

ARTS & LETTERS

Rice Balls in Wonder Bread Land

FISH SHAVINGS, DRIED wood ear mushrooms, and seaweed gelatin weren't sold at the local grocery store in Versailles, Indiana, when Linda Furiya was growing up there during the 1970s. She often accompanied her

Japanese parents on trips to ethnic markets in big cities in search of such ingredients, which were utterly exotic to most Midwesterners but essential to dishes such as her mother's sukiyaki. So began Furiya's own lifelong obsession with food.

Growing up in the Midwest, where her parents settled because of her father's job in the poultry industry as a chick sexer (someone who determines the sex of newly hatched chickens), Furiya straddled the world of her family's traditions and her own desire to fit into their small community. Now a *San Francisco Chronicle* food columnist, Furiya reveals the world of Japanese cuisine and tradition through the meals and recipes of her childhood in *Bento Box in the Heartland*. But food is also the means by which she reconstructs history and memory in order to understand her family and her own identity.

Early in the book, she recalls that in elementary school she pleaded with her mother to pack American-style bologna sandwiches for her lunch. Instead, she was sent to school with *onigiri*, the rice balls her mother knew she loved. Even as she hid in the bathroom during lunch hour to eat in secret, she could not resist this Japanese treat: "My teeth ripped through the crunchy seaweed wrapping, through the salty rice, to the surprise center, a buttery chunk of salmon placed precisely in the middle of the rice and seaweed ball." Food connects Furiya

BENTO BOX IN THE HEARTLAND:
My Japanese Girlhood in Whitebread America.

By Linda Furiya. Seal Press. 307 pp. \$15.95

irresistibly to her heritage.

Furiya's struggle to fuse these parts of her identity was mirrored in the duality her parents exhibited. At home, where her father was the voracious eater and her mother the steadfast cook, her parents sternly communicated their expectations for their children and for how the household was to be run. But they were deeply reticent in other settings. On one occasion, Furiya watched as they silently endured the degrading outbursts of a meat counter clerk who misunderstood her father's English. "I hated them for always bowing down," she writes, "for letting the other person be right."

After years dreaming of escape from Versailles and her own household, Furiya left to attend Purdue University. Though she continued to resent her parents' formality, she gradually realized that through food, they showed their love. "When I left for college Mom didn't tell me she would miss me with tears," she writes. "Instead she packed a box of rice balls into my pile of belongings."

Furiya's writing on the artistry of Japanese cuisine reflects a passion for food to rival a chef's, as when she describes "simple poached mushrooms topped with herbs stacked to resemble a shrub, and small lightly seared scallops arranged to look like a stony hill." Other parts of the book are not served up so carefully. Later chapters lack the tenderness of her earlier stories, and at the book's conclusion Furiya deserts her evocative prose for neatly explained lessons. Her observations about the surprising ways identity presents itself may be valid, but, like a bite that's too big, they are not easy to digest.

—Angela Balcitta

Solitary Genius

WHEN THE NOBEL PRIZE for Literature was awarded in 2000 to Gao Xingjian, the first Chinese writer to receive this honor, not everyone in

THE CASE FOR LITERATURE.

By Gao Xingjian. Translated by Mabel Lee. Yale Univ. Press. 181 pp. \$25