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Japan's **Mieko Kawakami** wants to 'stir things up'

Mieko Kawakami has called out clichéd depictions of women by one of her country's most feted writers, and seen her own bold style attacked by a top politician. But the award-winning Japanese author says she is happy to "stir things up" in her drive to depict the world as she sees it, as well as the experiences of people who might otherwise go unnoticed. And it's a formula she's confident readers want. "There is a growing desire to hear the real voices of Asian women," the 44-year-old told AFP, describing her desire to shed light on a broader sweep of Japanese society.

"(My focus) is the voices that would not be brought to the surface if they weren't written." Kawakami shot to fame in her home country when "Breasts and Eggs", her second novel, was given Japan's most prestigious literary prize in 2008. Not everyone was impressed by its experimental style, with Tokyo's then-governor, who is also a novelist and has often been critical of young Japanese writers, denouncing it as "unpleasant" and "self-centered rambling." But her exploration of the discomfort and confu-

sion women sometimes feel with their bodies was a big hit among the public. A reworked and expanded version was published in English last year, becoming a fixture of the book club circuit and winning its author international acclaim.

'Not a feminist writer'

Its dissection of sexuality and reproductive ethics has seen Kawakami cast a feminist writer. But that wasn't her intention. "I'm a feminist, but I'm not a feminist writer," she said. "I want to write about women as a part of humanity as a whole." But she is critical of persistent inequalities in her society, slamming traditional gender roles in Japan she says are so ingrained that "it's hard to even put it into words." "There's a social structure that makes it difficult for women to be independent," she argues. Outdated views on gender in Japan have been back in the spotlight since former Tokyo Olympic chief Yoshiro Mori last month declared that women speak too much in meetings.

For many in Japan, the comments were shocking, but not surprising. "It's a human rights issue, but that seems to be

something (he) didn't understand at all," Kawakami said. "That's the most problematic thing." Still, she sees hope in the fact that an outcry over the remarks eventually forced the 83-year-old to step down, while it "probably would have been overlooked as a gaffe, say, five or 10 years ago."

'I'm on their side'

Kawakami has been praised by her literary peers, but she hasn't been afraid to ask questions about their depictions of women. She made waves with an interview published in 2017 where she asked one of Japan's most famous writers, Haruki Murakami, why so many women in his novels seemed to serve a purely sexual function. Her upbringing has also made her sensitive to the importance of class and economic inequality.

Raised in a working-class family in Osaka, Kawakami has felt keenly the difference in her background compared to many in Japan's literary world. "I will never forget the town, the people and their voices, that shaped me," adds Kawakami, who sometimes writes in the western city's distinctive dialect. "Now



This photo shows Japanese novelist Mieko Kawakami posing during a photo session in Tokyo. — AFP

I'm surrounded by highly educated people from the middle and upper classes in the publishing industry, but I'm working class... and I'm on their side," she said. She was raised by a single mother in a poor household where "you had to work, it didn't matter if you were female or male" and she lied about her age so she could work at a factory during school holidays.

From music to poetry

Scouted as a singer in her early 20s, she pursued music for five years without a hit, and says she felt free when her record deal ended. A poem she submitted to a magazine caught the eye of an editor, who encouraged her to write longer stories. Her debut novella, "My Ego Ratio, My Teeth, and the World", told the story of a female dental assistant who believes her consciousness resides not in her brain, but her molars. It was nominated in 2007 for the biannual Akutagawa Prize, the award she later won for "Breasts and Eggs."

This year will bring the English-language release of her 2009 novel "Heaven", about a 14-year-old who is bullied at school—a work that grapples with questions of good and evil, with no easy answers. And she's now working on a project about the day that precedes a life-changing event. "I have an obsession with the day before something happens," she said. "None of us knows what will happen tomorrow, that is natural, but it is also a wonder-and terrifying to me." — AFP



This photo shows employees from the Burapha coffin shop working on a coffin near skateboards, made from wood used for coffins, in Bangkok. — AFP photos



Photo shows skateboards, made from wood used for coffins.



Photo shows an employee from the Burapha coffin shop painting skateboards.



Photo shows the exterior of the Burapha coffin shop, where they are also making skateboards from wood used for coffins.

Thai coffin-maker kickflips his caskets into skateboards

From a final resting place for the dead to a gnarly way to land a trick; a Thai coffin-maker is affixing Buddhist emblems to the dismantled walls of his caskets, and transforming them into skateboards. As the popularity of board sports exploded in Thailand, and the price of a skateboard skyrocketed, Anusorn Yungyearn decided to breathe new life into some of the wooden caskets he had lying around his Bangkok workshop. "I want to give the kids who don't really have much chance in life an opportunity to skate," said the 30-year-old. "I also don't want them to ask their parents to buy one for them since the cost of it is really high."

In the past year hordes of young Thais have taken up skateboarding and surf-skating—likely a consequence of most social spaces like bars and gyms being closed for months at a time because of pandemic restrictions. Today, bands of young skaters can be seen cruising through Bangkok's historic quarter and its universities' open spaces. Anusorn's warehouse has coffins with brocade designs, golden lattice work and even holographic stick-ons. But for his boards, he has decided to keep it comparatively simple—gleaming white with golden trimming on the bottom.

"The procedure of making these boards is almost exactly like making the

coffins," he told AFP, adding that he sticks a signature twist to the boards. "We put the Thai angel emblem and the Thai traditional border on the board's edge." The first 10 he flips from coffins to skateboards will be donated to lower-income families—though he admitted getting them right will be tough. "Some kids have never ever heard of a skateboard before so we want to make these casket skateboards as close to the real boards as possible. "That way they could play and smile a little bit from all the fun." — AFP



File photo shows models display creations from fashion brand Requal by designer Tetsuya Doi for the 2021 autumn/winter collection at Tokyo Fashion Week. — AFP

ing an ambition to change is no longer good enough." It graded the biggest 15 fashion companies across six areas: transparency, emissions, water and chemicals, materials, workers' rights and waste. Not one company scored more than 50 out of 100, with Swiss firm

Richemont and US firm Under Armor faring worst with scores of just 14 and nine overall. They did not respond to requests for comment. The best performers were French luxury house Kering and Nike, who scored 49 and 47 respectively. "Many of fashion's biggest companies

still don't know or don't disclose where their products come from, and the further down the supply chain you go, the more opaque things become," the report said. "That enables exploitation and human rights abuses and creates difficulties measuring the industry's environmental impact."

'Just not working'

A 2019 study by the UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion found that fashion was the second-biggest consumer of water, and responsible for eight-to-10 percent of global carbon emissions—"more than all international flights and maritime shipping combined". The new Sustainability Index said many firms had targets to reduce emissions but little information on how they were faring. Three firms—Richemont, Under Armor and LVMH—had not set emissions targets at all, it said.

Fewer than half were found to have clear goals on reducing the use of water and hazardous chemicals, and only four had a time-bound target to replace oil-based polyester—the most commonly used fabric in the world—with recycled alternatives. The worst results were on the issue of waste, with the report citing

a recent Ellen MacArthur Foundation study that found 40 million tons of textiles were sent to landfills or incinerated every year. "Companies are talking more about circularity than they are embracing it," it said.

Scores on workers' rights were also dismal. "We have been stuck with the current state of play for more than 10 years and the discourse is still way ahead of the action," Anannya Bhattacharjee of the Asia Floor Wage Alliance was quoted as saying in the report. "No matter how many commitments are set up in factories, they are just not working," she added. "Commitments to a living wage are meaningless if buying prices do not cover the cost of living wages."

Nonetheless, the report sought a constructive tone, saying it was not designed to chastise or praise individual companies, but to encourage innovation. "Environmental sustainability is bigger than any one brand, supplier or retailer. We all have to work together," wrote another of the authors, Edwin Keh, of the Hong Kong Research Institute of Textiles and Apparel. — AFP

Are video games 'essential culture'? French lockdown stirs debate

Confusion over France's new partial lockdown has accidentally reignited an old debate: are video games works of art or just another computer product? France, proud of its long history as a bastion of culture, added book and record stores to its list of essential services allowed to stay open when the lockdown came into force in 16 different regions including Paris on Saturday. But what about stores selling video games, which were already big business in France and are surging in popularity with so many forced to stay home due to the pandemic?

Following debate among ministers, the government published a decree in its official journal on Saturday authorizing the "retail sale of computers, peripheral units and software in specialized stores". When it came time to open on Monday, some video game stores owners and employees were still unclear on the rules. Ouri Zagoury said his store in central Paris was open only for customers to collect games they had bought online or to drop off consoles or hardware to be repaired. "We don't bring people inside, or really even ask for payment," he said.

'Cultural asset'

Vincent, a salesman in a nearby store, said his girlfriend had read media reports that video games had joined book and record stores on the expanded list allowed to stay open. "We don't really understand anything about this confinement," he admitted. It was not just independent shops struggling to interpret the new rules. French electronics retail chain FNAC hesitated at first, with YouTube game reviewer Julien Chieze tweeting that the video games sections in its stores were closed on the weekend. But FNAC director of products Olivier Garcia responded to his tweet on Monday saying the gaming sections had been reopened, citing the government's decree.

Chieze hailed the government's decision, saying: "Yes, video games are a cultural asset just like books and records". Jacques Creysse of the FCD retailing federation said "it is true that until now, we were rather uncertain on the subject of video games".

Video gaming center

After Prime Minister Jean Castex announced on Thursday that book and record stores would be classified as essential, the video game industry lobbied for similar treatment. Nicolas Vignolles, of the French video game publishers union SELL, told AFP that he "made a lot of calls" in which he said that "the best cultural activity during confinement—especially to keep young people occupied—is playing video games". He added that "the state of the law means that we can sell video games". The French spent a record 5.3 billion euros (\$6 billion) on video games last year, according to SELL. By comparison, the French spent nearly four billion on books, research group GfK said. France, which is home to major video game publisher Ubisoft among others, has also seen rising interest in eSports.



Video games are seen inside a video game store in Paris. — AFP

The former president of the Paris Saint-Germain football club, Robin Leproux, said Monday he would launch what he called Europe's largest video gaming center. The 2,000-square-metre (21,500-square-foot) facility in the heart of Paris has a 150-seat arena, 100 computers and 40 consoles, and is already being used by some professional clients. Called ESport, it will open to the public "when the health authorities allow us to do so," he told AFP. — AFP

FASHION INDUSTRY FAILING TO MEET GREEN TARGETS

Fashion's biggest firms are making slow progress in meeting promises to improve their environmental and social impact, according to a damning sustainability report released Monday. The inaugural Sustainability Index by the Business of Fashion magazine, the first to offer direct comparisons between the industry's top firms, found they were often falling far short of their ambitious rhetoric on going green. "The global economy has 10 years to avoid catastrophic climate change and an urgent duty to improve the welfare of the workers who make it tick," said the report, which was put together by a panel of sustainability experts from around the world.

"Time is running out and simply stat-