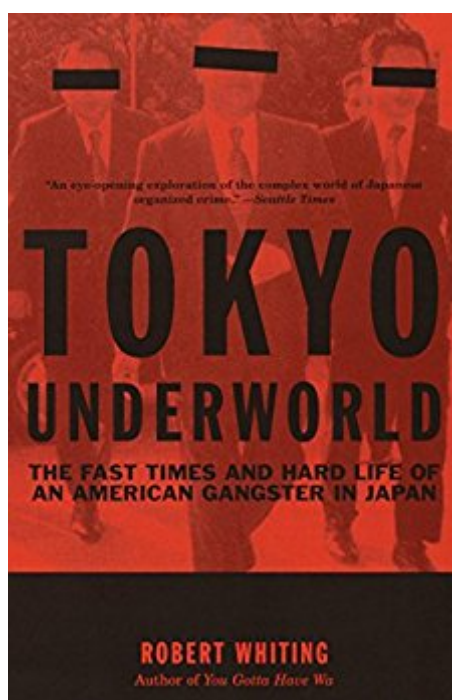


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Tokyo Underworld: The Fast Times And Hard Life Of An American Gangster In Japan (Vintage Departures)



Synopsis

A riveting account of the role of Americans in the evolution of the Tokyo underworld in the years since 1945. In the ashes of postwar Japan lay a gold mine for certain opportunistic, expatriate Americans. Addicted to the volatile energy of Tokyo's freewheeling underworld, they formed ever-shifting but ever-profitable alliances with warring Japanese and Korean gangsters. At the center of this world was Nick Zappetti, an ex-marine from New York City who arrived in Tokyo in 1945, and whose restaurant soon became the rage throughout the city and the chief watering hole for celebrities, diplomats, sports figures, and mobsters. Tokyo Underworld chronicles the half-century rise and fall of the fortunes of Zappetti and his comrades, drawing parallels to the great shift of wealth from America to Japan in the late 1980s and the changes in Japanese society and U.S.-Japan relations that resulted. In doing so, Whiting exposes Japan's extraordinary "underground empire": a web of powerful alliances among crime bosses, corporate chairmen, leading politicians, and public figures. It is an amazing story told with a galvanizing blend of history and reportage. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

An author who attempts to tell the story of an era via an individual's biography is likely to strike out. Robert Whiting succeeds magnificently, thanks not only to the writing ability he showed off earlier in his baseball books but also to his painstaking efforts to cross-check with many, many other sources besides his main subject. Tokyo Underworld stands as one of the best histories of the postwar period in Japan.

A great book about an American soldier who became a Tokyo gangster, millionaire and restaurateur as well as the history of Japan in its post war period. The book primarily follows Nicholas Zappetti an American soldier who was stationed in Japan just after WW2 and how through his criminal activities and business dealings became one of the richest and most dangerous foreigners living in Japan. The book also jumps around and explains Japan's history with the Yakuza and its complex relationship with Japanese society from business to politics. This is nonfiction book and is great read. If you have any interest in Japanese culture or stories about the mafia or the criminal world read this book. They honestly need to make this story into a film.

This is the Japan your mother would have warned you to stay away from if she had known it existed. Most westerners don't. But journalist and long-time resident Robert Whiting peeks behind the shoji to show us a sleazeball world of crooks, both petty and big-time, operating hand in hand with Japan's pervasive government-industrial complex, often in cahoots with corporate America and the CIA. Tokyo Underworld opens right after the surrender, when a devastated nation, reeling from the shock of Hiroshima, clung precariously to life. Tokyo had been flattened by the bombing raids. Food was scarce, consumer goods nonexistent. In this barren soil a black market sprang to life within days of the surrender and was soon flourishing, trading in contraband wares smuggled in or diverted from the supply chains of the occupying forces. Enter Nick Zappetti, a small time hood from the Bronx, who remained in Japan after his discharge from the US Army. Operating on the principle that every calamity contains an opportunity, Zappetti made his first big score by smuggling a precious shipment of lighter flints into Japan. With Zappetti as the central figure, Whiting recounts the story of Japan's recovery and rise to superpower status, focusing on the netherworld of crime. Given his own background, growing up in the mean streets of the Bronx where mafia bosses were the most highly respected figures, it was only natural for Zappetti to forge links with shady characters. These included Rikidozan, the ex-sumo wrestler whose exploits as a professional wrestler made him a figure of mythic dimensions in postwar Japan. Rikidozan's staged triumphs

over American adversaries helped, according to Whiting, a defeated and dishonored nation to recover its self-esteem, thus setting the stage for the economic boom of the 80s. Zappetti mixed out-and-out crime (he served prison time for armed robbery following an infamous diamond heist) with quasi-legitimate enterprises. The most noteworthy of these was Nicola's, a pizza restaurant in Tokyo's glitzy, cosmopolitan Roppongi district. At Nicola's, international film stars and the Crown Prince of Japan rubbed elbows with politicians and crooks. The intense and long-lasting popularity of Nicola's made Zappetti enormously rich and notorious, with a list of contacts ranging from gang bosses to members of the Japanese Diet. Other ventures didn't fare so well: a mink farm in Japan's northernmost island was a dismal failure. The reason? Japanese women didn't wear mink. Another farming venture ran aground. The same goes for Zappetti's marriages to Japanese wives. One of these, to a 19-year-old beauty queen, lasted only a few months and cost him ¥30 million in alimony. Whiting's previous books on Japanese baseball (one of which was named Sports Book of the Year by Time Magazine) are only superficially about baseball: they are insightful studies of Japanese society as seen through the window of the foreign game that verges on a national obsession. Whiting's analysis of how they have adapted the game shows us what makes the Japanese tick. The author brings the same bicultural sophistication and insider's insight to Tokyo Underworld as he does to baseball. His intimate relationship with Zappetti during the latter's last tell-all years adds a dimension rarely seen. No one but Whiting could have written this book, which makes it all the more valuable for its unique viewpoint. (Full disclosure: I was friends with Robert Whiting in the 70s in Japan before his first book earned him an international reputation). While Japan's criminal underworld may operate in the shadows, easily overlooked or ignored, it is impossible to underestimate its influence on the national life at every level--from sports, entertainment, and the mizu shobai world of bar hostesses and prostitutes, to government and big business. Politicians and businessmen with ties to the underworld were key players in the Lockheed scandal that rocked Japan in the 70s: Lockheed hired former drug smuggler, war criminal and underworld power broker Yoshio Kodama as a 'consultant' to grease the wheels in a deal where Lockheed paid more than \$3 million in bribes to Prime Minister Tanaka and other government officials to insure that its aircraft was chosen over its Boeing rival for All Nippon Airways. Tokyo Underworld is a fairly dense read, exhaustively researched (over 200 interviews) and packed with facts and information (Notes and Sources runs to 45 pages). Though it isn't always light reading, Tokyo Underworld provides a fascinating glimpse of the seamier side of Japanese society, along with a view of postwar US-Japan relations that won't be found in most histories of the period.

I enjoyed the book as it provided insight into the various characters, however, I was looking for something that focused more on the crime side of their story.

Ran across this book on Japanese society New York, and had to read it. I was there off and on during the years of 1948 to 1966. This book took me back in time and showed me things happening right in front of my eyes. Our government, and their mistakes, had a lot to do with Japan's wacky way of running their country. I knew a few of the people running around with a joint missing from the little finger. This book is an eye opener that leads right up to today. Funny, I don't remember ever eating pizza in Japan. R McKenna

I really enjoyed reading this book. I enjoyed the fact that this wasn't a boring read, and I didn't know what to expect next. By reading this book I was able to read just how different the laws were versus ours in the U.S. The book also gives a brief history lesson on the occupational stage of Japan during world war II. In my opinion this was a good book that touched on almost every aspect of Nick Zappetti's life. I would recommend this book to friends.

Interesting read which also highlights Japanese economic/political/judicial/criminal relations during the 50 year period from the end of WWII.

Great Book for learning about the Yakuza in Tokyo and the general underbelly of it. Great informing book

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