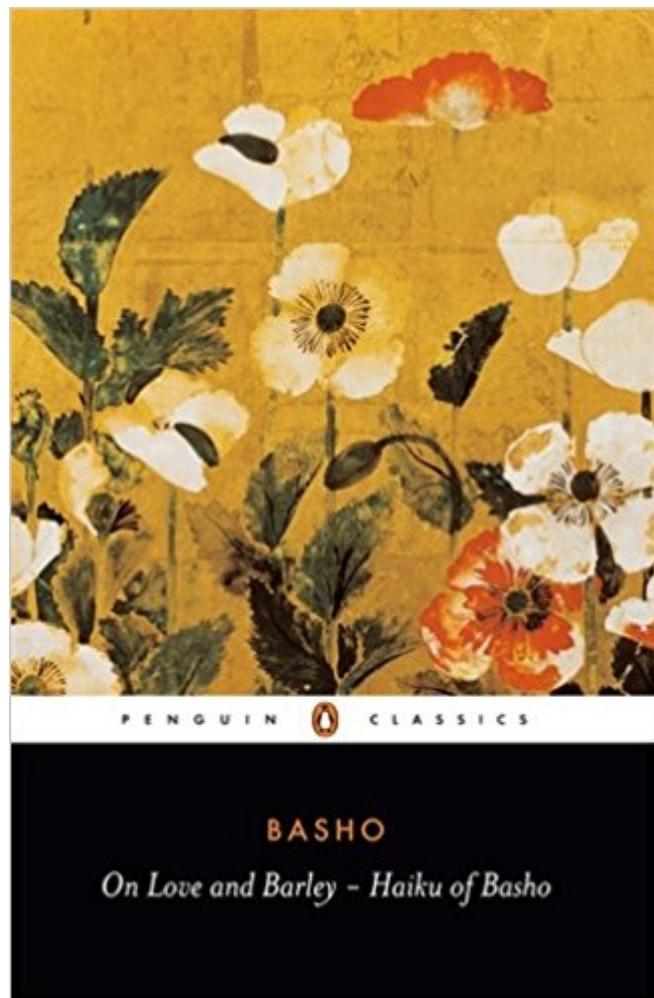


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On Love And Barley: Haiku Of Basho (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

Basho, one of the greatest of Japanese poets and the master of haiku, was also a Buddhist monk and a life-long traveller. His poems combine 'karumi', or lightness of touch, with the Zen ideal of oneness with creation. Each poem evokes the natural world - the cherry blossom, the leaping frog, the summer moon or the winter snow - suggesting the smallness of human life in comparison to the vastness and drama of nature. Basho himself enjoyed solitude and a life free from possessions, and his haiku are the work of an observant eye and a meditative mind, uncluttered by materialism and alive to the beauty of the world around him. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

With this book of translations, the importance of the contribution of Takashi Ikemoto's professional knowledge and advice becomes quite evident. The quality of Stryk's translations has obviously suffered without Ikemoto's valuable in-put. The haiku reading public deserves better than another mediocre book of Japanese haiku translations. The book was not published on the merits of the translations, but rather, on the merits of Stryk's past achievements and accomplishments. The book

is heavily flawed in nearly every aspect. Lucien Stryk's translations fall far short of the previous accomplishments made in this field by other translators prior to this project and difficult undertaking. There are many technical flaws, actual errors, and omissions in this book of translations. Here are a few examples from his book to back up my accusations: In my new robe this morning- someone else. This is the first haiku in the book, so Stryk gets himself into deep trouble from the onset. First of all, someone else is not wearing Basho's robe. Basho has just put on the new silk robe given to him as a gift from his beloved disciple Ransetsu. This should have been footnoted, especially since it ties in with Stryk's main theme. It is the first day of spring (according to the old lunar calendar) which was celebrated as New Year's Day. It is therefore not just any morning as suggested in Stryk's translation, but a special one that haiku poets and the people of Japan have been fond of for many generations. The literal translation of the last line is: Who do I look like? Basho is being both humorous and playful, light-hearted with his disciple. It is a display of affection and Basho is saying that he feels like a new man and does not want nor expect a serious response from his haiku pupil. It is not a question at all; it's a compliment, a way of saying thanks, a way of expressing complete satisfaction and comfort! Since Stryk decided to name the book On Love And Barley, I feel that he has a responsibility to his readership to emphasize and stress the theme of love whenever appropriate, and like the example given above, he failed to do this. Because of his neglect, there is a conspicuous lack of unity and cohesion in the overall presentation. The order of the haiku as they appear in the book seems arbitrary, as if the haiku were randomly tossed together without much fore-thought. Many of the haiku are taken out of context (haiku that were originally part of a renga or haibun). These should have been footnoted, but weren't. It seems in every possible area where Stryk could have gone wrong, he did go wrong! Another example from the book: Parting, straw-clutching support. All Lucien Stryk says about this haiku in his footnote is that this haiku is another parting poem meant for Basho's friends. This book, unlike many books of Japanese haiku translations, does not include the Japanese (Romanized) versions. But the above haiku is very well known, so I took the time and looked it up. The Japanese word mugi does not mean straw. Guess what, it means barley! The word barley should definitely have been used, especially in view of the fact that the word is part of the title that Stryk assigned to the book, and he didn't use it! Shame on him! The cat/love/barley haiku previously quoted is the ONLY haiku in the book with the word barley in it. This haiku should have included the word too. It is my opinion that the love/barley theme is stronger in this haiku than it is in the cat/barley haiku if it is adequately translated and properly footnoted. The Japanese phrase chikara ni tsukamu (the second line) means more accurately than clutching, clutching convulsively or with great intensity. Basho was departing on what was to be his

last journey, from the outskirts of Edo (Tokyo) on the way to his birthplace (near Ueno outside of Kyoto) three months prior to his death. Stryk's translation is ambiguous. To many readers it appears that Basho is doing the clutching and that is simply not true! He was departing from his friends on a dirt path next to a field of barley and out of an involuntary and spontaneous nervous reaction due to the intense grief of parting, his friends (not Basho) were intensely grasping the barley stalks by the pathway as they were saying their final farewells to him. Basho noticed this subtle anxiety of theirs, was deeply moved, and out of mutual love and affection for his friends and disciples, wrote the above haiku for them in their honor, thus immortalizing the tender and deeply felt emotions of their strong and close friendship. Another example: Orchid - breathing incense into butterfly's wings. A woman of high society by the name of Miss Butterfly (as in Madame Butterfly) owned a teahouse and requested that Basho compose a haiku for her on his return from Ise shrine. It was the custom in those days for the upper class women to perfume their clothing in the smoke of sandalwood or with other aromatics. The haiku is obviously in praise of her beauty, (not just her physical beauty, but her grace and beauty in natural surroundings or perhaps the tea-house) and once again Lucien Stryk failed to footnote this haiku that so appropriately ties in with the book's main theme. A better translation might read something like this: perfuming her wings in the orchid's fragrance oh beautiful butterfly! There are many more examples that I can give where Stryk made serious omissions and errors, but in 1,000 words I cannot give any more examples. I do suggest that readers interested in good Basho haiku translations look elsewhere. At \$7.96, this book is no bargain.

At a time when Milton and Dryden were producing their prolix epics, the Japanese Zen monk Basho was paring poetic language down to its very essence, managing to pack as much philosophy and metaphysics, narrative, evocation of place and custom, human behaviour and emotion in 17 syllable haikus as the Englishmen did in endless cantos. Unfortunately, the non-Japanese reader will never be able to appreciate Basho - his poetic art is such an inseparable union of form and content, that an inability to translate the former means an inability to understand the latter; while any attempt to replicate the 17-syllable structure in a completely alien language and mindset would be grotesque. So, from the start, Lucien Stryk's admirable attempt to evoke the spirit of Basho is doomed. The reader can do other things with his translations, however. The compression of the haiku actually gives the reader a lot of freedom to construct narratives, moods and feelings from the barest hints: of the peasant monk Basho travelling throughout Japan, visiting temples; eating; meeting friends and passers-by; passing mountains, trees, seas, rivers, waterfalls, gardens; sleeping in fields or on the side of the road; looking at the moon or a butterfly; sights transformed by

sounds or smells. It probably helps if you know something about Japan and Buddhism to appreciate the allusions packed in the poetry, and Stryk's introduction (which also briefly posits Basho's aims and technique, and his position in the tradition of the genre) and notes are of some help. The movement of the poems are remarkably fluid and expansive within such narrow limits, with their hierarchies of nature, fusion of the senses and questioning of reality all cohering to create the oneness with nature that was Basho's ideal. The overwhelming mood is one of serenity, of passive marvelling at the riches of nature, of plays of light or wind, of unexpected, tiny, revelatory details; but there is also an acknowledgement of human folly, poverty, war ('Summer grasses, all that remains of soldiers' dreams'), decay and death - Basho's deathbed poem is truly desolating. To be honest, I was much more engaged by the sketches by Taige that accompany the text, effortlessly combining the representation of nature with abstract thought that Basho strove for in his poetry (although other reasons for my dissatisfaction seem to be more precisely located in the reader Ty Hadman's very valuable comment below).

I bought this book June 23, 1996, and it's still holding up though a bit dog-eared. I frequently throw it into my bag when traveling, because no matter how much hustle and bustle involved, I can open it to any page and be transported to a better place. The simplicity and beauty remind me what's important. As the poet said: Do not forget the plum / blooming / in the thicket. (Sometimes I forget how important plums blooming in thickets are.) He also asks the important questions of life: Has it returned, / the snow / we viewed together? He covers economics quite well: Town merchants / who will buy this hat / lacquered with snow? And finally his theology: How I long to see / among dawn flowers / the face of God. This is a very good book. (I don't give 5 stars lightly)

While not the best basho read, still was moved by many of the haiku. I think my issue with it is that some/many of the poems are a bit too literal of a translation and it loses the emotion basho might have been trying to communicate, because the English is so awkward. But I don't regret getting this book.

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