AN INTRODUCTION TO "BOYS LOVE" IN JAPAN

MARK McLELLAND AND JAMES WELKER

If you walk into a typical bookstore in Japan today, somewhere on the shelves you are likely to find various books depicting romantic and sexual relations between beautiful, stylish male characters. These male homoerotic stories might be found in the form of manga—the name for Japan's globally known narrative comics—or in the form of "light novels" (*raito noberu*)—a local label for lowbrow, highly disposable prose fiction. If the store you're wandering around is large enough, you might find these texts occupying an entire shelf, floor to ceiling, or even multiple shelves. In fact, it's quite possible that the bookstore will have one section for manga and a separate section somewhere else for light novels, all depicting male–male romance. You may be able to find these sections by searching for a sign reading "*bōizu rabu*" in the phonetic *katakana* script or perhaps even "Boys Love" spelled out in English. The sign might also just say "BL."

If you pull one of those BL books off the shelf and start reading, more likely than not you'll find that those beautiful male characters within the book do not think of themselves as "gay." What's more, while the widespread availability and relatively high visibility of BL narratives might give the impression that it's easy to be openly gay in Japan, if you examine not the stories themselves but the context of their creation and consumption, you'll learn that BL is only tangentially connected with the lives of actual gay men. To the contrary, in Japan BL is generally assumed to be created and consumed by heterosexual girls and women. The fact that this widely held assumption is not altogether accurate is one of the many points about BL upon which the contributors to this volume shed light.

As its title makes clear, *Boys Love Manga and Beyond: History, Culture, and Community in Japan* examines various aspects of the BL phenomenon in Japan. Written by scholars working in diverse fields including anthropology, cultural studies, history, literature, and sociology, the twelve chapters that follow address a number of key questions about BL, such as: Under what

cultural and historical circumstances did adolescent girls and young women in Japan begin creating and consuming narratives about beautiful adolescent boys and men? What genres of BL have emerged in the course of its more than forty-year history? What is the significance of the differences between these genres? What kind of girls and women actually create and consume BL works, and what kinds of pleasure do they derive from reading and writing about male–male romantic and sexual interactions? What kinds of bonds among readers are fostered by a shared interest in such narratives? Do boys and men read BL too? Are they gay? If not, why do they enjoy BL? What do the boyfriends or husbands of BL readers and artists think about their girlfriends' and wives' interest in BL? How is the BL phenomenon received in Japan in general? The answers to questions such as these will be explored in depth in the chapters that follow. First, however, a brief introduction to BL is in order.

As we note above, BL narratives focus on male–male romantic and sexual relationships. They first drew the attention of publishers and the public in the form of *shōjo* manga (girls' comics). *Shōjo* manga is a category encompassing a wide range of comics that ostensibly target female readers from preadolescence to almost adulthood—though many *shōjo* manga works have had an actual readership that includes male readers and older readers.[1] While BL narratives featuring original characters and storylines have had a strong fan base since they first were published in *shōjo* manga magazines in the early 1970s, derivative works based on the characters and plots of existing manga, anime, films, television shows, and literature, as well as works narrating imagined experiences of actual celebrities and athletes have also long been very popular. BL narratives are produced and distributed through both commercial and non-commercial channels. In the commercial sphere, manga and light novels are most common, both of which are often first serialized in BL magazines before being reprinted in bound volumes. BL narratives are also produced and distributed commercially as anime, audio dramas, video games, live-action films, and stage plays, among other media. As with other genres, particularly popular works may be recreated across a range of media.

Outside the commercial sphere, the most common media form for the sharing of BL narratives remains "*dōjinshi*," zine-like publications of highly varied quality. While most closely associated with original and derivative manga, *dōjinshi* may also contain text-based narratives, non-sequential illustrations, essays, and other musings. *Dōjinshi* are created and distributed by small "circles" (*saakuru*) of "*dōjin*," that is, like-minded individuals. These circles are often *very* small; in practice, they can consist of even a single individual. Some circles produce *dōjin* webcomics, video games, and anime.

Although most chapters in *Boys Love Manga and Beyond* are primarily focused on the creation and consumption of BL manga found in commercially published books and magazines as well as *dōjinshi*, some chapters give attention to other media as well.

A number of terms have emerged to label and categorize BL media over the past four decades. Although these categories overlap and the terms' meanings have shifted over time, four have been predominant:

- ***shōnen'ai***—This term combines "boy" (*shōnen*) and "love" (*ai*) and has been most widely used in reference to commercially published *shōjo* manga from the 1970s into the 1980s. It is sometimes used retrospectively today to describe these works, but the term, now more closely associated in popular discourse with pedophilia, has largely fallen out of favor.
- ***JUNE***—This word comes from the title of a commercial BL magazine published from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s and has been used to refer to the kinds of manga appearing in the magazine. It has also been used in reference to works produced and consumed outside commercial channels, particularly original rather than derivative works.
- ***yaoi***—An acronym for *yama nashi*, *ochi nashi*, *imi nashi* (which might be translated as "no climax, no point, no meaning"), this self-mocking label was coined in 1979 and disseminated by an influential *dōjinshi* circle. It became popularized in the 1980s in reference to BL works that have not been published commercially, but it is sometimes used to encompass both commercial and non-commercial works.
- **boys love**[2]—Pronounced "*bōizu rabu*" and usually written in the *katakana* script, this term first appeared in the commercial BL sphere at the beginning of the 1990s. It is most frequently used as a label for commercially published manga and light novels, but it can also be used as a label for non-commercial works. It is often abbreviated "BL."

In addition to their overlapping usage in Japan, note as well that the common use of "*shōnen'ai*," "*yaoi*," and "boys love" in English and other languages among fans outside Japan often differs from the meanings given above.[3] (The emergence of these categories and distinctions between them are discussed at length in chapters by James Welker, Fujimoto Yukari, and Kazuko Suzuki.) For the sake of simplicity, in this volume we generally use "BL" as shorthand to encompass all of these categories, alongside more specific terms reflecting the context. Because the meaning of these terms varies by contexts, however, chapter authors often offer their own more specific definitions.

Other key terms used in the BL sphere in Japan not exclusive to BL culture include "*tanbi*" (aesthete or aesthetic), "*aniparo*" (short for "anime parody"), "*sōsaku*" (original work), "*niji sōsaku*" (derivative work), and "*sanji sōsaku*" (derivative work based on a derivative work).

While in contemporary Japan, appreciation for "beautiful boys" (*bishōnen*) in general and BL narratives specifically are most closely associated with adolescent girls and women, the depiction of the "beautiful boy" (*bishōnen*) has long been a romantic and sexualized trope for both sexes and commands a high degree of cultural visibility today across a range of genres from kabuki theater to pop music, anime, and manga. The celebration of youthful male beauty in Japanese culture arguably stretches back at least to the Heian period (794–1185), when prominent female authors celebrated the charms of aristocratic young men in texts such as the eleventh-century *Tale of Genji* and Buddhist priests penned "tales about beautiful boy acolytes" (*chigo monogatari*) for the reading pleasure of other Buddhist priests.[4]

It is not until the Edo period (1603–1868), however, that we see the development of a self-conscious literary tradition devoted to extolling the charm of youthful male beauty. This is associated particularly with famous novelist Ihara Saikaku, author of *The Great Mirror of Male Love* (1687), which contains love stories featuring relationships between older and younger samurai and rich townsmen and young kabuki actors. Homoerotic themes were also prevalent in the kabuki and puppet theater of the times.[5] During the Edo period the valorization of male–male love in the literary canon was also reflected in actual practice with many high-status individuals, including several shoguns, being renowned for their appreciation of youthful male beauty. Stories depicting male–male relationships (as well as such male–male relationships themselves) were described at this time as *nanshoku* (male–male eroticism), within which there were several categories, including the samurai-oriented *shudō*, or the "way of youths," a term that also named the norms which these relationships were expected to follow.

Yet, to speak of a tradition of "boys love" in Japan would be misleading since the historical and cultural contexts in which images of youthful male beauty have occurred differ widely over time and have been assigned often contradictory meanings. Furthermore, a history of boys *love* in Japan cannot be reconstructed without also attending to the changing nature of ideas about love itself in the Japanese context. In a compelling study of romantic love in Japanese and European literature, Takayuki Yokota-Murakami advances the provocative notion that romantic love as it was elaborated in European novels at the end of the nineteenth century was a concept unknown in Japan prior to the influx of Western culture beginning in the

mid-nineteenth century.[6] He notes that "the 'equality' between male and female lovers or spouses described in Western literary discourse was often quite incomprehensible to . . . intellectuals" in the Meiji period (1868–1912).[7] There were no terms in Japanese at the time that could adequately express the fusion of spiritual and physical love that underlay Western notions of romantic love. Moreover, Confucian morality, which became increasingly influential in the latter half of the Edo period, saw women as inferior, sometimes evil, and certainly not as suitable objects of admiration.[8] To the extent that anything similar to the Western concept of "romantic love" existed in Japan prior to the Meiji period, it had been explored in the context of tales of "devoted male love" between older and younger samurai.[9]

The absence of a native Japanese term approximating the English word "love" is conspicuous in early Japanese translations of Western novels where it was sometimes simply transliterated as "*rabu*." Yet, as Leith Morton notes, "there is no doubt that by mid-Meiji a revolution was underway in regard to notions of love, marriage and the status of women."[10] By this time the notion of "romantic love," connoting elements of spiritual attraction between men and women, was being expressed in the newly coined compound "*ren'ai*," which combines the meaning of physical love contained in "*koi*" (also pronounced *ren*) with "*ai*," whose meaning had begun to encompass the wide range of feelings indexed by the English term "love." This "shocking new perspective" became an important talking point in the Japanese media and was popularized via women's literature and magazines and via Christian educators at private girls' schools.[11] Despite the misgivings of many social commentators, the discourse of romantic love had an enormous impact upon culture generally, especially upon literature. As Jim Reichert has pointed out, lacking indigenous examples, Japanese novelists had to find convincing ways to develop "new literary languages [and] new approaches toward characterization and plot" in order to realistically depict romantic heterosexual relationships.[12] One casualty of this process was that male–male erotic relationships, that is, *nanshoku* and *shudō*, both of which had been well represented in the literature of the previous period, were excluded from the new category.[13] Their association with the now discredited "uncivilized" and "feudal" practices of the Edo period further placed male–male eroticism outside the bounds of civilized morality.

By the late Meiji period, the uptake in Japan of Western sexology that pathologized homosexuality, alongside the developing hegemony of heterosexual romantic love, had led to a narrowing of sexual identification and practice. Male homoeroticism did continue as a minor theme in Japanese literature, but as Jeffrey Angles points out, those authors who specialized in

this type of fiction had to resort to a range of strategies to disguise their interests.[14] No longer could the "love of youths" be valorized as an ennobling experience or a cultural ideal.

It is at this point chronologically that chapters in this volume begin to examine the prehistory of BL with Barbara Hartley's discussion of Taisho-period artist Takabatake Kashō. The Taisho period (1912–1925) saw significant economic growth and technological developments in Japan that resulted in major advances in the living standards of the urban population and in educational advances for both girls and boys. A vibrant literary culture developed, especially around popular monthly magazines aimed at differing readerships such as housewives, businessmen, and boys and girls. Kashō was one of the best-known illustrators of the period and created beautiful illustrations of both girls and boys used as cover art and to illustrate the content of leading boys' and girls' publications. In boys' magazines, Kashō tended to represent boys as young, beautiful, and sometimes effeminate-looking male figures that, as Hartley points out, "project an air of homoeroticism." Indeed, as Hartley, citing well-known Japanese cultural critic Takahara Eiri, remarks, many of the scenarios featuring these beautiful boys also featured depictions of older men, thus referencing the *chigo* (boy acolyte) tradition of Buddhist iconography discussed above. Kashō's illustrations of boys reflect the homosocial environment of the early twentieth century and in many of his pictures "there are no girls or women in sight." Given that contemporary accounts suggest that all male environments such as boarding schools and military barracks were sites for homosexual activity, it would be reasonable to assume that the homoeroticism of many of Kashō's beautiful-boy figures inspired interest and desire in the eyes of some male readers.

It is to a potential audience of female readers that Hartley draws attention, however. She notes that many girls would have had access to these images through brothers and other male relatives who subscribed to the magazines. Whereas girls' magazines offered depictions of women and girls in training for "respectable domesticity," boys' magazines focused on an outdoors' lifestyle of exploration and adventure, with boys often seen fighting and dying alongside their male comrades. These male figures—inflected with an oblique and therefore perhaps all the more thrilling sexuality—no doubt attracted interest among female readers. Noting that such images could also be featured in girls' magazines, such as *Shōjo no tomo* (Girls' friend), Hartley suggests that it was precisely the absence of women in the frame of these pictures—and hence their homoerotic charge—that may have attracted girl readers. Hartley speculates that the girl viewers of Kashō's illustrations may have interpolated themselves into the pictures and thereby the scenarios

they represented in an attempt to discover "something beyond the flower girl aesthetic that characterized much narrative for girls." Hartley proposes that the homosocial world of Kashō's beautiful boys anticipates in some ways the cross-gender identifications that later come to characterize BL.

James Welker's historical overview of BL manga also stretches back to this period. Referring to a growing body of scholarship charting the prehistory of *shōjo* manga, Welker draws attention to the role Kashō and his male contemporaries—as well as to the *shōjo* literature they were illustrating—in creating the aesthetic foundation for *shōjo* manga in the postwar. The predominantly male artists creating *shōjo* manga in the 1950s and 1960s would pick up and further develop the images of delicate girls with large twinkling eyes, providing a portal into the illustrated girls' psychological state and inviting identification by viewers. In the 1970s, the creation of *shōjo* manga was taken over by a new generation known as the Fabulous Year 24 Group (*Hana no nijūyo'nen-gumi*), or just the Year 24 Group, as most of them were born around the year Showa 24, that is, 1949. In English, they might more fittingly be called the "Fabulous Forty-Niners." Building on such developments in manga and borrowing elements from foreign and domestic literature, film, history, and folklore, the Fabulous Forty-Niners invigorated *shōjo* manga with lavish illustrations and complex narratives. These new works were appreciated for their literary qualities by a readership well beyond the targeted audience of *shōjo* manga magazines.

It is also at this time that some Fabulous Forty-Niners began creating narratives featuring romantic—and eventually sexual—relationships between beautiful adolescent boys. While they were not the first women writers to show an interest in male homosexuality, nor the first artists to create *shōjo* manga with male protagonists, this new "*shōnen'ai*" manga arguably set the stage for the emergence of diverse genres of manga and other media that would depict male–male romantic and sexual relations in subsequent decades, continuing to the present. Welker traces the historical development of these BL genres from the first manga published in commercial magazines in the early 1970s to a highly diverse market combining commercial and noncommercial production and distribution channels, with an estimated annual domestic size approaching $25 million. He draws attention to key sites of creation and consumption, particularly commercial magazines and "spot sale events" (*sokubaikai*) for *dōjinshi*. In tracing the emergence of these genres as well as the etymologies of the labels "*shōnen'ai*," "*yaoi*," and "boys love" (*bōizu rabu*), Welker suggests points of overlap in the development of the genres themselves that may account for their frequent conflation in popular and critical discourse on BL.

Well-known and frequently cited *shōjo* manga critic Fujimoto Yukari addresses this conflation in a chapter revisiting some of the arguments she made about *shōnen'ai* and *yaoi* more than twenty years ago.[15] Fujimoto argues that, while "*shōnen'ai* first emerged as a mechanism offering an escape from the social realities of gender suppression and the avoidance of sex(uality)," the development of *yaoi* "made it possible for girls to 'play with sex(uality)' (*sei o asobu*) and opened up possibilities for them to shift their own point of view from passive to active engagement." A central aspect of this play is directed by what she calls the "*seme–uke* rule," that is, the norms whereby characters in a relationship are determined to be the "*seme*"—the "attacker," that is, the dominant and insertive sexual partner—and the "*uke*"—the "receiver," that is, the passive and receptive sexual partner.

In the modern period, sexuality emerged as a difficult terrain for girls to navigate, burdened as they were with state-sanctioned demands to be pure and chaste (see McLelland's chapter in this volume). Hence, some early commentators on BL—including those relying on Fujimoto's criticism—argued that through imagining a male homosocial world without girls, and through focusing on "forbidden" relationships that took place exclusively between male bodies, girls were able to explore issues of sexual attraction and desire in a safe environment. However, Fujimoto critiques this position since she feels that it diminishes girls' agency as readers. Instead, she puts forward the argument that through the *yaoi* genre in particular, which is frequently a parody of existing texts created by and for male readers, women's re-appropriation of these characters in a homosexual setting is an example of girls' agency in imagining sexual scenarios, including sadomasochism and rape, that have traditionally been considered the preserve of male sexual fantasy.

In a related vein, in her chapter Kazuko Suzuki points out how the proliferation of different terms referring to genres of male–male romance in Japanese makes it difficult to make generalizations about either authors or readers without attending to specific terminology. She argues that much closer attention should be paid to various subgenres in academic writing about BL in order to facilitate "more refined historical, cross-national, and comparative analyses encompassing empirical research." Based on interviews with professional BL writers, Suzuki works to establish how those most closely associated with the production of male–male romance stories understand the various terms used to label it. While from the outside the categorization of narratives into subgenres may seem a purely esoteric pursuit—most suitable perhaps for caffeine-fueled late-night debates among fans—Suzuki demonstrates that these categorical distinctions are quite significant to the

artists who create these texts as they point to fans' expectations and, thereby, delimit narrative possibilities.

In discussing the categories "*shōnen'ai*," "*tanbi*," "*JUNE*," "*yaoi*," and "BL," Suzuki's interviewees stress both chronological and narrative (content) differences between these terms. For instance, they associate the traditional term *shōnen'ai* with the pioneering manga by the Fabulous Forty-Niners, an important influence on most of the artists she interviewed. Many of these artists also cite as influential "*tanbi*" (aesthetic) literature most associated with themes explored by "aesthetic" authors such as Thomas Mann and Oscar Wilde in Europe, as well as Tanizaki Jun'ichirō and Mori Mari in Japan—though the term "*tanbi*" has sometimes been used to refer to male–male romantic narratives in this sphere. The groundbreaking commercial magazine *JUNE*, published between the late 1970s and mid-1990s, sought to combine elements of highbrow *tanbi* culture with pornography and popular entertainment, and "*JUNE*" has come to be treated by some as a genre in its own right. While sharing with earlier *shōnen'ai* and *tanbi* stories an obsession with tragedy and unhappy endings, *JUNE* also developed more explicit sexual scenarios between the characters. It is the introduction of more explicit reference to sexual behavior between men that leads some BL writers to identify *JUNE* as the foundation of contemporary BL. BL has inherited the formal *seme–uke* distinction established in the *yaoi* genre, but unlike *JUNE* stories, which were often tragic, there is the expectation that BL stories will have happy resolutions. The picture Suzuki's research paints is complicated, however, by the fact that the terms are not used consistently within Japan, as well as that, as Suzuki notes, their meanings have also shifted as they have been taken up in Western fandoms.

Contrasting to varying degrees with Fujimoto, and Suzuki, in their chapter Kazumi Nagaike and Tomoko Aoyama "avoid . . . drawing clear borderlines" among BL genres since the genres are so "thematically intertwined," a sharp delineation between them has never been universally accepted, and because in Japan "many BL researchers use 'BL' . . . as an umbrella term, without clearly delineating these subgenres." It is this BL research and criticism in Japan that is their focus. Central in their overview of Japan BL studies is Nakajima Azusa, known for her early writing on *shōnen'ai* and her contributions to the magazine *JUNE*, including both critical writing under that name, as well as male homoerotic fiction she penned under the name Kurimoto Kaoru. In 1991, Nakajima expanded the horizons of Japanese BL studies with her influential book, *Communication Dysfunction Syndrome* (*Komyunikēshon fuzen shōkōgun*), arguably "the first full-fledged critical analysis of Japanese

BL."[16] Nagaike and Aoyama attempt to clarify and elaborate on certain aspects of her analysis, and, in so doing, trace the historical development of the discourse surrounding Japanese BL studies over a period of twenty years.

They begin with an examination of the initial stage of BL studies, in which scholars generally took an essentially psychoanalytic approach to these narratives. Later, other BL scholars explored a wider variety of theoretical frameworks, including media studies, minority discourse, author–audience studies, gender studies and queer studies, literary studies, and so forth. This historical and analytical overview reveals that Japanese BL studies have provided an analytical space for the cultivation of such interdisciplinary approaches. However, Nagaike and Aoyama also investigate a number of potential future paths in Japanese BL studies, such as transnational research concerning BL developments, both in Japan and abroad.

The concept of fantasy as a dominant force that characterizes the male homosexual narratives created by women is shown in the psychoanalytic approaches taken by several early BL critics, such as Matsui Midori, Tanigawa Tamae (later known as Mizuma Midory), and the aforementioned Nakajima Azusa. In order to explore the prevailing circumstances of female subconscious desires and repressions, these critics have discussed the framework of female fantasies of male homosexuality as an identity-creating process in terms of the psychoanalytic domain. In her chapter, Rio Otomo offers a different model for reading BL as fantasy, interrogating BL narratives as feminist—or more precisely, feminist-utopian—pornographic fantasies. Otomo looks at feminist theories of how fantasy works in women's pornography in order to challenge the common perception that pornographic imagery is necessarily degrading or demeaning. To highlight this reading, Otomo contrasts the essentially narcissistic autoeroticism of Modernist writer Mishima Yukio's obsession with three-dimensional male bodies with female BL artists/readers' fascination with the flat, two-dimensional bodies of fantasized male BL characters. The absence of female characters in the BL text entails the negation of their own female bodies, and thus enables the "floating away from a fixed identity" and an erotic autonomy that is not tied to any specific viewpoint or sexual identity. In this way, Otomo alerts us to potentially liberatory readings of BL as autoerotic female pornography.

This stress on women's agency as both readers and (re)creators of BL texts has gained ground in recent academic scholarship, in part in recognition of the growing awareness among BL consumers that they represent a particular subgroup or community. Around 2000, the word "*fujoshi*" emerged as a term of mocking self-reference among avid fans of male–male romance on the

notorious BBS *2-channel.* The term itself is a homophone of a word meaning "girls and women," but, in this case, BL fans have replaced a *kanji* character to create the neologism "rotten girls." *Fujoshi* have emerged in media discourse as a specifically female equivalent of the male *otaku* (obsessive fan or nerd), whose preoccupations sometimes include *rorikon* (Lolita complex) fantasies about the sexuality of or sex with precocious girls. In the case of *fujoshi*, rather than attempting to evade confronting or problematic aspects of female sexuality through fantasizing about love between boys, these girl readers actively embrace their "rottenness" and accept that their preoccupation with BL is not socially acceptable.

Patrick W. Galbraith, in his contribution to this volume, offers a fascinating glimpse into the *fujoshi* world. Galbraith's work is particularly important for its ethnographic approach. Rather than speculate about the possible motivations and desires of girl consumer-creators of BL products, Galbraith follows a group of *fujoshi* over a period of a year. His female interviewees allowed him access to their "rotten friendships" with other girls and young women who share their interests in the transgressive potential of male–male desire. Galbraith reinforces Fujimoto's critique of the "escapism" argument accounting for the development of the BL genre, noting how his informants characteristically divided their emotional energy between physical partners and fictional characters, with affective responses to the latter expanded in intimate communication with *fujoshi* friends. Galbraith highlights the importance of sharing *moe* chat among BL fans. "*Moe*," a term literally meaning "to bud," has come to refer to the erotically charged interest that manga and animation fans feel for fictional characters. It is now used more broadly throughout various fandoms to refer to any kind of scenario, fictional or otherwise, that evokes (erotic) desire on the part of the viewer. Galbraith notes how his *fujoshi* informants are constantly on the lookout for *moe* moments inspired by real and fictional people and events, and the shared nature of these moments means they are transforming the relations they see in the world around them.

Whereas Galbraith's chapter offers ethnographic insight into the workings of the *fujoshi* subculture, in his chapter Jeffry Hester looks at the emergence of the *fujoshi* as a controversial and contested figure in popular culture. As Hester notes, the *fujoshi* is not necessarily in control of her own image, and a variety of discourses have emerged in the media seeking to comprehend and explain these "rotten" women. As he observes, *fujoshi* are read as a kind of *otaku*, but until the emergence of the *fujoshi* in popular discourse, female *otaku* were only ever "a derivative and misty presence." In recent years, however, the *fujoshi*, characterized by her interest in male homoerotic

relationships, has, through online and print media coverage, been given "a solid and accessible social presence without precedent."

Hester focuses his analysis on three popular multimedia narratives, *Fantasizing Girl, Otaku-Style* (*Mōsō shōjo otaku-kei*), *My Neighbor Yaoi-chan* (*Tonari no 801-chan*), and *Fujoshi Girlfriend* (*Fujoshi kanojo*), two of which are authored by men and narrated from the perspective of male characters, and all three of which involve *fujoshi* as their main protagonists.[17] As Galbraith points out in his chapter, many *fujoshi* are in their everyday lives involved in intimate relationships with ordinary men, and the three texts that Hester looks at each focus on the male partners of *fujoshi* women who are bemused (and sometimes feel abused) by their partners' obsessive interest in male homoerotic possibilities. Once again, Hester's work highlights the agency that women readers and creators of BL products exercise, an agency that actually has transformative effects on material culture. He points to the way in which women's economic power has given rise to "female-dominated spaces" of consumption where "heterosexual men . . . are excluded or rendered uncomfortable or irrelevant." The male partners of the *fujoshi* women in these narratives, rather than imagining themselves as the "central pillar" of familial relationships as has traditionally been their role, now feel themselves to be sidelined or marginal to this fantasy world of female desire. The male narrators are bewildered by their girlfriends' activities and interests and although they "may come to understand, to some degree, indulge, or accommodate" these desires, the *fujoshi* community remains something they "can never call their own."

This last point—that heterosexual men are somehow *necessarily* excluded from the female-dominated economy of desire that circulates around the BL subculture—must, however, be reconsidered in relation to research highlighted by Kazumi Nagaike's contribution to this volume. Nagaike draws attention to how, in the past several years, a range of male viewers/readers has emerged who are not afraid to declare an interest in BL. The term "*fudanshi*" (rotten men) has emerged to describe them. Although it might be assumed that it is primarily *gay* men who are interested in these homoerotic narratives, as Nagaike points out, gay men have had a sometimes problematic relationship with these texts. As early as 1992 a "*yaoi* debate" (*yaoi ronsō*) emerged in feminist media wherein some gay spokesmen criticized women writers for appropriating and misrepresenting gay relationships and desire. However, as Nagaike explains, *fudanshi* does not clearly map onto any specific sexual orientation (just as *fujoshi* does not). In fact, in questionnaire surveys, self-identified *fudanshi* readers declare a range of sexual orientations, including gay, straight, bisexual, and even asexual.

Concerning the motivations of *fudanshi* for engaging with BL texts, we can discern a curious return to early explanations for women's interest in the genre, to the extent that the escapist potential of the texts are emphasized. However, in the case of male readers, it is an escape from the bounds of conventional masculine identity and desire that are enabled through identification with the "feminized males" of the BL world. As Nagaike shows, for many male readers what is enjoyable about BL characters is their freedom to express vulnerability and passivity. The beautiful boys of the BL world frequently "fail" to perform the tough image demanded by the codes of conventional masculinity. Hence, it is not so much the sexual orientation of the BL characters that is of interest to *fudanshi* men, but rather their embodiment of characteristics that have traditionally been gendered feminine and thus undervalued when expressed by male bodies. As Nagaike concludes, what BL offers to some men is "a subversive space, in which *fudanshi* can re-view traditional Japanese images of masculinity and learn to acknowledge, accept, and ultimately love such elements of maleness as weakness, fragility, and passivity."

Given that BL deals in stories of male–male romance and sexuality, it might be supposed that gay men in Japan are also a key audience for these texts. As Ishida Hitoshi makes clear in his chapter, however, there has been a fraught relationship between BL creators and some spokesmen from the gay community.[18] This dispute goes back to a 1992 article penned by gay critic Satō Masaki, who argued that BL represented a kind of misappropriation or distortion of gay life that impacted negatively upon Japanese gay men. Various BL fans and writers responded both that BL creations were pure fantasy and not meant to be about, or refer to, actual gay men or their lives and that fantasy should be unrestrained. In fact, as Ishida observes, the protagonists in male–male romance in many BL stories often deny or repudiate homosexuality since it is important for the female readership that these characters experience an exclusive attraction to each other (that is, they are not attracted to men in general). So, despite engaging in male–male romance, these characters still reject homosexuality and are often troubled by feelings of guilt or repulsion, as if same-sex love were a bad thing. In so doing, Ishida argues, the male characters in BL texts are actually repeating and reinforcing the prejudices against homosexuality that exist in Japan in real life. Hence, in BL texts, despite their core theme of male–male romance, gay men themselves are still repudiated and excluded from the narratives.

However, despite these criticisms, it can be argued that women's intensive engagement as both producers and consumers of male–male romance stories over the past four decades of BL culture has had a cumulative effect in transforming images of masculinity in Japanese popular culture more widely.

Indeed, these days, when thinking of representative masculine role models, it is not the "corporate warrior" salaryman (*sarariiman*) that first comes to mind. Rather, Japanese popular culture is dominated by images of "soft" masculinity as embodied in fabulously successful boy bands such as SMAP, and in particular, SMAP lead singer and actor Kimura Takuya, whose beautiful face and slender, defined torso have been ubiquitously displayed throughout Japanese media for over two decades. To this extent, mainstream representations of masculinity have begun to incorporate some of the characteristics that previously were associated with gay men.

Tomoko Aoyama, in her contribution to this volume, looks at three popular manga series by female artist Yoshinaga Fumi which are centered on such "soft" male characters. These stories all feature male characters somehow associated with the world of cooking—and it seems relevant here to note that SMAP also have had their own long-running TV cooking show. All the texts discussed by Aoyama began as manga, and some have gone on to become books, TV dramas, anime series, and even a film, suggesting their widespread appeal. As Aoyama notes, only the 1994 *The Moon and the Sandals* (*Tsuki to sandaru*) can be described as a BL work, the others—the 1999 *Antique Bakery* (*Seiyō kottō yōgashiten*) and the 2007 *What Did You Eat Yesterday?* (*Kinō nani tabeta*), are mainstream media products (the last being serialized in one of Japan's best-selling men's manga magazines, *Morning*).[19] Yet, as Aoyama demonstrates, BL conventions play a strong part in the representation of masculinity in all these manga, rendering them transgressive spaces in which conventional masculinity is subjected to scrutiny and critique.

Although the association of men with cooking might seem feminizing (and arguably is so in the case of SMAP), as Aoyama notes, there is a long tradition in Japan (as in the Anglophone world) of representing "cooking men" as virile mavericks who reject "domestication and formality," relying on their own intuition and skill as opposed to cookbooks. Cooking men have often been represented as promiscuous wanderers, not constrained by any cuisine or cooking style, but adventurously trailing all over the world in search of new culinary challenges. The cooking men in Yoshinaga's manga, however, "transgress just about every characteristic of . . . male chefs and gourmand protagonists" represented elsewhere in Japanese culture. Yoshinaga's cooking men are not maverick wanderers but focused on the domestic and use their culinary skills to express love and care for their (sometimes same-sex) partners. Through representing these BL-ized males in nurturing and caring roles, Yoshinaga is thus able to "convey feminist ideas and messages in the commercial media."

In the final chapter in this collection, Mark McLelland addresses cultural responses to BL texts, including both manga and light novels, in the context of broader conservative critiques of manga, anime, and related popular culture. McLelland points out how manga have often been targeted by moral campaigners across the late twentieth century. Since the late 1980s, following on from a moral panic occasioned by the serial killing of four infant girls by avid manga collector Miyazaki Tsutomu, manga and anime content has increasingly been governed by a code of industry self-regulation, but this does not apply to the self-published *dōjinshi* scene, which includes many BL writers. Until recently most public debate has been over the sexual and violent content of boys' manga but in recent years girls' manga, too, have come under scrutiny. McLelland's chapter focuses on two recent incidents in Japan: the 2008 furor over the large number of BL titles available for loan in a library district in Osaka, and the 2010 debate in Tokyo over the "Non-Existent Youth" Bill aimed at using zoning laws to restrict the sale of erotic manga. McLelland suggests that the enhanced scrutiny paid to girls' popular culture, and BL specifically, by conservative commentators in Japan needs to be read in the context of an ongoing moral panic over "gender-free" education and social-inclusion policies. Some politicians, most notably former Tokyo governor Ishihara Shintarō, imply there is a connection between women's reading habits and their increasing reluctance to marry. These conservative commentators also worry that the declining birthrate is also attributable to the "gender confusion" occasioned by the decline of traditional gender roles, in which BL plays a role.

McLelland also argues that until recently debate about manga content in Japan was largely about protecting children and young people from harmful adult themes. However, due to growing international pressure, the debate has now shifted to the supposedly harmful depictions of children and young people in manga themselves. Given that BL is a genre that specializes in the sexualization of its youthful characters, this chapter concludes with the prediction that BL is likely to come under increasing attack from conservative lobbyists in Japan and overseas.

In spite of such criticism and censure, male–male romantic and sexual narratives have been expressed in various ways and contexts in Japanese culture for centuries and are still very much alive in various popular cultural contexts today. This stands in stark contrast to the current situation in many Western cultures. As prominent feminist scholar Germaine Greer points out in her study of "the boy" in Western art, despite a long tradition of representing the charms of adolescent male beauty in classical and Renaissance art, in

the late twentieth century fears about pedophilia resulted in a "criminalization of awareness of the desires and charms of boys" in Western societies.[20] A major contribution of this volume has been to draw attention to the many different meanings that youthful male beauty has attracted in Japan and to provide a foundation for understanding the spread of BL narratives elsewhere, including, increasingly, Western nations.[21]

As we have detailed above, there is not a singular "tradition" of boys love in Japan. The styles, contexts, and meanings associated with the love of boys and young men have been radically transformed over time. When accounting for this process of transformation it has been necessary to look at the way in which love and intimate relationships have been conceived in the Japanese tradition. Ironically, in the period directly preceding Japan's opening to the West in the mid-nineteenth century, the love expressed by older men for male youths was the closest exemplar of the spirituality and equality that underlay Western notions of "romantic love." However, as husband–wife relationships were reimagined as central to the new nation-building project of the Meiji State, male–male love was sidelined and came to be regarded as an exemplification of a "feudal" and uncivilized past. But the new stress on the primacy of heterosexual relations as part of the nation-building project had the effect of subsuming personal feelings under national goals. Women, in particular, were constrained by these new ideologies, which exhorted them to be pure and chaste until the time of marriage, when their duty was to become good wives and wise mothers. It is not surprising, then, as Hartley illustrates, that in the early twentieth century some girl readers looked on enviously at the freedom and passion that boy characters were able to express in their exciting lives outside the confines of the home. At a time when patriarchal, heterosexual norms were increasingly stressed for both men and women, it is also not surprising that some readers were attracted by new kinds of transgressive relationships that could be imagined between men.

Although from the late Meiji period on, male–male sexual relationships came to be represented as base and carnal in mainstream discourse, the very domestication of male–female relationships in the interests of the State enabled a radical reimagining of male–male romance as somehow outside or beyond the demands of the family system. For some readers, male–male lovers became exemplars of what Anthony Giddens calls "pure relationships," that is, relationships that are driven entirely by the sentiments of the two people involved and which do not depend on any exterior support or motivation.[22] In the postwar period, particularly with the emergence of *shōnen'ai* and subsequent BL genres, male–male love once again becomes an exemplar of true romance, especially for female readers whose own lives were often

circumscribed by expectations of childbirth and domestic duties. Yet, as the contributors to this collection show, women have never been passive readers in relation to BL narratives. Not content with interpolating themselves into existing representations of male–male love, over the last four decades women readers have become creators of BL culture. Not only have some women appropriated and recreated existing characters from traditional boys' genres in their *dōjinshi*, but, as Galbraith argues, they have come to view all of culture through their "rotten filters," constantly on the lookout for homoerotic interpretations of otherwise everyday situations and events.[23] In their radical reimagining of the potentialities of affection between men, Japan's rotten girls *avant la lettre* have opened up new spaces for the exploration of masculinity and femininity for men and women alike.

Notes

1. While often translated into English as "girl," as many others have observed, the term "*shōjo*" does not convey the same meaning. A succinct discussion of the category "*shōjo*" within the context of Japanese culture in general and *shōjo* manga specifically can be found in Jennifer S. Prough, *Straight from the Heart: Gender, Intimacy, and the Cultural Production of* Shōjo Manga (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), 7–10.

2. While sometimes written with an apostrophe ("boys' love" or "boy's love"), we have chosen to omit the apostrophe to keep the meaning of the term more open-ended.

3. The encyclopedia on the popular website *Anime News Network*, for example, repeats a distinction between "*shōnen'ai*" and "*yaoi*" commonly made in English. The former, it says, focuses on romance and love, while the latter points to sex. See the respective terms in "Lexicon," *Anime News Network*, last accessed January 16, 2013, http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/encyclopedia/lexicon.php.

4. Paul Atkins, "Chigo in the Medieval Japanese Imagination," *Journal of Asian Studies* 67, no. 3 (2008).

5. Earl Jackson, Jr., "Kabuki Narratives of Male Homoerotic Desire in Saikaku and Mishima," *Theater Journal* 41, no. 4 (1989).

6. Takayuki Yokota-Murakami, *Don Juan East-West: On the Problematics of Comparative Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

7. Ibid., 36.

8. This can be seen, for instance, in the idea of *danson johi*, or "respect men, despise women."

9. Leith Morton, "The Concept of Romantic Love in the *Taiyō* Magazine, 1895–1905," *Japan Review* 8 (1997): 82.

10. Ibid.

11. Michiko Suzuki, *Becoming Modern Women: Love and Identity in Prewar Japanese Literature and Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 9.

12. Jim Reichert, *In the Company of Men: Representations of Male–Male Sexuality in Meiji Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 227.

13. Watanabe Tsuneo and Iwata Jun'ichi, *Love of the Samurai: A Thousand Years of Japanese Homosexuality*, trans. D. R. Roberts (London: Gay Men's Press, 1989).

14. Jeffrey Angles, *Writing the Love of Boys: Origins of Bishōnen Culture in Modernist Japanese Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 22–24.

15. Fujimoto's chapter is a substantially revised version of an article that appeared in a special issue of the Japanese literary journal *Eureka* (*Yuriika*) on "BL Studies." See Fujimoto Yukari, "Shōnen'ai/yaoi, BL: 2007-nen genzai no shiten kara" [*Shōnen'ai*, *yaoi*, and BL: From the perspective of 2007], *Yuriika* 39, no. 16 (December 2007).

16. Nakajima Azusa, *Komyunikēshon fuzen shōkōgun* [Communication deficiency syndrome] (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1991).

17. Konjoh Natsumi, *Mōsō shōjo otaku-kei* [Fantasizing girl, otaku-style], 7 vols. (Tokyo: Futabasha, 2006–2010); Kojima Ajiko, *Tonari no 801-chan* [My neighbor Yaoi-chan], 5 vols. (Tokyo: Ohzora shuppan, 2006–2010); Pentabu, *Fujoshi kanojo* [Fujoshi girlfriend], 2 vols. (Tokyo: Enterbrain, 2006–2007).

18. Ishida's chapter is a substantially revised version of an article that appeared in a special issue of the Japanese literary journal *Eureka* (*Yuriika*) on "BL Studies." See Ishida Hitoshi, "'Hottoite kudasai' to iu hyōmei o megutte: Yaoi/BL no jiritsusei to hyōshō no ōdatsu" [On the declaration "Please leave us alone": The autonomy of *yaoi*/BL and the appropriation of representation], *Yuriika* 39, no. 16 (December 2007).

19. Yoshinaga Fumi, *Tsuki to sandaru* [The moon and the sandals] (Tokyo: Hōbunsha, 1996); Yoshinaga Fumi, *Tsuki to sandaru 2* [The moon and the sandals 2] (Tokyo: Hōbunsha, 2000); Yoshinaga Fumi, *Seiyō kottō yōgashiten* [Antique bakery], 4 vols. (Tokyo: Shinshokan, Wings Comic, 2000–2002); Yoshinaga Fumi, *Kinō nani tabeta?* [What did you eat yesterday?], 7 vols., ongoing (Tokyo: Kōdansha, Morning KC [Kodansha Comic], 2007–).

20. Germaine Greer, *The Boy* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 10.

21. On the spread of BL to the West, see Antonia Levi, Mark McHarry, and Dru Pagliassotti, eds., *Boys Love Manga: Essays on the Sexual Ambiguity and Cross-Cultural Fandom of the Genre* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland 2010).

22. Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

23. Patrick W. Galbraith, "*Fujoshi*: Fantasy Play and Transgressive Intimacy among 'Rotten Girls' in Contemporary Japan," *Signs* 37, no. 1 (2011).