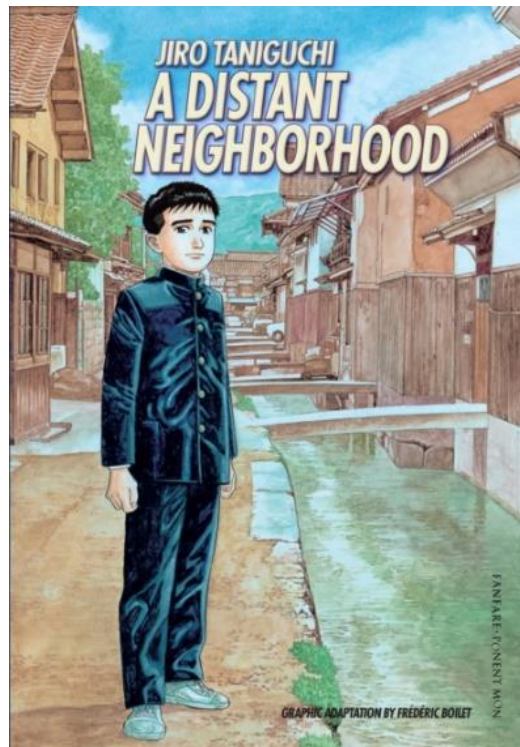


A Distant Neighbourhood by Jiro Taniguchi

[Contemporary Fiction]



If it were at all possible, would you go back in time with your current critical faculties and relive your life from the age of fourteen? If so, is there anything you'd change? And what would you learn that eluded your former fourteen-year-old mind?

Taniguchi's finest works involve a search for truth – often buried in the past – thence peace of mind.

This is a book which will have you reflecting upon your own past, present, and so perhaps your future. With crystal clear lines of breath-taking beauty and grey-tone shadows which denote so much sunlight, it's my favourite work from my most beloved Japanese creator executed with all the dignity, quiet contemplation and accomplished craftsmanship that make GUARDIANS OF THE LOUVRE, THE WALKING MAN, A JOURNAL OF MY FATHER and VENICE such transporting experiences.

It sees a 40-something businessman, tired and hung-over, mistakenly boarding the wrong train. It takes him back to the town he grew up in. Rather than fret, he takes advantage of the happenstance to stroll through the streets of his childhood. They're barely recognisable now, but when he reaches the graveyard under the hillside where his mother lies buried, he stops to meditate by her headstone:

"My father suddenly went missing when I was in eighth grade. I have no clear idea why my father decided to leave. Even now, whereabouts still unknown, I don't know what's happened to him... I don't know the pain she might have felt inside, but Mom passed away without ever saying a hateful word about my father. I asked my mother once again. "Were you happy?""

A butterfly takes flight above the cemetery stones as the morning moon exerts a sudden pull on the clouds. There's a shift in his shadow and a shift in his weight so that he loses his centre of balance.

We have crossed what I often refer to as a narrative's stepping stones, particularly in works by Neil Gaiman. For as Hiroshi Nakahara recovers his composure, he realises that he is dressed in school uniform and is once more but fourteen years old. The streets have reverted to those he knew, his mother is alive and his father's still living at home. All is well. There is no sign of strife. So why *will* his father disappear so abruptly? And can Hiroshi do anything to prevent it?



It's a work that can't help but catalyse self-reflection. How would you cope in the same situation? Who would believe you if you told them the truth? Do you moderate your more modern language? And how come you can't just take a boy or a girl out to dinner any longer?!

Although Hiroshi delights in a confidence around girls he never had as a child and rejoices in a rejuvenated athleticism, he overindulges in an alcohol binge his younger body can't cope with, and there are school friends whose funerals he's already attended who are chatting to him now without a care in the world. Plus he can't help but look at his mother and father with a different eye to a child's.



I learned so much from this work: the profoundly impressive Japanese courtesy of not wanting to inconvenience others, for example, especially when Hiroshi returns home drunk with repercussions. It's not about superficial manners; it is about genuine good will. In all Taniguchi's books there's an emphasis on respect and gratitude, as well as obligation, and an enormous generosity of spirit, forgiveness and kindness (another Taniguchi hallmark), evoked so well when Hiroshi's grandmother explains his father's particular circumstances following his experiences in World War II.

For a parallel comparison (and more exquisite dappled sunlight), please see Taniguchi's *A JOURNAL OF MY FATHER*. For some of the most jaw-dropping, refined architecture in comics, please see *GUARDIANS OF THE LOUVRE* and *VENICE*.

