



Counterpoint, 2021

2021 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School Literature

Culture Notes

Colorful

by Eto Mori

translated by Jocelyn Allen

Fiction, set in Japan

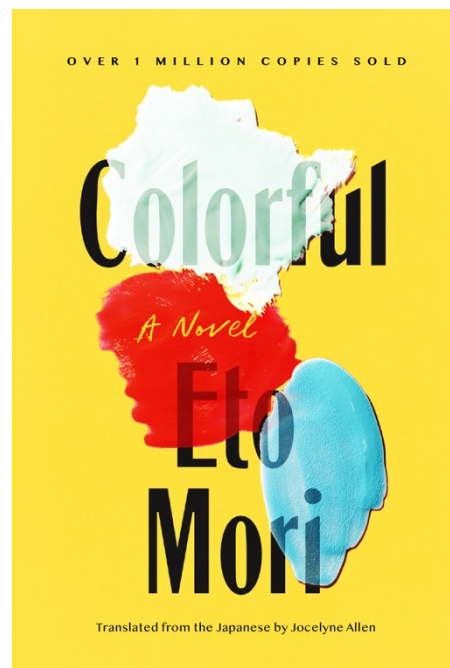
This YA novel is built around the concept of reincarnation—the belief that the soul of a deceased person can enter another physical body, usually that of a baby. In this case, the soul enters the body of a dying teenager, giving him new life.

A fourteen-year-old Japanese student, Makoto Kobayashi, is dying from an overdose. The “father of all creation” asks an angel named Prapura to reassign the soul of a deceased person to the student, bringing him back to life. Prapura guides the soul into Makoto’s body, thereby giving that soul a “second chance” on earth. Prapura is portrayed as a handsome man with wings, draped in white fabric.

Reincarnation is a central tenet of Buddhism. An angel could be likened to a bodhisattva, a compassionate being who helps to alleviate the suffering of humankind. The word angel—*tenshi* is what the author uses in the original Japanese—is Christian, however, suggesting that the story draws from both religious traditions.

Enjo kōsai

In the mid-1990s, *enjo kōsai* came to refer to the exchange of money for sex or, less frequently, for simple companionship. This term is not mentioned in the novel, but it was in the news at the time the book was published. The term *enjo kōsai* is euphemistic: it is a combination of *enjo* (support) and *kōsai* (personal relationship) and refers to older men connecting to young teenage girls through dating sites or social media. A character in *Colorful* who engages in this form of prostitution is in eighth grade, making her 13 or 14. The age of consent in Japan was raised from 13 to 16 in 2023; in real life, her situation would have violated the child protection law and the age consent law, as well as the anti-prostitution law.





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High school education in Japan

The story touches on many aspects of education. Advancing from elementary to middle school is automatic if the student is performing satisfactorily, but students must take examinations to move on to high school. Public high schools are generally more demanding academically and therefore harder to get into, while private schools generally have less rigorous admission standards.

Students in compulsory education (first through ninth grade) in a public-school setting receive instruction free of charge. Such is not the case for high school or college. The public high school tuition for 2024 was ¥118,800/year (about US\$792), which is approximately half of what a private school costs. If the family income is under ¥9,100,000 (US\$60,676), tuition is waived. While national universities are affordable at about ¥540,000/year (about US\$4,000), private universities are far more expensive. The financial burden of putting their children through college is not insignificant for many families.

T-score in this context is a metric that indicates a student's achievement on practice tests. A score of 50 is average. A score of 60 puts the student in the 84th percentile, and 70 would be about the 98th percentile. Thus, a student with a T-score of 62 would be a shoo-in for a university rated 55, but applying to a university rated 65 would be riskier. Most students aim for a public high school because of the low or free tuition and higher academic standards. A student in eighth grade may apply to only one public high school in their school district in a given year, but they usually hedge their bets by also applying to one or more private schools. Going from high school to college works the same way. All high school graduates regardless of their location are eligible to apply to a national university.

Applying to multiple schools lessens the chance of not being admitted anywhere. If a student is rejected by all the schools they have applied to, they usually take what we call a "gap year." They are called *rōnin*, a reference to masterless samurai. Typically, *rōnin* spend the year preparing for the next round of exams. There is a multibillion-dollar industry of preparatory schools, called *yobikō*, to cater to *rōnin* as well as anyone who wants to strengthen their academics while in high school. The *rōnin* experience may last several years if the student cannot get into a college or university.



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Many middle school and high school students attend “cram schools” (*juku*), which offer extra preparation for the exams. They tend to focus on three major subjects: Japanese language, math, and English. Students often spend several hours a day in a *juku*, after school and into the evening.

Mental health issues

The period of intense study to prepare for the entrance exams is particularly stressful. Overall, the last year in both middle school and high school is extremely challenging for both students and their families. Because Japanese society places great importance on education, the outcome of the exams may be said to determine their future.

The societal pressure placed on academic performance is unimaginable to most of us in the United States. This level of pressure can lead to all types of mental health issues, including depression and even suicidal tendencies. Japan ranks high for the number of youth suicides. In 2022, 412 youth took their own lives. While in the past mental issues were generally considered signs of personal weakness, the perception of mental illness has changed substantially over the past few decades. Currently, there is a better understanding of mental illness, diagnosis, and treatment.

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