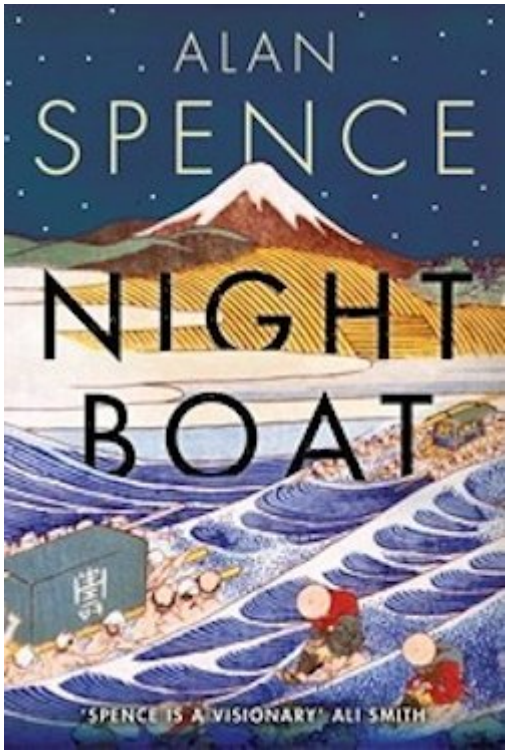
# My Japan

## By Alan Spence

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So how did all of this come about? Why the fascination with Japan?

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Fast-forward forty-odd years, and I found myself physically in Japan, practically in the shadow of Mount Fuji. I was in the small town of Hara, near Numazu — one of Hokusai's Views of Mount Fuji is from almost this exact spot. (It's almost unchanged, apart from the industrial sprawl in the foreground!) I was visiting the small temple of Zuisenji, founded by Zen master Hakuin in the eighteenth century. I was researching my novel *Night Boat*, based on Hakuin's life, and I felt I had to visit the temple, feel its atmosphere. I sat in front of a little carving of

Hakuin — one I'd heard described as ferocious (dark wood but with the eyes white — staring, intense). But in addition to that intensity, I felt an overwhelming sense of stillness and peace, a feeling of being blessed, of coming home.

In between these two experiences I had visited Japan half a dozen times, usually with my teacher Sri Chinmoy. His background was actually Hindu — a different tradition entirely — but he loved Japan and its culture. So each visit was a kind of pilgrimage, a spiritual journey. We visited Tokyo and Kyoto, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Fukuoka and the island of Okinawa. One place we went to on every trip was Kamakura, home of the Daibutsu, the great bronze statue of the Buddha, which Sri Chinmoy said was the embodiment of compassion:

*kamakura buddha*
*my back straightens*
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I've been writing haiku since 1968, and not surprisingly, I've written a few on each trip to Japan. I include a few of them throughout this piece as these little moments, distilled to an essence, best sum up what I feel about the place:

*jetlagged in japan —*
*forgetting, remembering*
*who I am*

*the zen garden*
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And it's the spiritual qualities of Japan that draw me back — that spareness, awareness of beauty, the exquisite aesthetic sense, clarity of insight expressed in a three-line poem, a briskly-executed brush drawing, a richly satisfying piece of pottery. It's a grain, a texture. It's there in the films of Kurosawa and Ozu, a heightened sense of being in the moment, and the transience of that moment, its fleetingness, impermanence.

So far, so zen. But of course there are many aspects to Japan, richly complex in its

modernity — manga and anime, the dazzling neon Bladerunner cyberdream of Shinjuku — and there is the sheer brutalism displayed in a kind of anti-environmentalism, destroying areas of natural beauty, paving paradise, oblivious. That industrial sprawl I mentioned, at the foot of Fuji, runs the length of the country, linking one major city with the next. Alex Kerr, in his wonderful study *Lost Japan*, bemoans the loss (with the insight and depth of one who has lived in the country for almost fifty years, and seen the inexorable pace of the changes): 'If you think it's not there, it is. If you think it's there, it isn't.' And remarkably, he ends on an entirely positive note, observing that Japan is  moving into yet another phase of reinvention, its writers and artists engendering a palpable sense of excitement.

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Two more haiku, written on my last trip:

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This too, this too.

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Deep bow.

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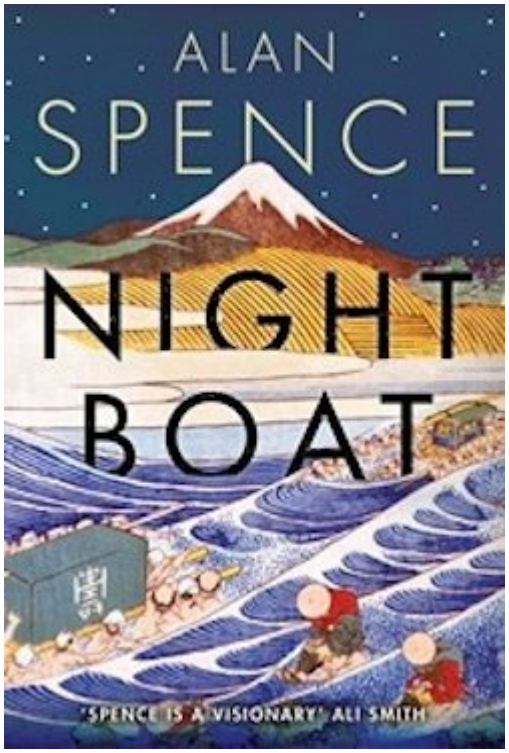


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*(c) The Bottle Imp*