



## Tokyo Underworld: The Fast Times and Hard Life of an American Gangster in Japan

*Robert Whiting*

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"A fascinating look at some fascinating people who show how democracy advances hand in hand with crime in Japan."--Mario Puzo

In this unorthodox chronicle of the rise of Japan, Inc., Robert Whiting, author of **You Gotta Have Wa**, gives us a fresh perspective on the economic miracle and near disaster that is modern Japan.

Through the eyes of Nick Zappetti, a former GI, former black marketer, failed professional wrestler, bungling diamond thief who turned himself into "the Mafia boss of Tokyo and the king of Rappongi," we meet the players and the losers in the high-stakes game of postwar finance, politics, and criminal corruption in which he thrived. Here's the story of the Imperial Hotel diamond robbers, who attempted (and may have accomplished) the biggest heist in Tokyo's history. Here is Rikidozan, the professional wrestler who almost single-handedly revived Japanese pride, but whose own ethnicity had to be kept secret. And here is the story of the intimate relationships shared by Japan's ruling party, its financial combines, its ruthless criminal gangs, the CIA, American Big Business, and perhaps at least one presidential relative. Here is the underside of postwar Japan, which is only now coming to light.

## **Tokyo Underworld: The Fast Times and Hard Life of an American Gangster in Japan Details**

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# **From Reader Review Tokyo Underworld: The Fast Times and Hard Life of an American Gangster in Japan for online ebook**

## **Marija S. says**

Anecdotal and written as a perfect mix of facts and lively storytelling which is painting a vivid picture of the postwar times in Japan and keeping the reader glued to the text. A must read for anyone interested in recent history of Tokyo and Japan, it did a great job conveying the bustling and chaotic period which were the postwar years and included an encyclopedia of known and less known facts about Japan to boot.

Nick Zapetti was such a fantastic character, his biography reads like wild fiction.

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## **Katherine ??? says**

Saat awal membaca buku ini, saya hampir tidak merasa bhw buku ini ttg biografi seorang gangster peranakan Italia yg berkebangsaan AS. Tetapi makin dibaca makin lanjut semakin menarik.

Gangster tsb bernama Nicola Zapetti yg saat pertama kalinya menginjak Jepang pd thn 1946 dia msh berusia awal 20-an. Bermula sbg pedagang penyelundup barang-barang dari AS pd Masa Pendudukan, berkolusi utk mencuri berlian yg menyebabkan dirinya masuk penjara, dan setelah keluar dr penjara, Nic sukses mendirikan restoran pizza "Nicola's" yg mutakhir dan dikunjungi para selebritis dunia.

Bagaikan roda berputar, begitu pula jalan kehidupan Nic. Saat di puncak kesuksesannya, Nic yg sudah berteman akrab dgn dunia bawah tanah alias geng-geng kriminal Jepang, sampai Nic sendiri dijuluki Raja Roppongi. Namun menjelang di usia tuanya, Nic terjebak hutang maha besar, yg mengakibatkan dirinya diperdaya oleh perusahaan besar Jepang, kalah sidang berturut-turut, mengakibatkan penurunan kesehatan dirinya. Faktor paling menyakitkan adalah Nic merasa "dirampok" oleh bangsa Jepang dan harga dirinya yg tinggi serta arogansinya yg luar biasa menyebabkan Nic tidak bisa menerima perubahan zaman yg terjadi termasuk pula perubahan fisiknya.

Selain kisah Nicola Zapetti, di buku ini juga banyak diceritakan tokoh-tokoh sentral era pascaperang yg kondang (semacam biografi singkat) seperti Thomas Blackmore, Rikidozan, Kakuei Tanaka, dll. Jadi kita banyak mendapat informasi mengenai keadaan dan situasi masyarakat Jepang setelah Perang Dunia II sampai dengan era pre-Millennium termasuk sikap xenophobia bangsa Jepang terhadap bangsa asing.

Selain itu modus operandi para yakuza dari zaman ke zaman juga diceritakan lumayan detail dan ironis saat perbandingan yakuza era 60-an dgn era 80-an. Skandal politik yg mewarnai sayap kanan partai LDP dari masa ke masa itu juga dikemas apik dari soal skandal suap, korupsi, pembelian jabatan, pemenangan proyek dsb.

Saya puas dan tidak menyesal telah membeli buku ini pd thn 2010 dan baru membacanya 7 thn kemudian. Tidak ada kata terlambat utk membaca buku yg bagus.

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## **Shankar says**

An entertaining book detailing the various characters who influenced Japan from the US. The book explains the role of the underworld during the period of its recovery from war times. While it has some very interesting anecdotes including some of Japan's royalty its a slow read.

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## **Kevin Farrell says**

Robert Whiting is uniquely qualified to write about this bit of history. He has lived in Japan for years and writes a column for a Japanese language newspaper. He knows the language and the people better than most Gaijan in Japan.

Start this book and you will find yourself falling into an odd recipe of US Occupation forces, ancient Japanese culture, and ex-US Military mobsters who see a profit in this madness called Tokyo. Throw it all in the blender and hit frappe and you get what happened to business and finance in Japan following WWII. The story is amazing and clearly told by Whiting.

To understand the Japanese perspective, Whiting educates us about the need for competing gangs who operate black markets and help businesses out with the occasional blackmail of competitors. Such activities, we are assured, help to eliminate "confusion" in the marketplace. By confusion, the Japanese usually mean any foreign competitor who offers goods or services at a lower prices than the local source. The Japanese business owners go to great lengths to avoid "confusion".

You just have to read this slickly written piece of history to understand how things really work in Japan. And how some outsiders learned to work inside Japan to make millions.

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## **Thomas says**

I don't really give this book two stars because it's a BAD book, I'm just not convinced that it really concerns a gangster. I may be nitpicking, but this felt more like a garden-variety criminal, really. It's pushing it to put this on my Japanese Mob shelf. It's an interesting enough book, however, and those interested in the American expatriate experience in Japan will no doubt like it. But I was looking for something about "An American Gangster in Japan," and I didn't really feel like this was that.

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## **Misha says**

Don't waste your time.

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## **David Bonesteel says**

The sub-title of Robert Whiting's fine book is a bit misleading. The American gangster in question often

disappears from the narrative for long stretches while Whiting explains the long history of collusion between Japanese politicians and the yakuza. Nevertheless, the result is a fascinating social history with plenty of entertaining anecdotes and colorful character profiles. Chief among the latter are Nick Zappetti himself, the "gangster" who made a fortune with pizza parlors that became the hangout of choice for expatriates, entertainers, and, most significantly, those who make their living on the wrong side of the law, and then lost that fortune through a combination of stubbornness, bad luck, and ignorance. Another highlight is the career of Rikidozan, the former sumo wrestler who became a national hero and single-handedly established professional wrestling in Japan by defeating foreign wrestlers in scripted bouts, all the while hiding his Korean heritage. Often very funny, this book appeals to both a taste for the prurient and seamy and the desire for a serious, even-handed analysis of the role of organized crime, political selfishness, and short-sighted anti-Communism in Japan's rise to power and wealth.

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## Krycek says

Quick-- what do gangsters, the U.S. Army, professional wrestling, the CIA, the LDP, the military/industrial complex, TV, pachinko and pizza have in common? If you said, "the post-war Japanese underground economy" then you have either read this book or are an extremely abstract thinker. Robert Whiting's *Tokyo Underworld: The Fast Times and Hard Life of an American Gangster in Japan* places Japan's post-WWII economic recovery in a whole new light. Witness to this recovery and subsequent reversal in economic power is Nick Zappetti, a former GI and would-be mobster turned pizza restaurateur. While introducing Italian-style pizza to the Land of the Rising Sun, Zappetti hobnobbed with scores of shady characters who matched his own shady proclivities.

Zappetti lived a colorful life in Japan. First arriving in Japan as part of the US Occupation forces, he took advantage of the thriving black market before opening a pizza joint in Roppongi that became the go-to place for expats and *yakuza* alike. The fact that Zappetti himself had Mafia ties back in New York (at least he claimed) gave him street-cred. His unceasing shrewdness, cunning and willingness to engage in business ventures for which he had no qualifications or experience (eg., making pizzas, pig farming, etc.) in anticipation of the quick buck eventually paid off, making him one of the wealthiest, if not *the* wealthiest *gaijin* in Japan.

But Zappetti's associates and acquaintances were equally as colorful and Whiting sketches these characters with subtle wit. Really, there was little more Whiting had to do to make these guys interesting. Check it out.

**Rikidozan:** the former *sumo* turned professional wrestling superstar who hid his Korean heritage from Japanese prejudice while he painted the town red in booze-and-pill fueled partying binges, shouting insults he had learned in English, like *kokkusakka* and *kommi basutado*.

**Hisayuki Machii:** the 6'2" 200 pound mob boss known for killing two men with his bare hands and who once worked for American intelligence. Like Rikidozan, he also was an ethnic Korean in a Japan that still marginalized Koreans.

**John "Gorgeous Mac" MacFarland:** the "Wild Bull of Nebraska," a big American lug who played the role of villain in the pro-wrestling circuit and was later involved in an ill-fated diamond heist. He was known for bizarre lapses in sanity and unusual sexual tastes.

See? You can't make this stuff up. Whiting's account of Japanese gangsters bears little resemblance to the

slick, stoic, tattooed *yakuza* we see in American films. These guys had a sense of honor, no doubt, and were super-tough (imagine taking fifty-three stitches sans anesthetic, or facing a sword-wielding opponent while unarmed). These guys were *crazy*. And they paid the price for their lifestyles.

*They were all in notoriously bad health, with toneless bodies and wan complexions caused by a steady morning-to-night diet of cheap sake, unfiltered cigarettes, and methamphetamines. Many of them suffered from diabetes and they talked incessantly of treatments for tooth cavities and hemorrhoids...*

Hardly a glamorous picture. The *modus operandi* of Japanese gangsters changed later, however, to more "white-collar" crime as Japan's economic fortune made a reversal in the '80s.

While the antics of Zappetti *et al* feature prominently, the subtitle, *The Fast Times and Hard Life of an American Gangster in Japan*, is somewhat misleading because the greater narrative is less on Zappetti's life than Japan's post-war economic life and the hidden factors that contributed to its remarkable development. Whiting gives us a view of post-war Japanese economic development that Japanese leaders are probably not willing to readily admit; that a great deal of the economic development was due in no small part to a lucrative underground economy, the players in which were organized crime groups, the CIA, Japanese big business and the Liberal Democratic Party (Japan's conservative political party, despite its name).

Being one of the Cold War era bulwarks against communism, the CIA heavily funded money to the LDP, who, in turn, utilized its extensive underworld connections (A quote from Jiro Ode, president of a finance company, "the Yakuza are part of the LDP. It is a relationship of mutual help, friendship, cooperation, and support. There are no straight lines, nothing dividing them. Everyone is gray.").

However, despite the fact that corruption played an integral role in post-war development, and it could be said that this corruption is just part of doing business in Japan, it is important to note that Western concepts of "corruption" and customary Japanese practices and concepts of "gift giving" and "harmony" are often at odds as Japan faced inevitable cultural shifts in the latter part of the twentieth century. Neither the US nor Japan were completely free from blame. *Tokyo Underworld* made it apparent that cultural misunderstandings and ignorance go both ways.

Whiting's history of post-WWII Japan is an eye-opening and entertaining account, well-researched and something that most students of Asia, economics or social sciences are not likely to encounter elsewhere. While casual readers might find some of the bits that focus on the greater political and economic areas tedious, I think Zappetti's story, as well as the others that feature, more than makes up for that.

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### **Sarah Crawford says**

The subtitle of the book is The Fast Times and Hard Life of an American Gangster in Japan. The book is generally about how Americans influenced the underworld in Tokyo after World War II, and in particular the role of Nick Zappetti who was originally from New York. To me, at least, the main interest in the book are the bits dealing with the yakuza, the black market and bribery, and the part about Zapetti is only mildly interesting.

The first black market after the end of the war opened in only a few days after that end. A lot of the materials sold in the black markets came from looted military supply depots. Some of it even came from the American forces that occupied the country. (The author notes these were fresh soldiers, not battle-hardened veterans who would have been much more difficult for MacArthur to control. They would have wanted to take out their hatred for the Japanese on the country.)

The author goes into how the Japanese underworld was linked to the right-wing movement in the country.

An interesting thing about the black markets was that social status didn't have much meaning to them. They operated willing to sell to anyone who had the money. Period.

The setting up of comfort stations for the American troops is also discussed. Some American officials became rich when they engaged in somewhat shady deals of their own. This also included some members of the Japanese government.

Something very interesting is that Wall Street was behind a lot of what went on, wanting to revive the prewar economic structure of Japan. Just as Wall Street ripped off the American people in recent times and got away with it, they did the same types of things in Japan and got away with it.

Pachinko and professional wrestling also played their role in the shady economic world and, for wrestling, in the rebuilding of national pride. The wrestling was staged, of course, just like it is today. The difficulty of foreign businesses making inroads into the Japanese markets is discussed. The construction industry does so much unnecessary work because it makes heavy political contributions.

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### **Rinja says**

From the standpoint of a history nerd (especially one who specialized in Japanese history), this book is simply awesome. Even though it's a historical read bordering on biography, Whiting does a fabulous job of making this read almost like fiction. Great subject matter explored in this book; I'm a huge fan of cultural comparisons, and this is how it should be done. I found this to be a fascinating read, from cover to cover.

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### **Jerry Peace says**

Well, if you think, in 1945, after Japan surrendered, that the U.S. just came in, wrote a new constitution, ran things for a few years while the Japanese sat around and said, "Yes sir and no sir," you need to read this book. This is not a Tokyo of tea ceremonies and Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines, no flower arranging and bonsai sculpting. No, this is a postwar Tokyo of black markets, of massive thefts and corruption, from the smallest street vendor all the way to the prime minister, with hundreds of stops between. And Americans were right in the middle of all this, from the gangster entrepreneur Nick Zappetti-the main protagonist of this book-to the CIA, Lockheed and all the way to the presidency. Prostitution, business "protection" shakedowns, gambling, drugs, weapons, bribes, blackmail- it's all here. Pretty durn fascinating account that

has nothing to do with cherry blossoms nor American exceptionalism.

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### **James says**

Those who are avoiding the US election news should skip this book, since, like a rancid cheeto, Trump shows up as a partner or patsy for Japanese mobsters. Other US figures include Nixon and Prescott Bush.

The GR description is pretty complete so I will not add much notes on the content. My first comment is read the acknowledgements and notes in the back, they add depth to the book, don't skip them. The amount of corruption going on in the book seems horrifying if you haven't read much about down and dirty politics, this was going on in the US when I was young. Read up on Frank Hague or the Tweed Ring as an example of traditional American machine politics. The violence shown by the Japanese gangs may be less than these bad boys. The US still has corruption but not to the extent of 60+ years ago.

For aspiring fiction writers, the bizarre life stories of some of these yahoos might provide some inspiration and help prevent the dreaded *villianus mechanicus*, for further fodder along these lines you can read Speed Tribes: Days and Night's with Japan's Next Generation among a few others, most of this info doesn't make it to the US, so the online Japanese news sites can provide you with the current payoff scandal of the month. If you a video oriented sort of person Pigs and Battleships is part of the Criterion collection or you can watch one of the countless Takeshi yakuza films.

An engrossing read, don't start it late at night.

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### **Victor Nobrega says**

#### **Awesome view of the Tokyo underworld**

At times disjointed and seemingly going off in tangents this book is an excellent account of an American and in turn of foreigners experience in Japan from occupation to bubble. Filled with tales of Yakuza and corrupt business leaders it tells a story rarely heard. Must read for Japan lovers. Strong recommend.

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### **Joichi Ito says**

Amusing and relatively accurate story about how post-war Japan was built by the CIA, gangsters and professional wrestlers.

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### **Ken Gtwo says**

Great book on the post war rise of Japan, from the perspective of an Italian-American Ex-GI who had a lot of shady friends.

Topics include:

- Roppongi history

- The post-war takeover of Japanese society (Media, Gov't, etc.) by right-wing, nationalist, war veteran, yakuza types.
- Cold War American complicity and involvement in said takeover (Particularly by Republican Admins).
- CIA
- Nixon
- Korean Mafia
- Lockheed-Martin Scandal,
- PM Kakuei Tanaka of the Tanaka political dynasty (See also Makiko Tanaka)
- Pro-wrestling as national feel-good propaganda and entertainment.

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