



Speed Tribes: Days and Nights with Japan's Next Generation

Karl Taro Greenfeld

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This foray into the often violent subcultures of Japan dramatically debunks the Western perception of a seemingly controlled and orderly society.

Speed Tribes: Days and Nights with Japan's Next Generation Details

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From Reader Review Speed Tribes: Days and Nights with Japan's Next Generation for online ebook

Forrest Norvell says

Seamy is all right when it's backed up by gritty detail, but this entertaining but slight sociological foray into many of Japan's disaffected youth scenes wants all of the grime with none of the shoe leather. In its style and narrative, it's more William Gibson than Donald Richie. I love William Gibson, but he's a fiction writer, not an anthropologist or journalist, and is also informed by a pulp crime aesthetic that's at odds with some of the stories Greenfeld is trying to tell in this book. I can't tell if I'm supposed to pity or disapprove of the characters in the book, and that distance seems to be what the author wants. And the stylish prose is full of tricks used to boost authorial authority without really convincing me I should read it as fact.

Still, if you want to get some dated but entertaining insight into what it meant to be young and Japanese after the bottom fell out of Japan's economy in the 90s, this is probably about as good as you're going to find in English. If you want an equally biased but more informative look at what ails Japan, Alex Kerr's Dogs and Demons will do the trick, but if you want a slickly-written true-crimey book about being young, dumb, and wasted on speed in Japan, this book's for you.

Sean says

I absolutely destroyed this book in less than two days. It's a very easy read that keeps your interest and allows you to build reading momentum. Having lived in Japan since 2006 as an English teacher (I'm returning this summer) I found it especially interesting, because I've had first-hand contact with some of the subcultures that are described here (the right-wingers blaring slogans with loudspeaker-equipped trucks, otaku, etc.) That being said, some of the information seems a bit dated. For example, the last chapter about otaku fails to mention Akihabara, which nowadays is the undisputed capital of the otaku "movement," if you can call it that. I believe this book came out in 1994. Still, it felt like it could have been written today, aside from the few bits that date it, like little mention of computers or cell phones. A nice read that gives an entertaining glimpse into different parts of the "underground" in Japan, especially because of its writing style that almost makes it seem like fiction. If another edition of this book were to come out, I would like to see a chapter dealing with hikikomori (shut-ins with a kind of agoraphobia). The author touched on some aspects of these kinds of people in the otaku chapter but I don't think hikikomori was such a well-defined concept when this was written.

George K. says

Βαθμολογία: 9/10

Ψ?χνοντας για παλι?ς εκδ?σεις ξ?νης λογοτεχν?ας που κυκλοφ?ρησαν στην Ελλ?δα μ?σα στην δεκαε?τα του '90 -με την ελπ?δα να βρω καν?να διαμ?ντι που τ?σο καιρ? μου ε?χε ξεφ?γει-, π?τυχα το συγκεκριμ?νο βιβλ?ο απ? τις εκδ?σεις Πατ?κη. Αμερικ?νικο ?νομα συγγραφ?α, ενδιαφ?ρων τ?τλος - οι μ?νες διαθ?σιμες πληροφορ?ες. Ε?πα να το ψ?ξω. Κο?ταξα στο Goodreads και ε?δα ?τι πρ?κειται για μια καταγραφ? των υποκουλτο?ρων των ν?ων της Ιαπων?ας, τ?λη δεκαε?τας του '80,

αρχ?ς δεκαετ?ας του '90. Ε, ?θελα να το βρω και να το διαβ?σω. Η Ιαπων?α π?ντα με τρ?βαγε ως πολιτισμ?ς, ιστορ?α, τοπ?α κλπ. Στ?θηκα τυχερ?ς, γιατ? λ?γες μ?ρες μετ? την ανακ?λυψη του τ?τλου, π?τυχα και το ?διο το βιβλ?ο σε παλαιοβιβλιοπωλε?ο. Πριν ?να μ?να αυτ?. Και τ?ρα το δι?βασα. Και ?μεινα εξαιρετικ? ικανοποιημ?νος.

Ο Γκρ?νφελντ, γιος εν?ς Αμερικανοεβρα?ου και μιας Γιαπων?ζας, ο οπο?ος γενν?θηκε στο Κ?μπε της Ιαπων?ας αλλ? μεγ?λωσε και σπο?δασε στο Λος ?ντζελες, απ? το 1988 μ?χρι το 1993 ?ζησε στο Τ?κιο, εργαζ?μενος ως δημοσιογρ?φος. ?ταν παρ?ν στην "οικονομ?α της σαπουν?φουσκας", ?πως χαρακτηρ?στηκε η απ?τομη οικονομικ? αν?πτυξη της Ιαπων?ας, με την α?ξηση των τιμ?ν των ακιν?των, της γης, των μετοχ?ν, και π?ει λ?γοντας. Ε, ο Γκρ?νφελντ σκ?φτηκε να γρ?ψει για τους ν?ους που ζο?σαν στην σκι? αυτ?ς της αν?πτυξης, για τους γιους και τις κ?ρες των βιομηχ?νων, των στελεχ?ν επιχειρ?σεων, των εργατ?ν, των απλ?ν μεροκαματ?ρηδων. Στο βιβλ?ο υπ?ρχουν δ?δεκα αληθιν?ς ιστορ?ες, μικρ?ς και μεγ?λες, που αφορο?ν αυτο?ς τους ν?ους. ?τσι, πα?ρνουμε μια ματ? απ? τον κ?σμο των κλεφτ?ν μοτοσικλετ?ν, των πωλητ?ν ναρκωτικ?ν, των κατ?τερων μελ?ν της Γιακο?ζα, των συμμορι?ν με τις φτιαγμ?νες μηχαν?ς και τα φτιαγμ?να αυτοκ?νητα, των συνοδ?ν πολυτελ?ας, της μουσικ?ς βιομηχαν?ας, των νυχτερι?ν κλαμπ, των πορν? ταινι?ν, των τρελαμ?νων τ?πων με τα ηλεκτρονικ? παιχν?δια και τους υπολογιστ?ς, των φοιτητ?ν, και π?ει λ?γοντας.

Οι ιστορ?ες αυτ?ς βασ?ζονται σε αληθιν? γεγον?τα και συνεντε?ξεις που π?ρε ο Γκρ?νφελντ απ? πολλο?ς ν?ους διαφ?ρων κοινωνικ?ν και οικονομικ?ν τ?ξεων. Πολλ? απ? τα ον?ματα που αναφ?ρονται ε?ναι ον?ματα πραγματικ?ν ανθρ?πων. Υπ?ρχουν αναφορ?ς σε πολιτικο?ς, σε μ?λη της Γιακο?ζα αλλ? και ακροδεξ?ν οργαν?σεων, σε επιχειρηματ?ες, σε πανεπιστημιακο?ς κ.α. Οι ιστορ?ες αυτ?ς μας δ?νουν μια ?λλη εικ?να της Ιαπων?ας, που απ?χει αρκετ? απ? αυτ?ν που γνωρ?ζουμε ? νομ?ζουμε ?τι γνωρ?ζουμε, της Ιαπων?ας της τ?ξης, της αφοσ?ωσης στους ηθικο?ς καν?νες και τους ν?μους, της παρ?νοιας της πολ?ωρης και αδι?κοπης εργασ?ας. Ουσιαστικ? οι ιστορ?ες αυτ?ς μας δε?χνουν τον υπ?κοσμο, τα στεν? και βρ?μικα σοκ?κια, τις παρ?νομες δοσοληψ?ες, την σκοτειν? πλευρ? του πλο?σιου Τ?κιου.

Η γραφ? ε?ναι, κατ? την γν?μη μου, εξαιρετικ?. Ο Γκρ?νφελντ περιγρ?φει τα π?ντα -τους ανθρ?πους, τα σκηνικ?, τα γεγον?τα, τις σκ?ψεις- με ιδια?τερο ρεαλισμ?, χωρ?ς φτιασ?δια και ωραιοποι?σεις. Καταφ?ρνει το κε?μενο να ε?ναι ζωνταν? και γλαφυρ?, ευκολοδι?βαστο και ευχ?ριστο. Υπ?ρχουν κουλ?ς καταστ?σεις, απ?θανοι δι?λογοι, αρκετ? χιο?μορ. Μπορε? να εστ?ασε σε ν?ους με δ?σκολη ζω?, ?μως δεν υπ?ρχει κατ?φεια, η ατμ?σφαιρα δεν γ?νεται βαρι?;, η αισιοδοξ?α δεν ε?ναι απο?σα. Επ?σης, προσωπικ?, δ?θηκα ακ?μα και με κ?ποιους απ? τους ν?ους που "γ?ρισα" στο βιβλ?ο αυτ?. Η αλ?θεια ε?ναι ?τι συμπ?θησα τους περισσ?τερους, αν και οι περισσ?τεροι μ?λλον δεν θα ?θελα να ?ταν φ?λοι μου, ο?τε καν γνωστο? μου, με τα μπλεξ?ματα που ε?χαν. Αλλ? ενδιαφ?ρθηκα γ?αυτο?ς, ?θελα να μ?θω περισσ?τερα. Ειλικριν?, δεν θα ε?χα καν?να πρ?βλημα το βιβλ?ο να ?ταν διπλ?σιο ? και τριπλ?σιο σε μ?γεθος, να μ?θαινα περισσ?τερα γ?αυτο?ς ? και για ?λλους ν?ους, να ?βλεπα περισσ?τερα πρ?γματα γ?ρω απ? τις δι?φορες υποκουλτο?ρες και τον υπ?κοσμο του Τ?κιο.

Το βιβλ?ο αποτελε? ?να κρ?μα πεζογραφ?ας, δημοσιογραφικ? ρεπορτ?ς και κοινωνιολογικ?ς ?ρευνας, και ε?ναι εξαιρετικ? ενδιαφ?ρον και καλογραμμ?νο. Απ? τον πρ?λογο κατ?λαβα ?τι θα δι?βαζα κ?τι πολ? καλ? και η συν?χεια με επιβεβα?ωσε πανηγυρικ?. Μπορε? και να μην ε?ναι τ?λειο, αν το δει κανε?ς αντικειμενικ?, το θ?μα ?μως ε?ναι ?τι με συν?ρπαση ο τρ?πος που ο συγγραφ?ας περι?γραφε τους ν?ους, τα σκηνικ?, τις δι?φορες καταστ?σεις. Μου θ?μισε κ?πως τον τρομερ? και μοναδικ? Χ?ντερ Σ. Τ?μσον. Και ?τσι κατ?λαβα ?τι αυτο? του ε?δους τα αληθιν? χρονικ?, που αποτελο?ν δημοσιογραφικ? ρεπορτ?ς αλλ? μοι?ζουν με μυθιστορ?ματα/συλλογ?ς

διηγημ?των, ε?ναι απ?λυτα του γο?στου μου. Αλλ? στα ελληνικ? δεν κυκλοφορο?ν και πολλ? τ?τοια, ειδικ? γ?ρω απ? την Ιαπων?α. Τι να κ?νουμε! Τουλ?χιστον το συγκεκριμ?νο βιβλ?ο μεταφρ?στηκε και ?τσι ε?χα την ευκαιρ?α να το διαβ?σω και, πραγματικ?, να το απολα?σω.

Samuel Rhodes says

Fun and quick read. Some of the information is probably a bit dated – take with a grain of salt if using as a reference. Some interesting insights, but if you're already somewhat familiar with Japanese subcultures you might not find too much that's new to you.

Adrienne says

On the one hand, it was interesting and kept me reading. On the other, the sensationalism and the numerous little "wrong" bits, whether due to editing or author error or both, made me read this entire thing while at the same time giving it a massive side-eye. It should definitely be read with a boulder-sized grain of salt, and an awareness of the intended audience.

I definitely would not recommend it to anyone who doesn't know anything about Japan, but I fear that IS the intended audience.

Rick says

For those who think of Japan as wholly tradition-bound, pristine and conformist, this book paints a very different picture. Through chapter-long vignettes, each following a different person for a brief time, it captures the disaffected, alienated and, in some cases criminal, youth of Japan. Written in the early 90s, the book is interesting in that it likely was chronicling the front end of a problem that still exists today -- young Japanese who feel out of touch with the expectations of the society into which they were born and who are either searching for a different way to define themselves and structure their lives or have no hope or clue as to how to do so. Because the people it followed were all in their late teens to mid-20s at the time, I can't help but wish for a sequel in which we learn what they are doing today, nearly 20 years later. Have they been assimilated into the dominant culture? Have they helped change the dominant culture? Or are they still living on the fringe of the dominant culture?

Some of the portraits in this book were more interesting than others. And although the book is not long, I still found myself wishing it had been more tightly edited. For the most part, however, it held my attention and I enjoyed the window it provided into a world of which many of us in the west are unaware.

Wes Freeman says

Alternately compelling and sloppy, but always lurid, Speed Tribes' original sub-title was something like The Children of The Bubble. It was meant to chart young Japan after the economic bubble of the 1980s popped and left their parents wondering why they weren't rich anymore. It does that, I guess, never having been to

Japan. Greenfeld, who is half-Japanese, is seriously about telling you how messed up Japan is and he's always searching for that borderline between the absurd and the pathological, but it's a moving target. He seems unsure of how to present some of the characters he meets (and how did he meet them anyway? Are they real? Does it matter?) and he plainly feels like an outsider in their world. The funniest moments in the book come from his frustration. You can laugh with him, but you'll taste his bile.

Lisa says

Compelling copy about underground subcultures, crime and disaffected youths in late 80s-early 90s Japan, in a series of vignettes following a person each. To me, this is the non-fiction version of Ikebukuro West Gate Park by Ishida Ira and its TV adaptation, down to the very subjects and topics covered.

The way the book itself is constructed is very cool: it starts at the top of the food chain, with a yakuza entrepreneur, moves on to the head of a biker gang - yakuza recruitment ground -, then to the teenage motorcycle thieves who sell bike parts to the gangs, and so on and so forth - each vignette is in that way connected to the one before.

The downside is that not all vignettes are of equal quality - some are much, much better than others. I especially liked the Money-Drinkers (about yakuza), the Perfect Tuna (the porn industry), the Early Breakfast Club (bored middle-class young women), Homestay (you'll see) and the Otaku - these were particularly well-written, with intriguing narratives and a good dose of caustic humour. Other chapters can be sluggishly slow, or dump a lot of numeric information on you about, say, the cost of specific car parts. At times the writing is clumsy and doesn't flow. It's a bit hit and miss.

I will say this though - this book has the merit of covering its topics in a way that avoids being voyeuristic and judgemental, and instead gives a true voice to its subjects. Take note, VICE!

Philipp says

A collection of (newspaper) articles from the author on various aspects of Japanese society that usually are ignored by the mainstream - motorcycle gangs (bosozoku, that's where the title comes from - speed tribes), small time youth criminals, low-ranking Yakuza, independent drug dealers, party girls, foreign hostess girls, criminal far right nationalists (Neonazis?), apathetic elite university students, etc. There's an undercurrent of anger in some of those articles, especially the one on uni students - the cult around Tokyo University, the number one elite university, is criticized as having this ridiculously hard rote-learning entrance exam, after which every student is basically given a pass for the rest of the degree. I can't comment on the truth of that - the example question on specific landmarks and their size in the Netherlands certainly is ridiculous and requires pure rote learning, but online I can only find their mathematics exam which looks 'normal'.

Since the book is a bit old it works better as a time document of Japan shortly after the bubble popped. Some of the subcultures described have mostly disappeared, or greatly lost in importance. I think *bodycon* is completely gone, bosozoku are mostly gone too (2011 source), other areas like hostess bars are still going strong (I've once been invited to one, it's a strange place), and the Nazis are still driving around with their annoying speaker cars (and are now getting stronger due to Abe's program of strengthening Japan's military and changing the constitution towards what they've always clamored for).

The target of these articles is clearly a Western reader unfamiliar with Japan since these articles mostly

appeared first in Western newspapers, so people should have no problems reading these. The seediness of the majority of these articles should satisfy people who are into authors such as Ryu Murakami (*not* Haruki), most of Murakami's books are set in the same milieu as Greenfeld's articles.

P.S.: The bosozoku gang Black Emperor appears shortly - there is a documentary from the 70s on that gang with a name that, to post-rock fans, sounds very familiar: *Godspeed You! Black Emperor*.

Rand says

Creative Non Fiction should be recognized as a genre by the US Library of Congress. Calling this book a collection of "case studies" denigrates the work of historians and sociology. That being said, this book is entertaining, some of the pieces moreso than others.

I wanted it to be Fruits in prose but it's not. At least not entirely. The story of the Map Maker and the one about Choco Bon Bon make the book worth picking up (for anyone interested in reading about smuggling and porn, respectively).

The last one on otaku is interesting but seems to make some generalizations about that subculture. Otaku Spaces is probably a better representation of that.

Ashley says

This was very interesting. I loved seeing this side of Japan. The writing style was also very captivating. Greenfeld did a fantastic job creating the setting and building up these real characters. This book is more like journalistic approach but it reads like fiction. I'm also curious to know if things are still very similar ten years later. It's a book I think anyone should read if you're at all interested in Japan.

Corto says

Interesting series of vignettes about people at the margins of Japanese society. Sometimes this "names of been changed" style of journalism felt false, but on the whole it was an interesting glimpse into Japanese sub-cultures on the cusp of the 21st century. Of particular interest was the final passage on the "otaku", and their experience with the burgeoning technology of the internet. It seems quaint in retrospect. Also interesting were the young Nationalist (if you've read any Yukio Mishima, it will make a striking contrast between this young man and the protagonist of "Runaway Horses"), the Bosozoku, and other petty Yakuza. The portrait of the young 20-something "body-con" girl was well written, as a woman struggling against the strict social structure of her culture. In the hands of a gifted film director, this would've been a great Japanese version of "Trainspotting". Quite a missed opportunity there.

Stephen Douglas Rowland says

A very interesting (if dated) book, but I suspect many events and some behavior chronicled were

manufactured or complete fabrication.

S. says

suggestively-linked vignettes that confront the question, is it innocent Anglo-Saxon Westerners being seduced by the corrupt Japan or innocent sober Japanese being seduced by the drug-addled foreigner? meditation on appearances vs. reality, living in the moment vs. planning for the future, the potential of the individual vs. the cohesion of the group. Greenfeld "dog-whistles" or "winks at the Japan insider" with little twists of phrase, demonstrating an insider's knowledge of what the people know and what the people will never get (he appeals to the broad audience with one layer of story, but for the language-speaker or those familiar with the culture, he winks knowledge of what is going on). flows his stories in such a fashion as to comment one on the other.

the Japan writer is faced with the existential dilemma: do I write about sumo wrestlers, geisha girls and Mt. Fuji and attract a mass audience (viz., presenting "tourist's eye view of Japan") or do I write about the gritty authenticity of the glue-sniffing streets and be unknown? only the very best, such as as Greenfeld, manage to present everything all at once, such that it's uncertain where the drugs are talking and where the social realities. author plays on authorial uncertainty/narrative unreliability, and even makes his next book about 'memoirist whose made-up memoirs are about to be uncovered.'

[Tats] wanted to tell them all about the Shonan Run, about the tear gas and methamphetamine and newspaper reports...and--he suddenly remembered Yamada, riding out of the rising sun on his motorcycle, and shivered. He didn't want to think about Yamada. He didn't want to think about the pistol. Instead, he yawned as some pimple-faced punk talked at length about his new Yoshimura header pipes.

There is no mention of "the American reporter" attending this gathering of motorcycle riders. How would Greenfeld know second-by-second exactly what the subject of his sociological research is thinking, in the fifteenth hour of a three day rave, what the subject didn't want to think about, and then down to the very split-second, his yawn? This is literary writing rather than non-fiction research. (see 'Million Tiny Pieces,' 'My Buddy Reagen' etc etc etc). but we forgive Greenfeld's embellishments for moments like this:

He looked her over. 'Oh fvck it, who cares. Hey do you want a trip?"

She didn't understand.

"A trip, some Ecstasy."

She knew that word. She had heard about this wonderful drug called Ecstasy that was supposed to make you feel happy or joyful. She scanned the room. So that's what everyone was doing.

[...]

He also told her he was from somewhere called South Yarra in Melbourne. Handsome,

charming, and he would be back in Australia in a few months. Australia with its Statue of Liberty holding up a flashlight.

Is this corrupt West preying on innocent Japan? Or terminally decadent Japan completely out-sophisticating yabbo West? Or supersophisticate Greenfeld, simultaneous ultimate insider and ultimate outsider conning us all? Only demographics in the end have answered these questions, as Japan's average age climbed last year to 44, and the population shrunk 1.7% (more if illegal Chinese immigration wasn't counted)...

The south entrance of Ueno Park was a wide, granite stairwell whose sweep and epic scale was similar to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. But the grandstairway had lately come to resemble a Middle Eastern bazaar. At open-air stalls mustachioed Iranians grilled shish kebabs and round flat, floury loaves of bread.

And then this quote finally contains the third important usefulness of the work, the insight into how things were in 1988-1995 (time period of the work). Certain authors such as Shusaku Endo comment on what a street scene was like at what particular year, and in Tokyo, the scenes change a bit from decade to decade, if seemingly in patternless ways. (Today Ueno Park is back to Japanese blue-plastic tarp homeless. No more Iranians. Roppongi has gotten far more African than ten years ago.)

brilliant work 5/5 contains deeper truth even if some scenes seem to delve far too knowingly into thought of strangers.

remaining thoughts: focuses on youth right at moment when Japan gets middle-aged/elderly; "magazine" style influence of magazine-article writer, plays a bit with factual truth for interesting content.

(as other GR reviewer notes, would be fascinating to learn what happened to various subjects of vignettes 10 years out.)

a good read 5/5

(view spoiler)

related books: Jake Adelstein researches Yakuza as crime reporter for the Daily Yomiuri; Tom Wolfe rides with the Hells' Angels and writes a book.

(view spoiler)

differs from Shutting out the Sun & other / modern preoccupation with cults / religions / psychodisorders. (Greenfeld's book 1994; Aum Shinrikyo attacks 1995; 9/11 of course 2001). portrait of a Japan right before all the extreme signs of decay set in; Grenfeld has identified the subcultures / superficial consumers / low-levels gangsters as objects of interest, which beats the 'green tea and flower arranging' crowd of japan-culture self-delusionists.

overall, Speed Tribes is an important, well-researched academic work, a glossy magazine write-up of tokyo street life, an insider's view of a reclusive culture, and a portrait of self-destruction on the verge. fascinating and authentic look at early 90s Japan, right as the bubble burst and before it became evident that the crash was permanent.

what is amazing is how little Japan has changed on the inside in twenty years rather than how much

PICTURE TIME...

chapter I. Izumi has a BMW and a Nissan Sylvia

Suzuki GSX-R 750s, similar to the 400 driven by Tats in Chapter II; the 750s stolen in chapter III "a biking enthusiast's bike, not a delivery boy's or student's"

"Choco Bon-Bon" dreams of a Karmann Ghia

[image error]

"Bodicon" style

the iconic Yasuda auditorium, symbol of Todai

Hotei Tomoyasu guitarist for Complexx Boowy

Zi:Kill, chapter VIII; before their almost break-up

silver-gray Toyota Hilux Surf

Chisato Moritaka

Bill Conrad says

Karl Taro gave the reader a glimpse of the Japanese youth in a fascinating way. He crafted several stories to highlight the different aspects of Japan's new youth. This made for an interesting read that opened me up to a fascinating world. There was a lot that I did not know about Japan and what it was like to grow up there. Speed Tribes stands as a unique book that highlights an important topic. It also highlighted how many of the Japanese youth fall through the cracks of a well-balanced society. This is a great book that I really enjoyed.
