehensive vocabulary in order to appreciate the powerful effect of Fukazawa's prose. When I first read *Narayama Bushi-kō*, my Japanese was still at the stage where reading was a struggle and the effort of deciphering the characters usually detracted largely from my enjoyment. When I embarked on this particular story, however, I was amazed and delighted to find that my mind seemed to absorb the words almost instinctively. I could not only understand the language, but I found myself participating in the story with all my senses. When Tatsuhei, making his way down the Mountain, realised that his mother's final wish had been granted and, in flagrant violation of the rule of silence, spontaneously cried out, "Ma—! It's snowing!" I could actually hear his voice echoing in the mountain valley and feel his tangled emotions resounding in my own heart.

How does Fukazawa manage to bypass the intellect and appeal directly to the senses in this way? As Kanada elaborates, the answer lies partly in the fluid nature of the narrative (22-24). Whether by accident or design, Fukazawa weaves back and forth between the voice of the narrator and those of the characters in the story to the effect that the distinction between the objective and subjective perspectives becomes blurred in the reader's mind. One moment we are in the narrator's shoes, observing Orin or Tatsuhei from a distance, and the next we find ourselves inside the character's thoughts and feelings, identifying with his or her emotions as if they were our own.

Another distinguishing feature of Fukazawa's prose is its rhythmical, musical quality. Fukazawa was first and foremost a musician – a guitarist – and his writing style reflects his desire to create stories like the mambo or country or rockabilly music he discovered after the war: spontaneous, intense and irrational – “not something you hear with your ears and contemplate with your mind, but the type of performance to which your whole body responds” (Fukazawa 1993: 372-373).<sup>6</sup> Fukazawa was, by all accounts, just as raw and untamed as the rockabilly music he adored (Yōrō 1-29). He didn't agonise over his writing; he wrote for pleasure, only when he felt like it, so the words flowed quickly and easily (Fukazawa 1985: 307). His language is simple and uncontrived, his sentences short and sharp, with a sensual immediacy that enables his prose to flow effortlessly into the reader's consciousness.

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<sup>6</sup> *Narayama Bushi-kō* actually contains numerous short songs, or ditties, that punctuate the story like a refrain. Fukazawa apparently wrote these first of all, with the idea of building the story around them like musical variations on a theme (Orihara 74-75).

## CONCLUSION

What, then, is the secret of the tale's enduring and universal appeal, and what meaning does it hold for us today?

As described above, one reason for *Narayama Bushi-kō*'s initial popularity in Japan was its moving depiction of traditional family life and separation from loved ones at an unsettled time in the country's history. Combine this with the refreshing accessibility of Fukazawa's language and his uncanny ability to engage the senses and draw the reader into the tale; add an endearing heroine and a compelling storyline that is tragic but not without touches of humour, and you already have a recipe for lasting success.

Look a little deeper, however, and *Narayama Bushi-kō* provides food for thought on a multitude of issues from birth to death. While the novel was initially applauded for highlighting a specifically Japanese social and political dilemma, its relevance to various universal issues has only increased with the passing of time. The film adaptations have played an important part in making the story accessible to a worldwide audience and transforming *Narayama Bushi-kō* into a modern everyman's tale. By evoking comparisons with modern norms and challenging preconceived ideas of right and wrong, Fukazawa invites honest reflection on our own behaviour and tolerance and compassion toward our fellow human beings. After all, he seems to be saying, "there but for fortune, go you or I"<sup>7</sup>.

*Narayama Bushi-kō* also provides a shining example of a life well lived. Not only does Orin live an "authentic" life, true to herself and to those around her, she shows us how to die with courage, dignity and peace of mind, regardless of our circumstances. With its powerful reminder that our death is inevitably a reflection of the way we have lived, her story prompts us to reassess our priorities and reflect on our own mortality.

Even more importantly, *Narayama Bushi-kō* invites us to reconsider the importance of family, community and interdependence. No less than in *Yonder Village* – more so, in fact, than ever before – our lives are intertwined with those of all the other inhabitants of our 21<sup>st</sup>-century global village, past, present and future. Just as we inherit the legacy of our predecessors, our lives sow the seeds for those who will follow. In the words of Leonardo da Vinci, "Our life is made by the death of others." It is, perhaps above all, the haunting refrain of this universal and eternal truth – a recurring theme in Fukazawa's literature – that will continue to capture people's hearts and minds and ensure *Narayama Bushi-kō* a significant place in Japanese literary history for many more years to come.

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<sup>7</sup> "There but for Fortune": 1963 song by American folk musician Phil Ochs, re-released by Joan Baez in 1964.

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