



The Man Without Talent

by Yoshiharu Tsuge, translated from Japanese and with an essay by Ryan Holmberg. New York Review Books, January 2020. 240 p. ill. ISBN: 9781681374437 (paperback), \$24.95.

Stephanie Kays, Fine Arts Librarian and liaison to Women's & Gender Studies and East Asian Studies, Denison University, Granville, Ohio.

Reviewed July 9, 2021

Initially serialized in *Comic Baku* from 1985-1986, *The Man Without Talent* is a semi-autobiographical collection of stories by Japanese manga artist Yoshiharu Tsuge. These stories fall within the "I-novel" genre, a popular Japanese literary genre generally described as confessional in nature, where much of the

narrative aligns closely with the author's life and internal reflections. Other themes within the genre engage struggles with poverty and reflections of self-worth, interactions with peers and the opposite sex, and relationships with family, all of which are explored in this book. Tsuge's delicate skill is rendering these relationships, especially those with his family, as harsh but relatable and oddly tender.

Like Tsuge himself, the protagonist in *The Man Without Talent*, Sukezo Sukegawa, is a professional comic artist whose dwindling job opportunities fail to pay the bills. In frustration and dejection, he abandons cartooning altogether and embarks on a series of unconventional and even lower paying jobs. He works as a used camera dealer, a ferryman, and finally a stone collector who tries to sell unremarkable stones he finds in the Tama River in his hometown of Chōfu, just outside central Tokyo. Throughout these stories, Sukezo aims to disappear from society, from his daily pressures and responsibilities, and perhaps most of all from himself. All six chapters explore this concept in philosophical, and oftentimes dreamlike sequences, interspersed with moments of absurd comic relief.

Tsuge's black & white linework is clean and expressive. Great care and detail are shown in his depictions of back alley antique stores, architectural dwellings, and mountainous landscapes, making the occasional deep shadow or blacked out silhouette that much more poignant. Part of the remarkable New York Review of Books comics line, *The Man Without Talent* is Tsuge's first book to be translated for English readers and maintains the original right to left orientation of the manga. Translator Ryan Holmberg provides an extensive contextual essay on Tsuge's life that notably deepens any engagement of the stories. This book has some minor sexual content and therefore may be more suitable for adult comics collections in public and academic libraries. A must for libraries collecting in manga and/or east asian literature.