

Mangaverse!

April 2019



Cover Art by Jose Sanchez

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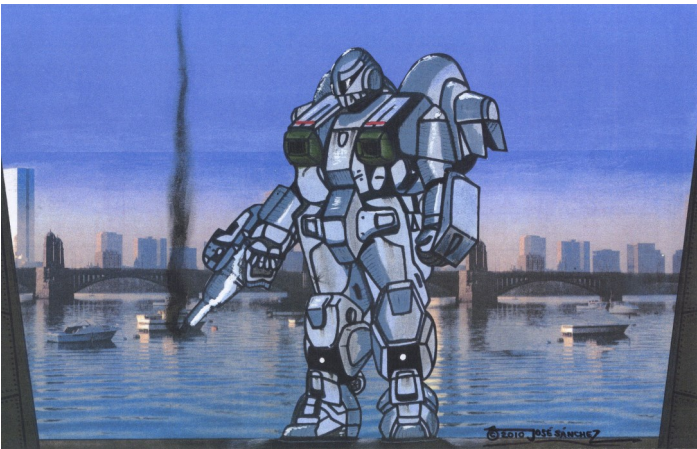
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Cover Art: “Soldier With a Gun” by Jose Sanchez

<https://www.deviantart.com/jose77sanchez/gallery/>





From the Editor – April 2019

Springtime is an iconic time of year in Japan. The image of blooming cherry tree blossoms will be a familiar one for almost anyone who's watched an anime set in a Japanese high school; the Japanese school year starts in the Spring, rather than in early Autumn as is the case in my home state of Minnesota, USA. As the last of the snow finally melts here, I'm seeing a different sort of renewal – all the anime simulcast streaming outlets are providing offerings of the new Spring anime series for us viewers to peruse and enjoy.

Each new anime season I become consumed with my personal mission to review each new intro episode, partly to help guide other anime fans in their quest to find the series they're likely to enjoy, but mainly to populate my own viewing queue. Long ago I felt myself falling out of love with anime fandom because I just didn't know what I wanted to watch. Since embarking on my amateur anime criticism career, I've leaned heavily into the philosophy that there's always plenty of anime out there worth enjoying – it just takes a little bit of work to narrow down all the series to a few favorites.

...And speaking of renewal and refreshment, I'm always looking to incorporate fresh perspectives here at Mangaverse. I'd especially love to add more content based around appreciation for Western comics and other related media, since that's not an area I'm very familiar with. And, of course, any perspectives on anime, manga, and related fandom elements are more than welcome, so if you've been interested in reviewing something, talking about a convention you attended, or writing an analytical essay on any of the above, please reach out and share your voice!

Thanks, as always,

-Jessi

jessi@s1e1.com



Comic/Film Review: Hit Girl

By George Phillies

phillies@4liberty.net

Our illustrious editrix asked for a review, something she was unlikely to review herself. I asked myself how I could manage this, given that she reviews everything. I found an answer, ensuring that Jessi will get her wish. I should probably say that I was accidentally given the answer, since I only have known about the answer for a few weeks. Nonetheless, why is she unlikely to review this?

It's not recent. The origin goes back a decade and a half, though the relevant character recently came back.

It's not Japanese manga. It's American manga, also known as comic books.

The books were not turned into anime. The original source was turned into two live-action movies in which the heroine superhero sidekick – I use the word heroine broadly – clearly walked off with the show.

Our illustrious editrix prefers items that are not excessively violent. The writers here appear to have decided to create a world violence shortage by consuming all the violence in the world for their American manga.

Bloodshed? Most films and comics hide the amount of blood that gets spread about when people are sliced to ribbons. Blood contains hemoglobin, which is one of the world's more powerful dyes. A small amount of blood goes a really long way as a colorant. That's why 'signed in blood' works. People when shredded lose really large amounts of blood. The artists here do not avoid this issue. Nor do they avoid the inevitable consequence, namely that the heroine's clothing picks up blood stains.

Our illustrious editrix has an objection to the theme 'children in danger'. Readers will suggest that the tween character in question is the danger; she is not the child being endangered. You may recall the line from Rorschach in Watchmen, recently invoked by Congressman Ocasio-Cortez, namely that he is not locked in with them...they are locked in with him. However, the character does manage to get shot, beaten unconscious, attacked by dogs, dropped through the ice of an arctic pond to end up well under water, find a bear trap with her leg, get picked up and thrown through large pieces of furniture, and other activities that many other tween-age girls would not enjoy.

Some parents think that children should not use improper words. The character is foul-mouthed, not only in English but also in Russian. The motion pictures have the English equivalent of an R or NC-17 rating, as far as I can tell. In discussing the first motion picture, however, the tween-age actress's mother remarked on her surprise that people were more upset by her daughter's character's language, and less upset by the 30+ people her daughter's character killed over the length of the film.

Some people think young characters should be role models. The character in question does live up to this standard, but only if the role model you are emphasizing is 'murderous psychopath'. More politely, the phrase was 'Punisher meets Polly Pocket'. Departing a prison via a shortcut, she asks the fellow in the first cell 'is this death row? and, on learning the answer is yes, marches the length of the corridor, killing all the residents. 'Think of all the money I saved the tax-payers' is her attitude.

The character, who wanders through two comic titles, two films, and several revivals, is of course...

Hit-Girl



Mindy Macready... Hit-Girl, from the film.

Yes, in that frame (from the first film, Kick-Ass) she looks a bit perturbed. That's because there are a dozen men with guns in the corridor behind her, closing in to shoot her. Well, that was their plan, at least until she rendered them deceased by shooting them first.

Yes, the costume is decidedly not the traditional superheroine 'more skin than cloth'. That's a highly positive change, in my opinion. It also made it much easier to switch out the lead actress and her stunt doubles, for all that she did many of her own stunts.

There is also a comic book.

Having finally revealed the secret "what are we going to review", we now advance to a review. The charac-

ter is the creation of Mark Millar and John Romita, Jr. Millar's creations, almost all of them, were acquired by Netflix last year. He retained Hit-Girl.

In some sequence, we have the Kick-Ass comic books, now available as collections, the two Kick-Ass films, and the Hit-Girl comics. Kick-Ass was Dave Lizewski, a high school student who had the brilliant idea that since superheroes exist in comic strips, they should also exist in real life. Some readers may question my use of the word 'brilliant'. The minor detail that he had no superpowers, no weapons, and no martial arts training was not recognized by him as an obstacle. After a series of incredibly negative outcomes leading to prolonged hospitalizations and imminent death, he is rescued by Hit-Girl, a murderous twelve-year-old who leaves a trail of bodies behind her. An extended series of massacres follow.

The two films starred Chloe Grace Moretz as Mindy McReady, the Hit-Girl of the comics. Other reviewers have said she was the reason the films were so successful. A heroic effort was made by special effects to mask the technical challenge that the films were spaced by several years. The actress was 16 by the end of the second film, but the character was still 12. Some reviewers disapproved of the closing moments of the second film, which were certainly less radical than Jodie Foster in the Little Girl Who Lives Down the Lane (note for that film there are European and American cuts, which at the key moment are I gather quite different; I have only seen the American version.)

The films follow the comic books respectably closely, though the supply of blood was, mercifully, limited. The first film was extremely successful; the second was not. A reasonable statement is that the efforts to show the normal lives of the two superheroes was a bit strained, especially in the second film, while the superhero combat sections lived up to expectations.

The segments of Hit-Girl attempting to train Kick-Ass were well done. The bits and pieces of comics thread, Hit-Girl's dad training her, might well have been used in the film. There is a modest bit of character development. Early in the second film, she is asked 'can you do a one-arm chin-up', which she promptly demonstrates. Through hard work, the fellow who asked the question eventually reaches the same level.

The current books are a series of four-book arcs, each with its own creators, geographic location, art style and set of foes. The Canadian arctic in winter is snow and beautiful black trees; Rome is terra-cotta and ancient stoneworks. The next arc will be Hollywood, written by Kevin Smith and illustrated by Pernille Ørum. The creators note that the Hollywood arc was written before the recent series of quaint revelations about Hollywood types. The heroine is offended because Hollywood is producing a motion picture based on her escapades.

Grade: A unique character. The level of blood in the massacres might have been more restrained. Some readers will wish for something different.



Manga Review: Monthly Girls' Nozaki-kun 1

Artist/Author: Izumi Tsubaki

Published By: Yen Press

Review by Skjam!

<https://www.skjam.com/>

Review: Confessing your love to your high-school crush is always a nerve-wracking experience. It's possible that your beloved returns your affections, but more likely you will receive a flat "not interested", or "buzz off" or perhaps she will laugh in your face and tell you you are a hideous deformity that no woman could ever love and you should do yourself in as a favor to everyone—but enough about *my* high school days. Let's talk about Chiyo Sakura, who has eyes for no one but her tall and quiet classmate Umetaro Nozaki.

Sakura fumbles a bit and says something that sounds like "I'm your fan!" which sounds more like "I have a crush on you" in Japanese. Nozaki doesn't seem the least bit surprised and gives his classmate an autograph. It turns out that Nozaki is not-so-secretly a *mangaka* (comic book creator) who gets published in *shoujo* (girls') manga under the pen name Sakiko Yumeno.

Despite being expert at depicting chaste romance on the page, Nozaki is clueless about Sakura's crush on him, and she winds up becoming one of his art assistants. As time goes on, we meet their friends and associates, all of whom are clueless in some way. And so this romantic comedy begins!

This shoujo manga is done in what's called the *4-koma* format, which is kind of like a newspaper comic strip (which are vertical in Japan.) Four panels per strip, with some sort of gag in each. This gives the story a rapid-fire feel as unlike a daily strip which must recap constantly, several pages of strips appear each month.

As this is a series about making manga, it gets into some meta humor. For example, because the magazine Nozaki's stories appear in is aimed at junior high school girls, editorial has decreed that the characters cannot be shown doing anything illegal lest impressionable children copy that. Not only does this mean that Nozaki can't show his juvenile delinquents smoking or underage drinking, but he can't even depict them breaking traffic laws! So he must find a different method to use a particular romantic moment.

Oh, for the few readers who aren't already experts on manga conventions, the "-kun" in the title is an honorific, like "Mr." or "Ms." "Kun" is used between or to teenaged boys primarily, it's a bit less formal than "-san."

The jokes are pretty funny, especially if you're familiar with shoujo manga cliches, and the art serves the 4-koma format well (plus there's jokes about the art.)

However, because this is primarily a gag strip with romantic elements as opposed to a romance strip with comedic elements, the characters' cluelessness means that relationships progress little if at all over the course of the volume.

Content notes: some humor revolves around gender roles and certain characters not fitting into the society-

approved categories.

Recommended to romantic comedy fans who are okay with the characters being dolts about romance.

A 12 episode anime adaptation is available to stream at Crunchyroll and Hidive, and a disc release is available from Sentai Filmworks.





Manga Review – Spirit Circle

Artist/Author: Satoshi Mizukami

Volumes: 6

Published By: Seven Seas

Also available digitally via Crunchyroll Manga

Review by Jessi Silver

jessi@s1e1.com

Review: *This review discusses some plot and thematic spoilers for the manga series.*

It's uncommon, but there are times where I'll be so emotionally moved after consuming a piece of media that I become immediately obsessed with seeking out other work by the same storyteller.

While my tastes in manga and anime are somewhat broad, there

are occasionally certain thematic elements in particular stories that cut deeply to the heart of how I approach the world and its many experiences. It's in those vulnerable, reflective moments that I feel as though I've made a personal connection with an author who's somehow on a similar wavelength to myself.

Last year saw the release of a lot of excellent anime series, one of which was Summer 2018's *Planet With*. The series told the story of an amnesiac teenage boy, his oddball adoptive family, and multiple alien factions arguing over whether to allow humans to evolve or to forcibly contain their violent nature within a powerful *Matrix*-like illusion. The show was not only razor-sharp with its pacing, cramming 6 months' worth of plot and character development into 3 months' worth of episodes without batting an eye, but it stands as one of the few anime series I've watched that I'd classify as being "emotionally intelligent," spending much of its thematic energy exploring the power of forgiveness and acceptance as an option instead of the endless cultivation of hatred and obsession with vengeance. The series was immensely affecting to me; after allowing it to settle for a few days, I found myself consumed with the desire to read more work by Satoshi Mizukami, the author responsible for the anime's story.

While one of Mizukami's previous works, *Lucifer and the Biscuit Hammer*, is somewhat more famous in the West (likely due to both its quirky title and an earlier digital release), I found myself more drawn to the premise of *Spirit Circle* (its shorter length also helped). The series follows a teenage boy named Fuuta, who's perfectly average but for the strange scar on his cheek and his ability to see ghosts and spirits. He finds himself smitten with Kouko, the new transfer student, but his overtures are quickly rebuffed when Kouko threatens to kill him. Though he doesn't immediately realize it, Fuuta and Kouko have a long-running and tragic history with one-another; they've met in several past lives and those meetings often end violently or tragically. Rather than kill him outright, Kouko wants Fuuta to experience each and every one of his previous lives so that he realizes the full extent of his transgressions; she forcibly begins this spiritual journey on his behalf by knocking him in the head with a "spirit circle," an object of mysterious origins that seems to connect them both.

From the first time that Fuuta inhabits one of his past incarnations, it's apparent that his lifetimes have fallen into certain patterns. He tends to meet the same people time and again; it's explained that souls will continue to meet when they still have lessons to teach one-another. What sets things in motion is the fact that Fuuta seems to be someone who often questions the accepted realities of the times and places he exists. In one case, he interrupts a violent cleansing ritual, as the spirits he can see (in this lifetime and others) reveal to him that the bloodshed doesn't accomplish anything. In another lifetime (and it should be noted that these are often non-linear and possibly exist in some far-off future rather than only in the past), he questions the belief that the disembodied brains being kept alive artificially are still living beings; is being kept in stasis indefinitely really *living*?

It becomes clear early on that Kouko's hatred of Fuuta seems partly based on her own half-knowledge of various situations. In one lifetime she passes away early on, whereas Fuuta's analogue lives a long life and becomes a very different person than the one she met. In another it's Fuuta who dies and Kouko who experiences the fallout. In each situation it feels as though some discussion in their part could help resolve the bad blood that's been festering over the millennia, and there are several points throughout the story where it feels as though a non-violent resolution may be possible with a little bit of work. As Fuuta tumbles ever more quickly to his 7th and final past-life experience, though, what's uncovered is a crime so heinous that Kouko's sense of vengeance seems more than justified.

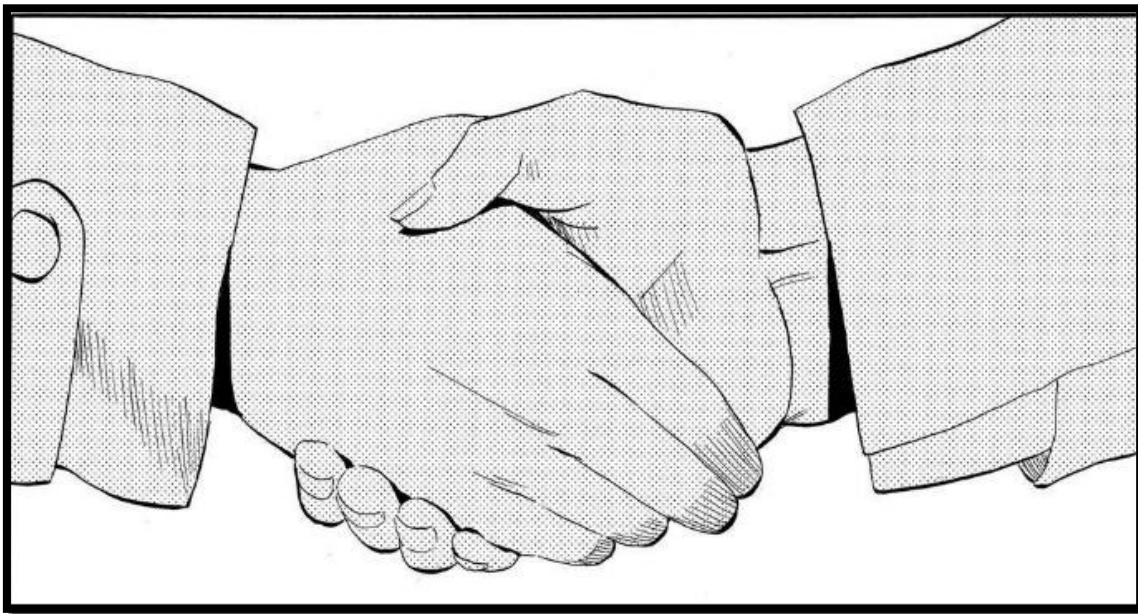
In many other manga the final resolution of the situation would likely be wrought through the launching of fists and ultimately the physical domination of the individual found to be in the wrong, but travelling this extremely messy journey alongside the characters reveals that, despite past-Fuuta's heinous sinning, there may still be hope for a solution that doesn't leave one of the characters forever locked out of the cycle of death-and-rebirth. It's this revelation, along with Mizukami's ability to portray the emotional truth of situations, that turns this from a compelling tale to a truly great one.

The most powerful thematic element at play is that of forgiveness, and even such a seemingly simple concept is treated with a sensitive hand that slowly reveals its underlying complexity. When we think of forgiveness, I believe we often try to couple it with a set of conditions that aren't emotionally realistic. Forgiveness to many is defined as choosing to allow someone's trespasses to go unpunished, for the sake of the greater social



Kouko comments on Fuuta's odd scar—what he'd thought was a weird birthmark might very well be a connection to his past.

good and without expecting anything in return. Speaking as someone who's been harmed deeply by others, this unconditional release of responsibility for perpetrators of that harm is something that I'm personally unequipped to handle. I've only recently come to understand forgiveness as something that's never meant to be a given, but instead is a gift we're allowed to give to those who've done what they can to earn it. When we learn the truth about Kouko's multi-lifetime grudge, we also learn how justified she is in nursing it. When we experience Fuuta's story, we also see the diligent work he puts in to try to earn her forgiveness. It's a delicate balance that could have easily been mishandled, and yet Mizukami allows us to understand and sympathize with both characters to the extent that we believe in their separate journeys.



Sometimes the most difficult act of forgiveness is the one in which we forgive ourselves.

Without revealing too much about the manga's most climactic moments, I believe it should be mentioned that perhaps its most powerful statement is that forgiveness is not something only reserved for others, it is also a powerful choice we can make regarding our own actions. I think it's easy to get caught up in the gravity of our own errors, and once realizing their severity we might spend a great deal of energy trying to apologize for them. While there's always the danger of trying to absolve our own sins without doing the hard work of atoning for them, I find that it's more common for people to wallow in their own feelings of guilt well past those feelings' best-by dates. This story emphasizes that self-forgiveness is one of the grandest gifts that we can give to ourselves – one which is earned alongside the kind of personal growth that we ideally strive for.

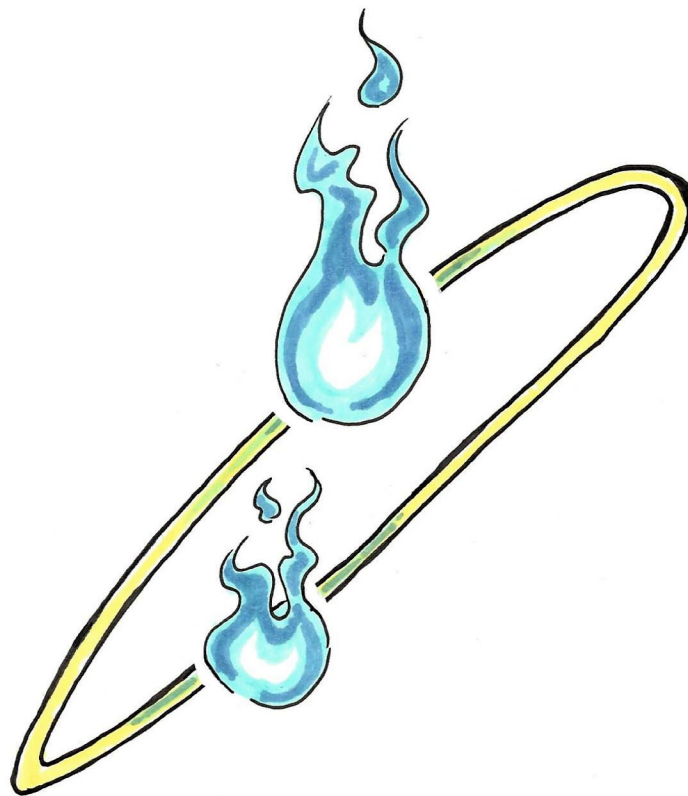
This profound emotional gravitas is presented through Mizukami's simple, straightforward character artwork. While some might find the art style overly-simplistic and possibly even a poor match for the grand ideas being told through the story and dialog, I found the contrast to work very well to present the narrative without a lot of visual confusion. On a related note, the story features a cast of several characters in their different incarnations throughout time, and the character artwork did a good job of preserving the key facial features and builds of the different characters so that they were recognizable throughout these different eras without their names being outright stated every time.

I find that examinations of human nature are oftentimes focused around our negative aspects. While I believe that there are many things we could collectively improve on as a species, it's easy to fall into a pattern of believing that there may be no hope for the future of humanity. What I appreciate about this manga, and by extension what I've been introduced to through other examples of Mizukami's storytelling, is that it seems to express a belief that we can make the choice to do and believe better about ourselves, and ultimately to learn from our mistakes and choose to forgive one-another for our many collective errors. This is something that I truly want to, and possibly even *have* to believe; without this small sense of hope to look toward it becomes easy to fall into a depression.

Though *Spirit Circle* wears the skin of a typical shounen ("boy's") manga title, in its heart it stands alongside some of the more emotionally truthful entertainment out there, revealing the power that exists in eschewing violence and might for the sake of something greater and more enduring.

Grade: A

Content warning for mild nudity and some violence.





Anime Review – Run With the Wind

Haiji Kiyose is an enthusiastic fourth year student at Kansei University who has been stealthily gathering men for the track and field team of the campus. As Kakeru Kurahara, a snappish first year student, becomes the promising tenth member; Kiyose dreams of participating at the Hakone Ekiden, a famous relay university marathon race.

Streaming: Crunchyroll and Hidive

Episodes: 23

Source: Novel

Review by Jessi Silver

jessi@s1e1.com

Review: *This review contains minor spoilers for the series.*

Exercise has never been one of my strengths. In elementary school, we were tested every year on how quickly we could run a mile (4 laps around the outdoor gravel-coated track). My best time was somewhere in the 12-minute range, and that was when I was in 1st grade. I think, deep inside, I never saw the point of running when walking was a perfectly serviceable mode of personal transportation. That, or I have always been chronically out-of-shape and unwilling to admit it.

Run With the Wind may seem like an unlikely favorite for someone like me; its romanticization of the feeling of the wind and the pavement and the tension of muscles being pushed to the limit might seem as though it's trying to convince me of something which I know personally to be untrue. Yet, like most of the very best sports anime, its appeal isn't in its depiction of a particular sport. What sets *Run With the Wind* apart is its ensemble storytelling and character drama, which captures the emotional highs of stretching to reach a goal that's consistent across so many human experiences.

The story begins as newly-minted college student Kakeru Kurahara races through the darkened streets, clutching a stolen sandwich from the convenience store. Having lost his apartment deposit gambling, he's left with few options. He's spotted by Haiji Kiyose, who's immediately in awe of Kakeru's running form. Haiji invites Kakeru to fill the vacant room at his dorm, but he turns out to have ulterior motives; it's been his goal all along



Kakeru and Haiji begin on shaky footing.

to construct a team of 10 runners so that they can make an attempt at the Hakone Ekiden, a brutal Tokyo-to-Hakone round-trip relay marathon that takes place around the New Year holiday. The problem is that most of the group has little-to-no training for this type of running, and those that do have complicated emotional relationships with the sport that make them reticent to follow Haiji's lead.

Much of the early part of the series is focused around Haiji's attempts to convince the various members of the group to join him on his mad, improbable quest, and it's this set of episodes that are likely to prove the most tedious for many viewers. To put it bluntly, Haiji becomes extremely manipulative in his tactics, showing up uninvited and essentially stalking many of the other characters until they give in and promise to start training with him. Starting around episode 5, the series becomes infinitely more charming as the various characters begin to take the spotlight and express their various personalities and experience the challenges that will help define the runners they are to become.

While each of the characters is appealing in his own way, I think the one whose experience rang the truest to me was "Ouji" ("Prince"), an unapologetic manga consumer with a lanky physique and a clear lack of talent for running. Ouji continually comes in last place in the group's practice runs, and as the team members start attempting their officially-recorded timed races at regional track meets, it becomes questionable whether he even has the ability to achieve the baseline requirements for qualification. This becomes a point of conten-



The residents of the Chikusei-sho boarding house don't fit the typical image of marathon runners.

tion for Kakeru, who has a lot of training and some innate talent; he sees Ouji as a liability.

What I loved about this part in the story wasn't just Ouji's change in mindset from grudging participant to active and invested trainee, although that in itself is inspiring to someone of similar ability. What's special about this arc is what it reveals about Haiji as a sportsman and mentor, though we don't learn the extent of his background until later on in the series. Kakeru insists that Ouji should be dropped from the team if they're serious about competing – there's no way that they can win the race with his lackluster times. Haiji refuses, his insistence indicative of his much deeper understanding of personal motivation and philosophy about the sport.

While the bulk of the series is comprised of each character's personal arcs that eventually come together and feed into the series climax, there's an underlying thread that speaks to something much broader about why and how people compete to achieve greatness. There are many examples throughout the series of characters who are driven by obligation and habit and are eventually frustrated by their lack of tangible success. There are other examples in which characters are brutalized by their mentors, their bodies broken through the endless challenge of succeeding in the eyes of someone who only acknowledges results. Some are even told outright that their physical make-up turns their goals into impossibilities. Haiji proves to be operating from a

vastly different perspective, one which is defined by his own experiences and a goal which is extremely time-limited. This may be his one-and-only chance to see this goal fulfilled, and his way of seeing it through to the end is to allow each runner to come to their own personal place of motivation.

The second half of the series is, for lack of a better term, a true victory lap. All of the personal challenges, the intense training, and the characters' emotional journeys build to a series of episodes in which measurable results honestly stop mattering. The anime begins to transcend the incremental and minute gains in individual qualifying times and suddenly transforms into a love-letter to sport written in sweat, the rhythmic clapping of shoes on pavement, and the throbbing breaths of runners as they hand off their relay sashes to their next teammate. Even I, one in love with remaining sedentary, began to long for the wind in my face and the feeling of comradery built from shared focus and suffering.

It's that element of glorified suffering, however, that might be one of the bigger hurdles of enjoyment for some. Without revealing too many specifics, there's a painful episode in which one character comes down with a bad illness and insists on pushing himself to run. The visual elements of the show are utilized to their greatest effect here, portraying the feeling of claustrophobia and feverish visual distortion of someone clearly too ill to be running the equivalent of a half-marathon in the icy weather. The sequence is extremely uncomfortable, not just because of the dizzying visual effects, but also because of the knowledge that athletes have actually collapsed and died when pushed to perform in extreme conditions. While the race cannot continue for our protagonists if the character drops out (so we know that he'll likely choose to proceed in spite of his exhaustion and pain), the sequence goes a bit too far over the edge into the realm of discomfort.



Run With the Wind focuses on what turns out to be a somewhat unlikely, almost magical snapshot in the lives of its characters. Though they're all very different people with their own personal goals and struggles, their ability to join together in service of a shared goal is as inspiring as it is unlikely. Though running, as an activity, can be extremely hard on the human body, straining muscles and tendons while doing a real number on one's knee joints, the running that the characters perform throughout the series turns out to be almost a form of healing for many of them. They come out of the experience with refocused minds, a sense of personal accomplishment, and memories of their participation that will follow them for the rest of their lives; I find a profound sort of beauty in that.

While sports anime is in no sense a rarity and many can be said to capture more than just rote performance of the sport in question, it is the rare sports-focused series that really transcends the confines of its focal sport and captures emotions and truths that are nearly-universal. *Run With the Wind* speaks to so many of these universal experiences – the motivation that comes from positive rivalries, the ways in which poor mentorship can be damaging, and the drive to accomplish things in a group that might be impossible on one's own. It's almost inspirational enough for me to lace up a pair of running shoes and hit that track again... *almost*.

Pros: Formulates a strong character-based narrative around the sport of long-distance running. Each character is an interesting individual. The second half of the series is especially exhilarating.

Cons: Tends to glorify/romanticize physical suffering in a way that can be uncomfortable to watch. Haiji is a bit of a creeper for the first several episodes.

Grade: A

Anime Detour 2019 – A Convention Report

Report by Jessi Silver

jessi@s1e1.com

Photography by Goldeneyeuro

Throughout many of my years as an anime fan, one thing has been consistent – my love of anime (and other fandom) conventions. While I came of age as participant in internet-heavy forms of fandom, it's the in-person gatherings of like-minded people that have always felt like home to me. When I entered college I joined my University's anime club, and through the club met people who were involved in the local fandom community. Through them I was able to learn about and attend some of the existing anime conventions at the time – Anime Central, which took place outside of Chicago, and Anime Iowa, which at the time was in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. I also met and made friends with some folks who were hoping to establish an anime convention in the Twin Cities metro area. Some thought it foolhardy, but they eventually did so – that was how Anime Detour came about.

I've been involved with Anime Detour nearly since its inception. First as an attendee, then as a member of art staff, and now, for many years, as a member of programming staff (we put together the panel and event schedule for the weekend, and help to ensure that panelists have what they need). I also run a great deal



(some might say an insane amount) of programming, including several panels and the convention's long-running Anime Music Video (AMV) contest. This level of involvement definitely colors my experience of the convention itself, as I'm often buzzing from panel room to panel room so that I can set up for my next presentation, or trying to fit in a meal during a gap; I sometimes don't get a chance to see and do everything I would like to if I were simply another attendee.

Convention Logistics

Anime Detour 2019 took place from March 29th – March 31st, at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Minneapolis, Minnesota. This was the convention's second year in the hotel, which luckily put many of the previous year's growing pains and other pain-points in the past. Its location comes with its share of challenges, however, some of which my husband and I luckily avoided as members of staff; parking is at a premium, with the attached parking garage coming at a higher cost for three days than many are comfortable with (the convention cut a deal for something like \$13/day, but the previous convention hotel came with free parking on a surface lot which is difficult to beat). We were able to snag a hotel room for the weekend (a necessity when you're on staff), and brought one car between the two of us, which we left in the ramp all weekend. The cost

was certainly a price we were willing (and able) to pay. There was a shuttle running between the convention overflow hotels and another parking ramp further out, which helped to make the situation less of an issue. The hotel is also on a major transit thoroughfare, with several bus lines (including the 10, 11, 17, and 18) servicing the closest stops, so this is always a good option for folks familiar with taking transit.

The location is close to several decent food options, though in this there is somewhat of an issue; aside from a Chipotle, a Vietnamese restaurant, and Einstein Brothers bagel place, most of the options nearby are either closed on weekends, or are sit-down options which might be a bit too expensive for most con-goers to make good use of throughout the whole weekend (and which take too much time for those of us who need to be in and out quickly). The hotel itself has a café, which is definitely helpful; there you can get various sandwich and breakfast options, as well as coffee (which is a requirement for me these days). Luckily there's also a Target store a couple of blocks North of the hotel where one can grab some staples and snacks, and the Hyatt's hotel rooms have mini-fridges to store leftovers. This saved me a couple of times when I didn't have time to grab other food. My advice to convention attendees would be to bring things like oranges, bananas, apples and some various non-perishable items like crackers, granola bars, jerky, and such. The convention also provides snacks; I believe this is something that's mostly a tradition at midwestern conventions, as I haven't seen them elsewhere. The Consuite as it's called provides snacks and rice to all attendees; those who put in volunteer hours gain access to an adjacent area that has sandwich fixings, yogurt, and additional items. While the Consuite isn't meant to be a substitute for actual meals, it can definitely help when you're in a pinch.

One excellent improvement from last year is that the food trucks contracted to park alongside the hotel were there for longer periods of time, and there were two at a time instead of just the one, which really helped to cut down on the crazy lines that formed last year. I only got the chance to try one of the two, but managed to end up with a very tasty barbecue sandwich out of the deal. This is an amenity that I hope the convention continues to provide, as it's very convenient and also helps out some local food businesses in the process.

Panels and Events

While panels might not be a huge draw to many fans (cooler things like Cosplay, video gaming, and the nightly dance/rave tend to be more highly-regarded), they're the reason I keep going to conventions. First, because I love the discussions (except when they turn hostile – not a common occurrence, but I've seen it happen), and second, because I always feel like I learn something new. At Anime Detour I spent much of my time behind the microphone with my husband presenting several panels on various anime-and-manga-related subjects. He and I are extremely lucky in that we've been doing this a long time and have been able to cultivate relationships with many of the people who attend our panels consistently. This aspect of the convention is truly a high point for me and something that keeps us wanting to run panels (even though we know we run way too many).

This year we (surprisingly) had a chance to attend a couple of other panels. One was presented by Evan Miller, a long-time friend, which focused on the development of anime conventions in both Japan and the US. The second half of the panel went somewhat off-track and became a discussion regarding how conventions can and should handle some of the unfortunate realities of the modern era (one example given was a stalking incident that happened at a convention on the West Coast, during which a person set fire to several cars after being turned down for a date). While there was an interesting debate going, I think the discussion revealed

that preventing similar incidents revolves a lot around cultivating certain expectations within the convention community, one example being the “Cosplay is not Consent” motto which was first developed at another local convention (CONvergence, also now held in Minneapolis).

I also attended a panel that my husband moderated, which revolved around the pressures put upon real-life athletes and how these are (or aren’t) reflected accurately in anime and manga. The convention’s theme this year revolved around sports and sports anime, and one of the guests of honor was Chris Kluwe, former Minnesota Viking (and current geek). It was an interesting panel, as all the panelists had experience in various sports (MMA, Tai Kwon Do, Swimming, and Football) and could relate that to anime. The panel itself was streamed and is available to watch on the convention YouTube channel, for those who are interested (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DBaMikHGzQk>).

Shopping



One of my favorite things about attending conventions is browsing the dealers’ hall. While obtaining anime-related merchandise is no longer difficult, there’s something about seeing the items in person that’s appealing to me. Sadly, though the dealer hall is greatly-expanded from what it was in previous years at the old location, the variety of merchandise felt very lacking this year. I like to collect anime figurines, and while I’m admittedly a fan of some niche series, I can usually find a few characters from series that I enjoy represented at most conventions. Perhaps this is just something that’s happened over the past couple of years (I had a similar complaint about last year’s A-Kon convention), but most of the figurines for sale seem to be similar across the board between different merchants, and I didn’t happen to find anything unique. It might just be an off year (and perhaps I ought to work a little harder to expand into some bigger fandoms so I can have more selection available), but I was disappointed.

I’d also love to see some J-fashion or kawaii-fashion merchants make an appearance at the convention.

Unfortunately, Anime Detour has never really catered much to that area of fandom, as I suspect I’m one of the few staff members with any interest in that and my plate is already full as it is. I do recall a somewhat amusing incident where some panels from our local lolita fashion community were nearly refused because the individuals handling the request thought it was a fetish thing rather than a niche fashion unaffiliated with the famous novel, so I suspect some of those challenges still exist in some form. While there has always been a place for local designers, leather/corset workers, rave fashion sellers, and T-shirt merchants, I would love if someday Anime Detour could invite Lolita Collective to sell in the dealers’ hall, or even bring in some Japa-

nese fashion guests.

As usual, I found a lot more to my fandom liking in the Artist Alley, which was held in one of the smaller ballrooms. The various fan artists there ensured that a great variety of fandoms were represented, including some of my recent favorites like *Golden Kamuy* and *Devilman Crybaby*. The room in which the Artist Alley is located seems as though it has some space to expand, so I'm hoping that future years will be able to accommodate even more excellent artists.

Con Culture

Anime Detour, like many of the local conventions I attend, has a robust anti-harassment policy (and has for many years). I know from insider experience that the convention staff puts in a lot of work to ensure that staff members are empowered to handle these types of situations, and that con attendees know that harassing behavior is not to be tolerated. While there are always people who believe the rules don't apply to them, for the most part I find that Anime Detour is one of the conventions where I tend to feel safe and don't observe

other attendees behaving in an out-of-control manner. The convention also cordons-off its 18+ programming in a specific area. While this may seem like overkill to some, my opinion is that this helps to ensure that the people who are interested in seeing that sort of material are well-aware of what they're getting into, and those who don't want to see it don't stumble into it accidentally.

The convention has also latched onto a trend which I hope will become commonplace at more events like this



– it provides a way for convention attendees to share their preferred gender pronouns in a visible way if they so choose. This year the convention registration staff provided badge ribbons (if you're not familiar with these, they're printed ribbons with a sticky backing that you can attach to your attendee badge) with common pronouns (she/her, they/them, etc.), as well as a blank version for those who utilize less common pronouns. I've seen this accomplished at other cons using stickers, so this is kind of a variation on a theme. This did, unfortunately, introduce a venue for those with bad intentions to take advantage of the blank ribbons and use them to write insults. While I was lucky enough not to see any of these particular ribbons in person, it was reported to me that some folks were writing gender slurs and insults to transgender individuals on the blank ribbons, so something will have to be put into place to help mitigate this for next year (one suggestion given to me and passed along to convention staff was to have people choose from a list or enter their preferred pronouns at registration to have them printed directly on the badge, which I thought would be a good way to filter out the insulting ones).

One thing that I would love (and this is me speaking not as a staffer, but as a convention participant and

attendee) would be if Anime Detour would do more to cultivate some more academic, meaty discussions in its panel programming. We do attract a few individuals who choose to approach their presentations in this manner, but historically programming is comprised of what people submit with the intention to run, and what people submit tends to be more light-hearted fandom content and in-character truth-or-dare sessions. I'd never want to eliminate these things because that's obviously what a large contingent of people want to do, but I feel more work could be done to allow the more serious stuff to exist more prominently.

Wrap-up

This year's Anime Detour seemed to blaze by in a flash, possibly because I had overbooked myself to the extreme. When your mind is so consumed with what panel or event is coming up next in your personal schedule, it's difficult to take a step back and experience the things that are going on around you. I tell myself every year that I'll cut back next time, but that never seems to happen; it's difficult for me to say whether or not I'll ever learn my lesson.

Anime Detour is what I consider to be my "home" convention, and to that end this year was another success. I got the chance to see old friends, chat with other attendees, see pretty much everything the convention had to offer, and enjoy being in the middle of downtown Minneapolis (not exactly a novelty since I work in the area, but it's different when you're there for fun). My hope for the future is that the convention will continue to expand responsibly, to utilize its space more efficiently, and to learn and improve upon its ability to cater to people from many different walks of life in pursuit of its fandom-focused mission. Oh, and maybe let me know (gently) that I'm running WAY too many panels for my own good.

Anime Detour takes place in early Spring in Minneapolis, MN. Find more information at:

<https://animedetour.com/>

Aniblog Feature – Sakuga Blog

Feature by Jessi Silver

jessi@s1e1.com

<https://blog.sakugabooru.com/>

While each anime fan's reasons for engaging with the fandom are different, I find that anime's appeal can often be consolidated into a couple of key things. The first one is anime's way of telling its stories. Anime series and films are often based on and adapted from preexisting media, the major side-effect being that one of anime's signifiers is its serialized style of storytelling, which was, until recently, much less common in Western animation. Speaking from my own experience, it becomes much easier to get emotionally-involved in a series with long story arcs and character development than a gag cartoon with very little continuity (though those are fun, too).

Anime's second major identifying trait is its particular look, which focuses more on the depiction of appealing characters rather than smooth, fully-animated motion. This emphasis on static poses instead of fluidity can possibly be "attributed" on the great manga master Osamu Tezuka, who's said to have wanted to make a *Tetsuwan Atom* (*Astro Boy*) animated series so badly that he bargained the production down to a minimal amount of animation frames in an attempt to lower the cost per episode. The resulting minimalism has since carried forward into the present day, bestowing upon anime a set of idiosyncratic visual quirks that at one time were meant to help save of the toil of animation. These are all over the place if you know what you're looking at – repeated use of the same animated cuts in subsequent episodes (think transformation sequences), the clever hiding of characters' mouths during dialog-heavy scenes, horizontal pans across static backgrounds as characters strike threatening poses at one-another... these are all things that populate the visual language of Japanese animation while serving a dual-purpose of conserving time and resources.

That's probably why fully-animated scenes in anime stand out as particularly notable when they do happen to crop-up. The uncommon and "special" nature of fluid animation is often used to denote something important to the series, whether that be a battle between two major foes, an emotional character interaction, or the climactic plot-related moments of a series. I began to notice these moments more and more as I started to become more serious about anime fandom in the mid-2000's. It was always a puzzling pleasure to witness animated exuberance of this type, though for a long time I never had the proper language to explain what I was noticing. That's where the experts at Sakuga Blog come in.

Sakuga Blog is, simply, a blog devoted to the examination of Japanese animation and its production. The word "Sakuga" literally translates to "drawing pictures," and can simply mean "animation," but the word has taken on an additional and more descriptive meaning when it comes to the act of analyzing the quality of that animation. In that sense, the word has become a shorthand to refer to those moments in anime that stand out due to their high-quality, expressive, and downright *rare* animation. The contributors at Sakuga Blog, through both their extensive background knowledge of different animators and the animation process, as well as their keen eyes, point out and highlight these wonderful moments of expressive animation, and in doing so help others like us to cultivate an appreciation for it.

One thing that's always been intimidating to me about sakuga fandom is the type of knowledge base it ap-

appears to require of fans. It's not only a matter of being acquainted with the terminology, although knowing the difference between a *genga* ("keyframe") and *douga* ("in-between frame") comes with its benefits. The issue is that this type of knowledge often demands that people have serviceable skills with the Japanese language, the motivation to keep on top of animation news, and an ability to stomach anime series that are otherwise not entertaining for the sake of witnessing a few cuts drawn by certain talented or well-regarded animators. What's special about Sakuga Blog is that its writers and denizens have very extensive knowledge about the anime medium but approach the subject with an attitude focused around sharing and enjoying that knowledge with others rather than insulating it against some perceived invasion from "n00bs." This, in turn, makes the subject approachable, interesting, and often entertaining.



Production materials from "Little Witch Academia." Copyright Studio Trigger

The writers at Sakuga Blog focus on various types of analysis. This includes deep-dives into current season anime series, focused around specific animation staff contributions (as of the time of this writing, the flamboyant, symbol-filled, and currently-airing *Sarazanmai* is a weekly feature), as well as articles focused on different directors and animators, translations of interviews from various animation-related events, certain iconic anime episodes, and even analyses of the conditions surrounding the animation industry in Japan. The information covered on the blog is what most people would consider to be supplemental, but the beauty of it is that it allows fans to cultivate a deeper, richer appreciation for a storytelling medium that they love.

The blog is something of an offshoot of Sakugabooru (<https://www.sakugabooru.com/>). For those unfamiliar, a "booru" is a type of imageboard where users can upload images and tag them. Sakugabooru is an imageboard focused around sakuga and contains gifsets and videos of animation cuts from both Japanese and Western animation. It's a great place to click through if you're interested in seeing some examples of sakuga

from your favorite series and movies and helps to supplement the bigger picture around this aspect of animation appreciation.

Strangely enough, out of the many anime fans out in the world, comparatively few are acquainted with the type of work that goes into constructing a typical anime episode. This is one big reason why I truly appreciate the service that the writers at Sakuga Blog are providing to the anime community. They help to take an aspect of the medium that seems impenetrable and turn it into something that even the newest fans can appreciate.

For a primer on Sakuga appreciation, Sakuga Blog main contributor Kevin “kViN” Cirugeda wrote a piece for Anime News Network called “The Joy of Sakuga” (<https://www.animenewsnetwork.com/feature/2015-09-30/the-joy-of-sakuga/.93579>) which is an excellent place to start.

Just for fun – Anime as Cultural Education

Though I'd caution anyone who believes that watching a lot of anime or reading a lot of manga is equivalent to serious study when it comes to learning about Japan's cultural heritage, the truth is that anime can be incredibly broad with its subject matter and often manages to touch on elements of Japanese theater, culture, and food in the service of a particular narrative. These things may be unfamiliar to Western viewers and can definitely serve as a gateway to a more serious and robust follow-up for those who are interested.

Below are several examples of anime/manga series that focus on aspects of Japanese culture, some of which might be more familiar to Western viewers than others.



Showa Genroku Rakugo Shinjuu

Japan has cultivated a variety of storytelling and theatrical styles over the centuries. Many people are likely familiar with Kabuki theater, with its flamboyant costumes and boisterous vocal stylings. Some might even be familiar with Noh, which is characterized by much more subdued, controlled movements and esoteric religious-focused storytelling. On the other end of the spectrum is Rakugo, a style of energetic (and often comedic) storytelling performed by one actor. The Rakugo storyteller performs all of the required roles, transforming themselves through voice and body carriage into whatever characters exist within each tale. Each performer brings their own sense of style to these classic stories, so the same story might feel completely different when interpreted by various performers.

Showa Genroku Rakugo Shinjuu tells the story of several fictional performers throughout the twentieth century, first through the eyes of Yurakutei Yakumo, the current master of a long-lived performing arts lineage, and then later through his one-and-only apprentice, a reformed Yakuza criminal given the stage name “Yotaro” (short hand for “idiot” in the Rakugo tradition).

Throughout the 25 episode series there are several full (or near-full) recitations of many Rakugo tales, some of which tie directly into the thematic elements of the overall story. The anime also touches on the transformation of Rakugo from a nearly-lost artform, to one which has started to embrace more modern ideas surrounding women's participation in the arts and the incorporation of newly-written stories into the canon.

Showa Genroku Rakugo Shinjuu is available streaming in full on Crunchyroll and is available for digital purchase on Amazon Video. The original manga version, entitled *Descending Stories: Showa Genroku Rakugo Shinju*, is available to purchase in the US (published by Kodansha Comics).

For more examples of Rakugo stories (including a couple that play important roles in *Showa Genroku Rakugo Shinjuu*), interpreted in the form of sequential art, check out *Fallen Words*, an anthology compilation drawn by late manga/Gekiga master Yoshihiro Tatsumi. This compilation directly captures a lot of the humor inherent in Rakugo stories. *Fallen Words* is available to purchase in the US (published by Drawn + Quarterly).

You Might Also Enjoy: *Kabukibu!* is a more light-hearted series focused around a high school Kabuki club. An enthusiastic student turns his love of Kabuki theater into a reality by convincing other students to form a club where they learn the basics and have a good time doing so, naturally.

The series is available to stream on Amazon Prime Video, and a Blu-Ray release is available to purchase (licensed by Sentai Filmworks).



Chihayafuru

Japan is home to many native poetic forms. Many people are acquainted with (and have likely written a few) haiku poems, which speak to elements of nature within a minimalist 5-7-5 syllable format. Senryu are a poetic “relative” that utilize the same format to make observations about human nature. Waka (sometimes used synonymously with Tanka) is a longer form of poetry, usually presented in a 5-7-5-7-7 syllable format (though there are longer variations), that has existed in some fashion since the 8th century in Japan. There are various waka anthologies, but one of them, the Ogura Hyakunin Isshu (“One-hundred people, one poem each”) has gained additional fame due to its utilization as the basis for the Japanese game of uta-garuta (“poetry karuta”).

“Karuta” are simply a style of Japanese playing cards, but the game of uta-garuta uses cards inscribed with the 100 waka poems of the Hyakunin Isshu – or, to be more clear, the finishing phrases of each of those cards. The cards are laid-out in front of both players, and a reader reads the opening lines of each poem off of a Yomifuda (“reading card”). The player who identifies the poem and grabs the Torifuda (“grabbing card”) with the end of the poem gains the point. Though the image one may have in one’s head of the game may be one

of subdued and thoughtful movement, matches can get very intense (if you don’t believe me, look up some karuta matches on YouTube).

Chihayafuru is a drama series that follows a teenage girl named Chihaya whose identity revolved around supporting her older sister until she discovered the game of karuta through her friend, the quiet Arata. Suddenly Chihaya finds that she’s personally invested in her goal to become one of Japan’s best karuta players. She, along with a childhood friend, form a karuta club at their high school, though Chihaya’s goals of winning on behalf of her school come with the added motivation of meeting Arata face-to-face once again.

The anime series is one which focuses as much on cultivating a strong emotional connection with its characters as it does introducing and studying the culture around the game of karuta, which helps to make it compelling and memorable. It’s also quite the interesting combination of a sports tournament narrative, popularized by many anime and manga series aimed more at young boys, with a romantic and character drama aimed at the josei (“young woman”) demographic, which gives it pretty wide appeal even if waka poetry isn’t one’s major interest.

The two current 25 episode seasons are available streaming on Crunchyroll and HIDIVE in the US, and also available for purchase on Blu-ray from Sentai Filmworks. A third season is currently in the works, for broadcast in Autumn 2019.

You Might Also Enjoy: If the poetry itself is more of interest to you, you might enjoy watching *Utakoi*, an anime series that takes place in Heian-era (794-1185 A.D.) Japan and looks at the composition and compilation of some of the Hyakunin Isshu poetry. The series is definitely more of a romantic drama with comedy elements rather than a serious cultural study, but it is a lot of fun. Those who are unfamiliar with the restrictive nature of Heian-era courtly romance may be a little put off by some of the gender relations depicted within the series, but I think it’s a small point of contention.

Utakoi is 13 episodes and available streaming on Crunchyroll.



March Comes in Like a Lion

It should come as no surprise that Japan has its share of home-grown games; playing games is an element of human nature that crosses all cultural boundaries. While nowadays we may be more acquainted with Japan's many contributions to the world of video-gaming, analog tabletop gaming is still a robust and beloved activity. Shogi is a Japanese board game with many aspects that will seem familiar to Western anime viewers.

Shogi can roughly be equated to chess, in that its various pieces are named after roles in the military and their abilities and movements are pre-defined based on those roles. The game is a tactical competition between the two players, with the goal being to defeat/checkmate the opposing player's king. The players take turns moving their pieces around the rectangular board in service of this goal. An additional interesting element of shogi is that of "promotion" – when one's pieces reach certain points on the opponent's end of the game board, the piece can be promoted and gain additional movement options. This adds an additional layer of strategy to the game, as there can be benefits to promoting pieces, as well as benefits to leaving them as they are. Shogi is a game that can be learned in an afternoon, but as with chess it's also something that individuals spend a lifetime

attempting to master.

March Comes in Like a Lion is the story of Rei, a 17-year-old boy considered something of a shogi prodigy. He's in fact one of the youngest players ever to reach a professional level. While this has brought him his share of fame, it's also led to and amplified his complicated emotional state. Rei's relationship with the game has been tainted by the strain his prodigious playing caused within his adoptive family, as well as by Rei's own struggle with depression and anxiety (depicted visually throughout the series in visually-affecting and symbolic ways). Rei makes friends with a family of three girls who live with their grandfather, and it's through these relationships that he gains both a sense of what family ought to be, as well as the self-confidence to pursue the game of shogi more on his own terms.

The anime is certainly not a tutorial on how to play shogi (and, in fact, some select scenes of shogi competition may benefit from a little bit of pre-research on the part of the viewer), but it does provide a fascinating window into the world of competitive shogi alongside its very human story of emotional struggle and personal betterment. Though if you do have a hankering for a little bit of base-line knowledge about the game, the ending animation and song for episode 7 gives a primer on the various pieces (portrayed as cats).

The two anime seasons (totaling 44 episodes) are available streaming on Crunchyroll. A Blu-ray release (in 4 sets) is available in the US from Aniplex of America.

You might also enjoy: *Hikaru no Go* is the story of a young boy named Hikaru who stumbles upon a Go board haunted by the ghost of a famous Heian-era player. Through the influence of this ghost, Hikaru gains an interest in the game itself and goes on to play it competitively. Go is a strategy game with its origins in China. Though it appears relatively simplistic, using only black and white pieces placed at intersections atop a special game board, it's a game which is incredibly difficult to master. *Hikaru no Go* is a popular shounen (boy's) sport manga and anime focused around the game.

The 75(!) episode animated adaptation is available streaming on Hulu and Yahoo View. The manga is available digitally on the Shonen Jump app, and in paperback from VIZ media.



Barakamon

One of the major hurdles to learning the Japanese language, especially for those of us who have grown up with English as a first language, is the Japanese writing system. Written Japanese is the combination of three alphabets; two (hiragana and katakana) which are used to directly denote pronunciation, and Kanji characters, which are borrowed from Chinese, can have many pronunciations, and are used to indicate meaning. Competency in Japanese party relies upon learning these writing systems – the kana alphabets in their entirety, as well as a set of around 2,000 kanji and their various common combinations. This can be very intimidating!

One interesting aspect of Kanji, though, is the meaning that can be gleaned not only from the characters themselves, many of them pictograms that can be traced back to origins hundreds or thousands of years old, but also the ways in which the characters are written. Japanese calligraphy is an art form that incorporates interpretation of word meaning as well as the mental state of the artists who put brush to paper in order to inscribe the words.

Barakamon peers into the life of Seishu Handa, a young master calligrapher who's encountered a roadblock in his career (partly the result of punching a well-regarded calligraphy critic in the face). Handa spends some time on Goto Island, an out-of-the-way (some would say isolated) destination off the coast of Kyushu, the most Southern of Japan's 4 main islands. There he attempts to clear his head and refocus his efforts on his art, though not without the influence of the colorful locals (including several outgoing children). Its through his unorthodox practice and his eventual willingness to interact with the local residents on their own terms that Handa gains the perspective needed to reenter the world of competitive calligraphy.

For those of us without the experience and background in Japanese writing systems, Japanese calligraphy can seem like an impenetrable fortress, but *Barakamon* does a good job of portraying not only the striking beauty of calligraphy, but also the human emotion that fuels the creation of such specific works of art. There's a certain earthiness to the writing that Handa creates which feels enriched by his interactions with the townsfolk. One of my favorite moments in the series occurs when he's asked to paint a fishing boat's name across its hull; it's a one-shot deal (since it's not the type of thing that can be easily-erased for a second chance) and the result is hearty and intense.

The 12-episode series is available streaming and on disc in the US from Funimation. The manga series is also available (published in the US by Yen Press).

You might also enjoy: *Sakura Quest* is an anime-original series that takes place in a small town that's been struggling to establish a local tourism industry. The protagonists are a group of young women who find themselves attempting to revitalize the town, and in doing so help themselves to find a life's purpose. While the series itself doesn't necessarily focus on one specific Japanese art form, one of the sub-plots involves the incorporation of a traditional wood-carving style into the town's train station as a way of transforming it into something uniquely local and attractive. *Sakura Quest* captures the charming rural setting and eccentric local flavor that also makes *Barakamon* so enjoyable.

Sakura Quest is 25 episodes long, and available streaming and on Blu-ray from Funimation.



Tsurune

Archery is a martial skill that's been in practice for something like ten millennia, and Japan's incorporation of the bow-and-arrow predates recorded history. Approximately 2,000, the Japanese people developed and refined the use of an asymmetrical-style bow; this type of bow characterizes what's now called Kyudo ("Way of the Bow"). With the rise of the Samurai class in Japan starting around 1,000 years ago, the practice of archery took on a more formal appearance, and styles of mounted archery manifested for use in battle. Following the Meiji era (1868-1912) and the diminishing of the samurai, many martial arts fell out of favor and practice. It wasn't until the 1950's that guidelines on the practice of Kyudo as a sport were established.

Modern Kyudo is characterized by a couple of very iconic aspects. First is the bow itself, the Yumi – at two meters long, it stands taller than many practitioners of the sport! Second is the archer's form, the hassetsu ("eight stages of shooting"), a very regimented and almost meditative way of standing, setting-up, nocking and releasing each arrow. Kyudo practitioners spend a great deal of time perfecting their form using rubber training aids before even touching a bow or releasing a real arrow into a target. Kyudo can also

incorporate some bits of spiritual practice, though this is not a requirement. In any case, it's certainly different than the kind of Robin Hood antics we might first think of when talking about archery.

Tsurune is a recently-broadcast anime series focused on the practice of Kyudo. The protagonist is a boy named Minato who gained and interest in Kyudo as a small child after watching a competition with his mother. He fell in love with the "thrum" of the bow after the arrow's release. Minato experienced heartbreak, both through the loss of his mother, as well as through competition anxiety which left him unable to hit the archery target. When Minato's high school attempts to reestablish its Kyudo team, Minato is initially unwilling to pick up the bow again, but after meeting an archer practicing in the moonlight he begins to realize his attraction to the sport.

The series' emotional exploration of the characters on the Kyudo team are bolstered by Kyoto Animation's beautiful, delicate animation. When each moment of an arrow's flight is so fleeting, it takes this kind of knowledgeable and conscientious framing to capture the beauty buried in each millisecond. This definitely isn't a sports series focused on competition; like the sport itself, *Tsurune* is more about the personal journeys of the individual characters as framed through the development of their meditative actions.

Tsurune is 13 episodes and available streaming on both Crunchyroll and Hidive. It will also be available in the future on Blu-ray from Sentai Filmworks.

You Might Also Enjoy: Sports anime is an extremely robust genre, but there are fewer anime focused directly on Japan-specific sports. *Hinomaru Sumo* is a fairly recent anime series focused around the traditional sport of sumo wrestling. A new student with a passion and skill for sumo attempts to revitalize his school's sumo club in pursuit of his own professional goals. The series is available to stream on both Crunchyroll and Funimation.

Bamboo Blade is a series focused around the sport of kendo, which descended from traditional Japanese swordplay. The sport uses bamboo swords, and practitioners don heavy armor, including mesh face-masks. Competitors score points by striking their opponent in several specific areas. The anime series focuses on a teacher whose goal it is to put together a winning school kendo team (so that he can win free meals for a year). The series came out during the peak of the moé anime boom, and thus features a cast of cute girls with different, very archetypal personalities – something which may send some viewers packing. However, it also philosophizes plenty about the sport of kendo itself, so it may be a good entry point for those who are interested. The series is 26 episodes, and available streaming and on disc from Funimation. The manga series is also available (published by Yen Press).

Anime fandom has been a great way for me to maintain my enthusiasm for other aspects of Japanese culture, so I hope that some

Credits

Editor - Jessi Silver

jessi@s1e1.com

Cover Artwork - Jose Sanchez

<https://www.deviantart.com/jose77sanchez/gallery/>

Additional Artwork - Jessi Silver

Comic/Film Review - Hit Girl - George Phillies

phillies@4liberty.net

Manga Review - Monthly Girls' Nozaki-kun - SKJAM!

skjam@yahoo.com

Manga Review - Spirit Circle - Jessi Silver

Anime Review - Run With the Wind - Jessi Silver

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