

A 15-year-old schoolgirl stunned Japan's literary world by winning the 42nd "Bungei Prize" for up-and-coming writers. Her feat followed that of 19 and 20-year-old girls who won the Akutagawa Prize, one of the most coveted literary prizes in Japan, in 2003.

Bungei Prize Is Springboard to Literary Success

The "Bungei Prize" is offered annually by Kawade Shobo Shinsha Publishers, which issues the quarterly literary magazine *Bungei*. Many of the previous winners have gone on to become popular writers, including novelist-turned-politician Tanaka Yasuo (the current governor of Nagano Prefecture), and bestselling author Yamada Amy.



Minami Natsu, "Heisei Machine Guns," Kawade Shobo Shinsha Publishers

This time, Minami Natsu became the youngest ever recipient of the prize for her work, *Heisei Machine Guns*.

Winning the prize does not by any means guarantee a successful future. A look at the history of the Bungei Prize shows that winners who disappeared from the literary scene outnumber those who became popular writers. It may be that some of those who faded away peaked as writers when they became prize winners after many years of literary training but were unable to produce impressive works after their initial success. 🌀

Literary Prizes in Japan

There are a large number of literary prizes in Japan. Prizes given to novels alone number around a hundred. (In addition, there are prizes given only for *tanka* and *haiku* poetry as well as other traditional literary works.) As with the Bungei Prize, literary prizes in Japan are mostly sponsored by major publishing houses for the purpose of finding promising new writers. Some prestigious literary prizes, such as the Akutagawa Prize, named after the famous writer Akutagawa Ryunosuke (1892-1927), are given to works chosen from those already carried in magazines or published in books. In addition, some local authorities sponsor literary prizes named after famous local writers.

In the past, many writers in Japan began their literary careers after many years of apprenticeship under famous writers, though there were several exceptions like Natsume Soseki (1867-1916, who was a university lecturer), and Mori Ogai (1862-1922, who was an army surgeon). Recently, however, there have been many cases of young unknown writers stealing the show by winning literary prizes. Such a phenomena is not necessary unthinkable but quite new. Does it show that Japan's literary world has been modernized?

Photo: Kyodo News



Minami Natsu (right) at the 42nd Bungei Prize ceremony

Teenage Girl Wins Literary Prize for Rookie Writers

– Prize Award Winners' Ages Dropping in Japan –

By Kurosawa Tsuneo

Writers' Age

The general public may view young – or "childlike" might be better to describe a school age girl – prize winners like Minami Natsu as more talented than writers who win prizes in their 20s or 30s. However, as a Japanese proverb says that a child prodigy could become an ordinary person when he or she reaches their 20s, and some literary critics view Minami as having written a good work for her age just by chance. It is hoped that Minami will prove she is not a flash in the pan.

The teenage winner of the Bungei Prize stirred up a media frenzy. But what meaning does age have for writers? Françoise Sagan shocked the world when she wrote *Bonjour Tristesse* at the age of 18. Raymond Radiguet wrote *Le Diable au Corps* and *Le Bal du Comte d'Orgel* before he was 20. Arthur Rimbaud was also in his teens when he wrote *Une Saison en Enfer*.

Did the mass media fall into a bad habit of making too much fuss over age? The media should focus on the contents and quality of prize winners' works, and not on their age. JS

Kurosawa Tsuneo is the Chief Editor of the Cultural News Section of Kyodo News.