

The Witch of the Mountain, Boundary-less Yamamba

[Claire Ning Fang](#) 8:59 pm, Sep 23, 2021

Staff Reporter

The title of this marvelous and intriguing anthology, “Yamamba: In Search of the Japanese Mountain Witch,” edited by Rebecca Copeland and Linda C. Ehrlich, hints at the sheer scope and breadth of its content. Both prose and poetry (both translated from English to Japanese, and from Japanese to English) are on offer in this thorough exploration of the yamamba’s travels, from the Noh theater to the Blue Ridge Mountains. Voices from across the oceans and across disciplines (actors, professors and poets) intermingle and speak to each other through a variety of mediums such as interviews and commentary. The essays are fascinating, accessible and deeply informative, and the short stories build on each other to paint a wonderfully multifaceted picture of the yamamba: “like the natural stronghold that contains her — rocky ridges and soft glens — she is alluring, nurturing, dangerous, vulnerable.”

Our introduction, “Locating the Yamamba” by Noriko T. Reider, defines the yamamba and highlights her fundamental ambiguity (“One half of the yamamba’s genealogy goes back to goddesses, and the other half to *oni*.” *Oni* are analogous to demons, can change gender and form, and sometimes attack humans). Once equipped to understand what role the yamamba played (and still plays) in cultural imagination, readers can dive into “Yamamba on the Noh Stage,” an interview conducted by Ann Sherif with Uzawa Hisa and her daughter Uzawa Hikaru, performers of the Noh play “Yamamba,” where a young dancer meets a real yamamba. Highly illuminating, the conversation yields insights on the Buddhist and philosophical viewpoint on the yamamba, and the unique qualities of performing a play about performance itself, about “performing Yamamba *for* Yamamba.” The final work in this anthology is also an interview: “Dancing the Yamamba: With Yokoshi Yasuko.” It serves as a fine conclusion and a response to the earlier interview, bringing in the voice of a contemporary dance artist performing in the West. The anthology ends by emphasizing the transgressive role of the yamamba and highlighting how the yamamba figure continues to inspire artists today.

Three short stories in this anthology focus on encountering the yamamba’s terrible, enigmatic or revealing smile. Two of those three center around a chance confrontation with the yamamba. “Blue Ridge Yamamba” by Rebecca Copeland and “An Encounter in Aokigahara” by David Holloway explore how the originally Japanese yamamba interacts with individuals outside of Japanese culture. Finally, “The Smile of the Mountain Witch” by Oba Minako brings in the yamamba’s own perspective — a particular yamamba raised in human civilization, who lives and dies among humans. Much like how the second interview responds to the first, these stories also are engaging in a conversation with each other about the yamamba. Each has a unique perspective; “Blue Ridge Yamamba” depicts how the yamamba emancipates a woman trapped in an unfulfilling marriage, stressing the gender-transcendent nature of the yamamba. “An Encounter in Aokigahara” has the suicidal protagonist, K, take pity on the seemingly old and

frail figure of the yamamba and from that pity regain the will to live, only to be attacked by her as she ceases to cry for help. And “The Smile of the Mountain Witch” illustrates the childhood of a yamamba born into the village, born into a gender-restrictive role but still with powers beyond that of an ordinary human woman.

“Yamamba’s Mountains”, a poem by Linda C. Ehrlich, reveals the core intention of the entire anthology itself: to find the yamamba, even though the yamamba is inherently nomadic.

“What is beyond understanding

must be understood.

What is understood

must never be forgotten.”

The yamamba’s body is not a human body, and does not follow the laws that govern human bodies. Still, artists and authors and actors attempt to capture the movements of the yamamba, to describe the yamamba in ways we can understand, even if that understanding is necessarily limited.

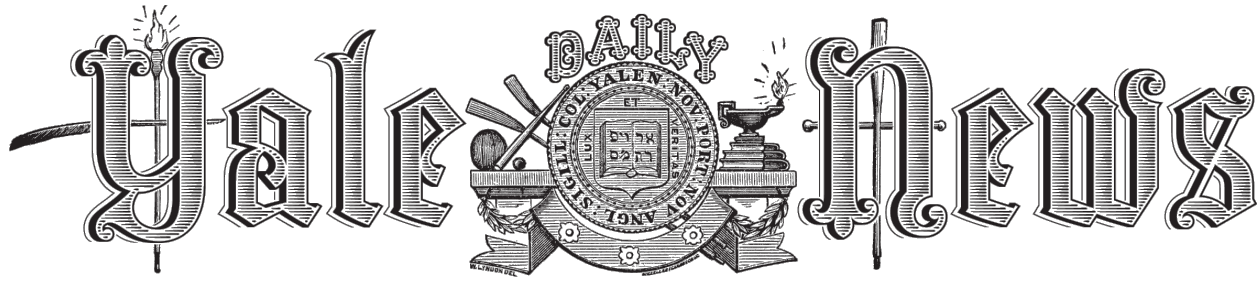
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