

“Real human dramas are in the court.” Books describing court proceedings and the court itself are selling like hot cakes. Courtroom-watch manias and reportage writers are writing about their experience in watching court proceedings in a casual tone, whetting the appetite of the general public to satisfy their curiosity about the real faces of defendants, judges and prosecutors.

When this writer was a court reporter 20 years ago, the Japanese court was a closed world, consisting of only judges, prosecutors and attorneys. Despite the authorities’ furious campaign to publicize the “citizen judge” system, in which ordinary citizens are to take part in the judicial proceedings, ahead of its introduction, the public is not showing much interest in it. On the other hand, a boom in courtroom-watching is quietly spreading, and it has nothing to do with the government’s force-feeding.

“*Judges’ Remarks Which Make You Split Your Sides*,” authored by Nagamine Masaki, has become a bestseller, selling more than 200,000 copies. The author, who took and failed the bar examination seven times, collected interesting remarks of judges in the court, added his own comments and compiled them into a book.



Illustration: Kato Susumu

Courtroom-Watching: A Quiet Boom

By Matsunaga Tsutomu

“I recommend that you appeal and ask for a ruling by another judge” (a remark by a presiding judge after sentencing a female defendant to death for a robbery-murder). “I mean it is a serious matter for the state to hand down a death penalty although it is simple for a person to kill another. I am afraid this is not very convincing to you, but this is the truth” (a remark by another presiding judge in the courtroom to the family of a victim after he rejected a prosecution-demanded death penalty and sentenced the defendant to imprisonment for an indefinite period).

Contrary to what its title suggests, the book’s contents are very serious. It introduces honest and anguished words of the judges who have chosen the death penalty or indefinite imprisonment.

“When I was in junior high school, I was bullied, too. Nobody spoke to me, and it was very hard for me. I am sure it is tough for you too, but discipline yourself well and make a new life for yourself.” (These were the words of a presiding judge to a defendant who had had problems in human relations and committed a crime out of frustration.)

Kitao Toro writes a series of courtroom-watch books, such as “*Your Honor, How About Four Years In Prison?*” The writer hops from one courtroom to another, covering both criminal and civil cases. There are “unexpected gems” in small cases, he says.

For example, when the boss of a criminal gang, who had been

sentenced to 15 years in prison, was about to be removed from the courtroom in handcuffs, some 50 of his underlings in the seats for the public stood up in unison, stood straight and saluted him: “Boss, keep your spirit up!” Kitao writes tales of courtroom dramas one after another.

The regular courtroom-watchers are not just “spectators.” According to Kitao, defendants who remember seeing such regulars in the seats for the public mistake them for people who have something to do with their victims and apologize to them. Sometimes, judges speak to them in a cafeteria in the basement of a courthouse.

The “Kasumikko Club,” a group of female courtroom-watchers, puts its reports from courtroom-watching on the Internet and also publishes collections of such reports. On the Internet there are not a few notes from fans of courtroom-watching.

What attracts the public to courtroom-watching is the sincere feelings and humor that are found in the details of the world of law. It is a world where formalities and procedures are all important and which is ruled by the articles of law. The courtroom-watch books and Websites depict the part of the exercise of law that was not present in press reporting of trials or in courtroom nonfiction, and they have lowered the threshold of the courthouse. The fact that it is “being watched” may put fresh air into the judicial system. **JS**

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