

Trevor Ryan, “Dear Judge Ichiro” (Zeus Publications, Burleigh Qld, 2007)
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Reviewed by Luke Nottage, Associate Professor, Sydney Law School

Now for something completely different. This cleverly constructed and attractively written short novel will appeal especially to those interested and already quite familiar with law’s interrelationships with society, and cross-cultural encounters with Japan. It doesn’t take long to read, but it should leave you wanting to revisit all or parts, and the book certainly leaves some lasting impressions and things to ponder further.

The Prologue (pp 1-2) vividly sets the scene with the main character, a young Australian called Thomas, learning of a murder – and sensing that somehow he may bear some responsibility. Most of the rest of the novel comprises his reflections back over the previous 18 months, as he settled into life in Tokyo teaching English to individuals representing a diverse cross-section of contemporary Japanese society.

Thomas abandons the strict curriculum (and many other strictures) set by the language school in favour of conversation classes revolving each time around a random selection from a book of quotations in English (summarised at p 168). These turn out to be loosely intertwined with 15 stories or parables about rules and social order submitted to Thomas’ “in tray” as extra homework by “Judge Ichiro”, seemingly one of his adult students of similar age working as a career judge in Tokyo. Thomas responds to each with his interpretation. Mostly, especially at first, these are framed by a traditional Western “rule of law” framework derived from Thomas’ training as a recent law graduate from Australia. Judge Ichiro replies (as summarised by Thomas at p 166) from a perspective on law and society that is decidedly more communitarian or hermeneutic, reflecting his own experience or at least ideals as a Japanese jurist. In Judge Ichiro’s world, rules, objectivism, modernity and individuals are less sharply distinguished from context, subjectivism, history and collectivities.¹

Thomas comes to appreciate the Judge’s perspective, as well as his thought-provoking parables. This helps to explain, when the opening scene is revisited (p 161), why Thomas does see himself as somehow implicated in the murder, which turns out to have occurred at his language school. Even more intriguing is some suggestion (p 159, p 167) that Judge Ichiro is an alter ego of Thomas himself, not a real person. An implication may be that Thomas has matured as a person, as well as a jurist, over the 18 months before returning to life in Australia.

Is some of this autobiographical? The Author Bio (p 169) tells readers that, apart from many eclectic tastes, “Trevor Ryan is a researcher living in Japan. Born in London, he grew up in Canberra, Australia”. I know Trevor as the winner of the 2004 ANJeL / Blake Dawson Essay Prize in Japanese Law, submitted when he was completing a Graduate Diploma in Asian Studies (after an LL.B) at the Australian National University. His essay, “Creating ‘Problem Kids’: Juvenile Crime in Japan and Revisions to the Juvenile Act”, was later published in the *Journal of Japanese Law*.² Trevor is now completing a PhD in Law at ANU, based primarily in Tokyo, focusing on wide-ranging implications for the Japanese legal system of its rapidly

¹ For a similar worldview propounded by one of Japan’s leading legal sociologists, see Luke Nottage, “Translating Tanase: Challenging Paradigms of Japanese Law and Society” (May 27, 2006), Sydney Law School Research Paper No. 07/17, via <<http://ssrn.com/abstract=921932>>.

² 19 JIL/ZJapanR 153 (2005), reproduced at <http://www.law.usyd.edu.au/anjel/documents/ZJapanR/ZJapanR19_11_Ryan.pdf>.

ageing society. With the sensibilities displayed in that essay and this novel, his thesis will be worth the wait.