

# Bookshelf

## The Best of Japan

Published by Kodansha Ltd.  
1987, Tokyo  
288 pages; ¥4,800

More than 250 products and services judged worthy of the 1986 Nikkei Award for Excellence are profiled in this large-format book featuring a balance of industry surveys, product information and fine color photographs. Even a brief glance through the pages of the book's various sections gives the casual reader a good idea of the virtues of artistic refinement, practicality, function and sensibility found in contemporary Japanese product design.



The Nikkei Award (made by the leading Japanese economic publishing group Nihon Keizai Shimbun Inc.) is based on product originality, design, effective use of high technology, success in the market, cost performance and impact on society. Nikkei journalists screen the thousands of new products they cover during the year and a list is presented to a jury of nine distinguished panelists with academic and industrial backgrounds.

Ten different categories of products and services are covered, including industrial and consumer materials; machinery; information and communications equipment; financial, insurance and entertainment services; and cars, watches, home appliances and cameras. Prior to the unveiling of the award-winning products in each category, a summary of recent trends in the category is presented.

Most of these summaries of trends are very well-written and informative.

In his introductory comments, Takashi Mukaibo, professor emeritus of the University of Tokyo, points out that when carbon fibers were introduced U.S. engineers immediately looked for military and aerospace applications whereas their Japanese counterparts set about making lightweight golf clubs and tennis rackets of the new material. Mukaibo stresses the need for Japanese companies to address the commercial marketplace rather than big-ticket government-funded contracts. This need to appeal to hard-to-please customers drives Japanese companies to shorten the lives of products and introduce new and upgraded products on a brisk schedule.

Most of the products surveyed in this book are imaginative and innovative. A few examples are a combined compact disk and laser disk player from Pioneer Electronic Corp. and self-heating canned sake from Toyo Jozo Co. Other products represent the very latest in high technology, such as Fujitsu Ltd.'s high-electron-mobility transistor (HEMT); NEC Corp.'s 32-bit microprocessor (in its V-series); and Mitsubishi Electric Corp.'s artificial-intelligence workstation, called MELCOM PSI, which was developed as part of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry's fifth-generation computer project. Some of the most impressive award-winning products are those that break new barriers in cost-effectiveness.

A few years ago the development of an inexpensive copier for home use seemed unlikely. But Canon Inc. was able to develop such a small and handy copier priced under ¥100,000 (about \$690 at the rate of ¥145/\$). A few of the new products and services seem ingeniously simple, including Nippon Rent-A-Car Service's "Freeroad" showroom which displays the various types of cars available for rent.

An imaginative combination product-and-service is Hotel Nikko Osaka's overnight stay program which involves instruction in the use of word processors.

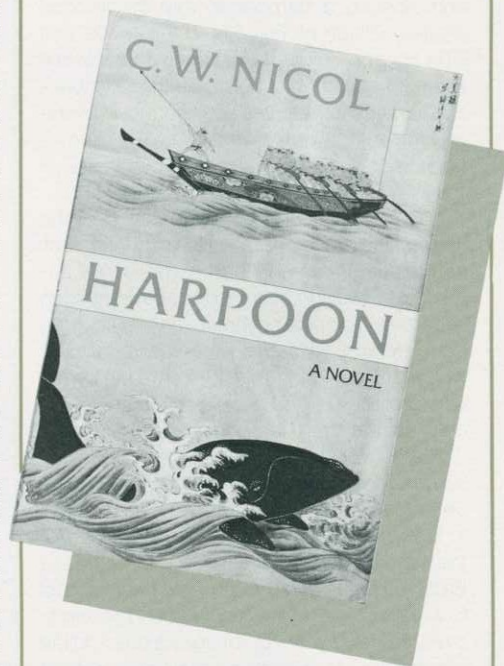
Both the Ark Hills complex in Tokyo and the Suntory Hall, located within the new complex, were recipients of 1986 awards. The Ark Hills complex (located between Akasaka, Roppongi and Kamiyacho subway stations) was recognized for its progressive allocation of space for business, residential, hotel accommodations and other uses.

One of the most striking points of the book is the notion that Japanese companies are facing increasingly formidable competition for market share at home. Firms must constantly offer innovative products to keep up with their competitors, and subtle differences in design are often the key to attracting a wider range of consumers. The book will appeal to a variety of readers ranging from artists to advertisers, and from businessmen to specialists involved in R&D of new products.

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## Harpoon

By C. W. Nicol  
Published by André Deutsch Limited  
1987, London  
506 pages; £11.95



This book by Canadian-born C.W. Nicol has been translated into five languages, Japanese among them.

The main reason that this adventure novel has attracted such attention is that it deals with whaling—and the International Whaling Commission has mandated an end to commercial whaling as of 1986. Even the taking of Antarctic whales for scientific research purposes as specifically approved under the 1946 International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling has had to be stopped in 1987 in the face of the American Magnuson-Packwood Act designed to deny any nation that continues whaling access to fishery resources within the United States' 200 nautical mile economic zone. Whale meat has been an important source of animal protein for Japanese since the 8th century; and now it has disappeared from the Japanese table forever. It is not so much that the IWC and the antiwhaling groups have ignored this centuries-old tradition—a tradition that is immortalized in the 8th-century *Manyoshu* anthology—as that they never even understood these customs well enough to ignore them.

Thus this book by Nicol—who lives in Japan and is well-known here for his understanding and affection for Japanese ways—has been welcomed by many Japanese as a stout defense of whaling by a Euro-American.

Even putting aside the satisfaction of finding someone who supports Japan on the whaling issue and judging *Harpoon* in comparison with other Japanese novels in this same historical-fiction genre, this book is still well worth reading. Just as there is fierce technological