



# Japanese by Spring

*Ishmael Reed*

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## **Japanese by Spring** Ishmael Reed

Benjamin "Chappie" Puttbutt, a black junior professor at the overwhelmingly white Jack London College, lusts after tenure and its glorious perks (including a house in the Oakland Hills). He spends most of his time trying to divine the ideological climate of the school and obligingly adapting his beliefs to it. When Puttbutt's mysterious Japanese tutor, who promises to teach him Japanese by spring, suddenly becomes the school's new president and appoints Puttbutt as academic dean, the fun really begins—for Puttbutt sets out to stir things up and settle old scores. Turning every contemporary political and social movement on its head—from feminism to nationalism to jingoism—this boisterous and irreverent novel manages to be by turns hilarious and totally serious.

"One of the funniest satires of university politics I've ever read. Ishmael Reed is funnier than Norman Mailer or Gore Vidal." —Leslie Marmon Silko

"Reed is, as always, an American original; a wiseguy whose wisdom is the real thing," —**The Boston Sunday Globe**

## **Japanese by Spring Details**

Date : Published August 1st 1996 by Penguin Books (first published 1993)

ISBN : 9780140255850

Author : Ishmael Reed

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## From Reader Review Japanese by Spring for online ebook

### Amber Binion says

I must say that I'm turned off by each off the characters in this book.

It is truly difficult for me to relate to any of the characters, their motives, their histories, etc. I know it's satire, but really, most of the characters are obnoxious.

I think another part of the reason why I can't seem to enjoy this book is its dated references. Which, to be fair, is understandable since this book was published in the mid 90's. Ugh...

Actually, the history was interesting. It's the book's discussion of it annoys me.

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### Rachel says

i do not know how i chose to read this, but i checked it out from the library when i was like 12 and i read at least half of it. i suppose i must have seen mr. reed's poetry somewhere, or heard something about him that suggested to me that he was a bad-ass of some kind. i think it was probably the first book i read that had sex in it, and that is also pretty much all i remember about it.

i am beginning to think i should read it again.

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### John says

Chappie Buttputt is a conservative African American professor who will do anything to get tenure, and get back at anyone who stood in the way of his tenure. The novel is a scathing parody of academic politics, with a fairly absurd plot, and the author inserts himself as a character towards the end. There are a lot of surprises, and a strong advocacy for multiculturalism and multilingualism. Some of the events come across as somewhat random or absurd, and a lot of the novel is dense with obscure references, and some readers might get confused by following a protagonist for most of the novel who is not of the same ideology as the author. But the journey is fun, and there is eventually a good message. And you'll probably be left with a great yearning to learn more about Yoruba. 4 stars for my shelf, 3-3.5 stars for the general reader.

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### Amy says

Wow, Reed blows the top off multiculturalism in the academy while also carefully protecting it. He doesn't even spare himself in the controversy. Smart, satirical and irreverent, he asks searing questions about the values, assumptions and craziness of faculty life and campus atmosphere. No one could take the characters too seriously with names like Puttbutt, President Stool and Jokujoku, but he does ask some deeper questions among the craziness that are worth considering.

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## **Nancy says**

You never know when learning a language could be beneficial. This is a satirical look at the world of academia and how quickly colleagues can turn on you and how quickly the tables can turn back. Recommended for those that already have tenure (smile).

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## **fati says**

I am especially interested with the postcolonial and the East-West themes. This novel is a meaningful parody of minority's struggle in gaining its equal existence. I analyzed this novel for my thesis under Edward Said's Orientalism.

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## **Ryan says**

Ishmael Reed has never been one for subtlety, and this novel is about as subtle as a brick. At one point, the protagonist is whipping out copies of Japanese by Spring to Ishmael Reed himself, bashing the reader over the head with meta-fiction.

Sure, this book lacks prosiac beauty, contains an epilogue that is trecherous for readers who aren't experts in Yoruba culture (read: most everyone including myself), and every inconceivable twist is solved with a Deus Ex Machina, but that is exactly where Reed's humor lives. He shows you the bones of his structure, which allows the reader to see the breadth of this project is meant to be nothing more than a super critical caricature. When was the last time an author harshly attacked every subculture/PC trend in the university system?

Ishmael Reed deconstructs every argument surrounding racism, feminism, jingoism, feelgoodism, Miltonianism, and finally... deconstructionism! Truly subversive and sinister, yet familiar and hilarious to those who have watched any of these debates play out in reality. He slashes the pomp and lets everybody have it. Absolutely hysterical.

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## **Daniel Rose says**

This is political satire at its most extreme - no one is spared (not even the author himself) and no subject is too taboo. Japanese businessmen cum political rebels take over a college campus and the surrounding town to show the students and faculty of overtly racist Jack London University that Westerners aren't the only ones who can play at imperialism. In a similar vein to Spike Lee's Bamboozled, Japanese by Spring left me not knowing whether to laugh or cry... or both.

I've been wanting to test the Ishmael Reed waters for a long time now, and although I'd always planned on reading Mumbo Jumbo first, I found this one among a sidewalk vendor's collection and decided to jump headlong. I didn't quite know what to make of Reed's writing style... It's very bizarre and unique - mixing magical realism, HEAVY political content, and more traditional narrative techniques. Japanese by Spring blends fact and fiction in way that makes it difficult to separate truth from fantasy. I spent some time trying

to find any online reference to David Duke's extensive interracial porn collection, but after finding none, realized that whether or not the events in the book actually connect to reality is beside the point - Reed is always showing us some kind of truth.

Japanese by Spring is extremely thought provoking... get ready for a pretty intense head trip.

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### **Shannon says**

Interesting social commentary, witty. Not impressed by the story itself.

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### **Shafiqah Berry says**

Post Modern, post Black power satire. The marvelous and multi-talented Ishmael Reed's look at America's higher educational system and the hypocrisies that exist there. The strange cliques and the lunacy of taking sides as either a liberal or conservative... a look at jingoism and obsessive devotion to any cause without full understanding of what is being fought for. And at times you will laugh out loud :)

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### **Daniel Polansky says**

Weird. I can't remember having such a case of a literary whiplash since reading Annie Proulx. The story of a black professor of literature who sells his soul first as an anti-affirmative action advocate, then as a pro-Japanese quisling after the Japanese take over the university, I was so shocked by its bitterness and general incompetence that I spent a lot of the book thinking I must have been missing something, before coming to the decision that no, I didn't, it just sucked. There is a joke somewhere to be made about the inherent racism endemic to most all cultures and people, our secret belief that whatever we are must be better than whatever everyone else is by virtue of our being it, but it doesn't come together here. Reed's depiction of Academia as being a bastion of Nazidom is from my experience, peculiar and inaccurate. (admittedly this was written in 91 or so, but still I cannot imagine things have changed so much between then and my undergraduate experience in the mid 2000's. True, there has been a recent and disturbing 'mainstreaming' of right wing pseudo-fascist ideology, but that's sort of the point—Academia is not the main stream, it is its own peculiar niche, and not one in which you will see many individuals wearing swastikas). Likewise almost hysterically dated is the early 90's fear of a resurgent Japan, as incoherent a boogieman

There are a lot of skills required of a satirist, most of which Reed seems to have lost in the quarter-century or so between writing *Flight to Canada* and writing this. His powder is dry, his assaults either toothless or taking place on straw men. Worse yet, Reed gives in to the single most unacceptable fault in a satirists, which is to allow his own personal feelings to dictate the vent of his spleen. Whoever it was that popularized the 'punching upward' school of satire is a fucking idiot who understands nothing about humor in the slightest (as if it were an Excel formula – 'make sure you exclude any underserved populations from your comic sum!'). A good satirist carries a machine gun, not a rifle, and he takes aim at everything he sees, and, most importantly, he makes sure to keep one in the clip for himself. *Flight to Canada* does a great job with this, skewering the pretensions and hypocrisies of everyone it lays its eyes on. *Japanese by Summer* does the exact reverse. Reed frequently slips into an omniscient third person that comments in what, by all appearances, is meant to be an objective fashion, pointing out the failures of the various characters and telling

the reader what they're supposed to believe. By the time we get to Reed's introduction of the character 'Ishmael Reed', who takes over the last quarter of the book and engages in fairly naked sock-puppetry, one cannot help but feel that Reed the author has shat the bed altogether. As a single if sterling example; there are at least half a dozen asides mocking a character named Dgun da Niza, a Neo-Conservative of Indian descent meant, obviously, to be Dinesh D'Souza.

Fair enough, D'Souza is as rancid a festering pile of of shit as was ever stuffed into a suit and shoved on television, but he's 1) not really worthy of being called out directly and 2) making fun of another person's name is the lowest form of humor that can be stumbled upon.

In short, despite having some fabulous throw away lines, there was so much of Reed's own persoal issues shoved into the narrative that one comes away with the awkward feeling of having caught someone masturbating. I suppose its possible that this was all some incredibly subtle joke that I just didn't get it, but if so, I didn't get it. Drop.

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### **Brent Legault says**

An oddball pastiche - part farce, part screed, part *fait divers*. Probably more fun for the author to write than the reader (this reader, at least) to read. Ishamael Reed has points to make and so can't be bothered with exercising much in the way of style. I would offer this book up as an example to any novelist (I'm talking to you, Mr. Franzen) who decides to incorporate "current events" into his fiction. A novel like this grows old fast. It puts on weight. It goes grey.

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### **MJ Nicholls says**

Reed wrote a campus satire. Whatever happened to the campus satire, you ask? When Kingsley Amis published *Lucky Jim*, suddenly it was OK to admit you worked at a university, and that teaching Advanced Polynesian Judo Rubric to squat milquetoasts from Ploverstown was in fact the apex of hip. Soon a slew of campus coms from prime inkers like Randall Jarrell and Vladimir Nabokov emerged, ending in meltdown when John Barth published the frankly silly *Giles Goat-Boy*—one of his valiant attempts to explode the very movement he'd created, like a smirking nihilist inventor. In the 70s and 80s, the campus novel vanished into a cloud of heretonormative properness—this, after all, was the providence of Randy Male Authors, and nothing was funny in the Reagan-Thatcher 80s. In 1993, Ishmael Reed (who appears as a character), never one to worry about trends or offence, wrote this prickly campus book, wonderfully fresh since the first to satirise campus politics from an ethnic as well as gender and generational viewpoint, full of outstanding political riffs and rants and lunacy. As to its PCitude? Forget. Good satire means never having to say you're sorry.

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### **Stephen P says**

The rat-a-tat-tat of groups, causes, pretensions shredded. The gore left in bloody swathes by Reed is evidence of the fragmentation occurring no matter which side one occupies and within groups themselves.

The story of Jack London College in Oakland, California is told through the eyes of a black professor who is willing to circumvent all laws of gravity and flexibility to adapt himself to whatever political position that

will advance him. Between large doses of information - at times bordering on tedious, - parody and humor, incisive analysis by a character with the author's name, a plot is imposed and cranked out.

The problem with writing a book based on current issues of the time-1992-is that in 2015 they taste stale. So, if I can go back to those years Reed gets 5 stars for writing a novel where humor highlights large themes. He loses a 1/2 star for allowing his parodies to roll over the top into slapstick and predictability. Another 1/2 star is lost for some clunkers of sentences and a couple of add-ons pulled out of nowhere to make a scene or point work but had no organic lead-in or relation to the prior text. If he wrote this as a parody of certain types of poor writing then I stand corrected. I doubt it though since the surrounding writing is excellent. Another star is lost due to my personal bias. The book made a strong and clear political statement through the above mentioned strategies. However, I don't believe that any book that is written with the idea of providing a political statement is literature, especially when character development is muted by it.

This leaves us with a 3/5 stars. I need to round it up to a 3.5/5. He's a popular writer so I shall await the hail of bullets.

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## Megan says

I might not be so angry with this festering little number if I hadn't been so betrayed by it: because I'm working on writing a campus novel myself, I've been keeping a list of apparently-great novels already in the genre that are supposed to help me get oriented with it. I let Nancy Pearl's *Book Lust* talk me into this one because she swore it was a lighthearted and hilarious romp. But clearly the New York Times Book Review quoted on the cover means "explosive" and "funny" in the sense that you feel funny before you have an explosive gastrointestinal dysfunction. Actually the only thing this book didn't make me do was get physically ill, but it came close.

Apart from having to read the most idiotic name ever given to a character in the history of time ("Puttbutt"?!) about 50 times per page because Ishmael Reed didn't show up for school the day they covered pronouns, I also had to endure some of the most cloyingly almond paste metafiction I've ever encountered outside of John Barth: Ishmael Reed turns out to be a major character in his own book, as himself, and because of the aforementioned never learning about pronouns thing, he refers to himself as "Ishmael Reed" some three times per any given paragraph he appears in. (Apparently he couldn't decide whether he was more enamored with his first or last name.) You know, Mr. Reed and Mr. Barth (I'll give you a rant on Mr. "I'm a Moron" Barth some other time), the vast majority of authors are content to see their name on the COVER of their own book, and don't feel the need to sprinkle it throughout with a 5th-grade level cheesy fanfic caricature of themselves.

I'm going to be extremely honest with you: I did in fact look at every single page in this book, but after about the third chapter, when his oozing racism became really obvious, and the author kept obsessing over himself as a major character, I went into hyper-skim mode, and therefore can't tell you much about the plot now a month later. Anyway, why do you want to know what the plot is? It's so nasty, I urge you not to waste your time.

This review via [Hundredaire Socialite](#)

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