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MULTIPLE BOOK REVIEW BY TIMOTHY S. GEORGE

The tragedy caused by the organic mercury poisoning known as Minamata disease (*Minamatabyō* 水俣病) is, along with war responsibility and the wartime "comfort women" sex slaves, an issue that arose in the first half of the Showa 昭和 period (1926–1989) and one that Japan's governments have been unable to put in the past. Nearly fifty thousand people, most living in and around Minamata 水俣 in Kyushu where the Chisso chemical factory (Chisso kabushiki kaisha チッソ株式会社) dumped mercury into the sea from 1932 to 1968, but also others from Niigata 新潟 Prefecture, where the Shōwa Denkō 昭和電工 factory discharged mercury into the Agano River 阿賀野川, have received compensation and medical care after being recognized by the Japanese government as official Minamata disease patients or as affected by the pollution. About twenty-four thousand others have only been given health insurance passbooks entitling them to medical care. Over thirty-two thousand more applications for compensation or recognition have been denied, and the true number of victims will never be known.

These two books published in 2021 could hardly be more different, but both help explain the victims' suffering and struggles. Both aim to inspire not only understanding and sympathy, but also action, and they make it clear why Minamata disease patients were so offended in 2013 when, on the occasion of the conclusion of the international Minamata Convention on Mercury, Prime Minister Abe remarked that Japan had "recovered" from the Minamata issue.



Figure 1. Patients negotiating at Chisso's Tokyo headquarters. Photo by Aileen M. Smith, © Aileen Mioko Smith. From Smith and Smith, *Minamata*, pp. 132–33, with permission.

Minamata is not the first book on Minamata, photographic or otherwise, but it was the first—and remains the most powerful—extended introduction of Minamata in English.[1] The world was first shocked and moved by Minamata with photographs by W. Eugene Smith and Aileen Smith in *Life* magazine in June 1972, and a more extended photographic essay appeared in *Camera 35* magazine in April 1974.[2] In 1975, the same year *Minamata* appeared, Norie Huddle and Michael Reich published *Island of Dreams*, the first book in English surveying Japan's pollution crises, including Minamata.[3]

Japanese, of course, were much more familiar with Minamata, at least after lawsuits began to be filed in the "Big Four" pollution cases, which included Minamata, in 1967. (Minamata victims were the last to file suit, in 1969, and the last to win, in 1973).[4] Ui Jun, the University of Tokyo waste water engineer and activist who played a role in Japan similar in some aspects to those of Rachel Carson and Ralph Nader in the United States, published *Kōgai no seijigaku: Minamatabyō o otte* (The Political Science of Pollution: On the Trail of Minamata Disease) in 1968.[5] The next year saw the release of *Kugai jōdo: Waga Minamatabyō*, the hauntingly beautiful and only slightly fictionalized account of events in Minamata by the author Ishimure Michiko, a native of Minamata.[6] In 1972 Harada Masazumi, the doctor best known for working closely with patients, wrote the first of his many books about Minamata, *Minamatabyō*.[7]

Nor did *Minamata* present the first images of Minamata and Minamata disease patients seen in Japan. Kuwabara Shisei, who began photographing in Minamata in 1960 and continues to do so today, published his first two books of Minamata photographs in 1965 and 1970.[8] Shiota Takeshi began photographing Minamata in 1968 and published a collection in 1973.[9] Miyamoto Shigemi began photographing events surrounding

1 This reviewer has written a general survey of Minamata as a lens on postwar democracy. See George, *Minamata*.
2 Smith and Smith, "Death-Flow from a Pipe"; Smith, "Special Feature: Minamata, Japan."
3 Huddle and Reich, *Island of Dreams*.
4 The "Big Four" were Kumamoto Minamata disease, Niigata Minamata disease, cadmium poisoning (*itai-itai byō*, or "ouch-ouch disease") in Toyama, and asthma caused by air pollution in Yokkaichi.
5 Ui, *Kōgai no seijigaku*.
6 Ishimure, *Kugai jōdo*.
7 Harada, *Minamatabyō*.
8 Kuwabara, *Shashinshū: Minamatabyō*; Kuwabara, *Minamatabyō: Shashin kiroku*.
9 Shiota, *Minamata '68–'72*.

Minamata in 1970 and produced widely viewed images of the activist patients and supporters, though they did not appear in book form until much later.[10] In February 1971 the award-winning documentary filmmaker Tsuchimoto Noriaki 土本典昭 premiered his *Minamata: Kanjasan to sono sekai* 水俣: 患者さんとその世界 (with an English version released in 1972 as *Minamata: The Victims and Their World*), and he went on to produce at least a dozen more Minamata documentaries.

Still, little world attention had been brought to Minamata, attention patients and supporters desired in order to put further pressure on Chisso and the Japanese government and to make sure others elsewhere never suffered what they had. It would have been hard to imagine a better way to achieve this than for one of the greatest photojournalists of the twentieth century to publish a photographic essay on Minamata in *Life* magazine and then a book describing the disease, the perpetrators, and most of all the suffering and struggles of the victims in unforgettably moving words and photographs.

Yet in 1970, when W. Eugene Smith was fifty-one years old, it seemed to most who knew him and perhaps to Smith himself that the high points of his career were behind him. He had taken powerful photographs in the Pacific during the Second World War and been seriously wounded in the Battle of Okinawa. After the war he perfected the photographic essay at *Life* magazine, using his humanism as well as his artistry with the camera and in the darkroom to produce essays such as "Country Doctor" (1948), "Spanish Village" (1951), "Nurse Midwife" (1951), and "A Man of Mercy" (about Albert Schweitzer, 1954). But he had left *Life* in 1954 and become something of a recluse in his Manhattan loft, continuing to suffer pain from his war injuries and drinking more.

In 1970, however, he met Aileen Sprague, a Stanford student whose mother was Japanese. She moved to New York and became his assistant, helping prepare a retrospective exhibition of his photographs, "Let Truth Be the Prejudice." Ishikawa Takeshi, who became the Smiths' assistant in Japan, explains in his chapter in this new Japanese version of *Minamata* ("Yūjin Sumisu no nokoshita mono" ユージン・スミスの遺したもの, pp. 178–81) how Eugene and Aileen came to photograph Minamata. Eugene asked the publisher Motomura Kazuhiko 本村和彦, who was in New York to secure the rights to publish Robert Frank's book of photographs *The Lines of My Hand* in Japan, if it might be possible to show "Let Truth Be the Prejudice" in Japan. Motomura was from Kyushu, and suggested that if they came to Japan for the exhibit, Eugene and Aileen ought to go and photograph in Minamata, on Kyushu, since terrible things were happening there. In 1971 they were married and moved to Minamata, where, as they write, "we injected ourselves as participants and commentators into an immediately human and finally historic event" (page 172 in both the new Japanese edition under review and in the English original; quotation is from the English original). Aileen was an equal and essential partner in the project, not simply an interpreter or assistant.

The original English-language version of the Smiths' *Minamata* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), was the crowning achievement of Eugene Smith's career. It was also the book that made the horrors of Minamata, and pollution more broadly, and the struggles of pollution victims, known to the world. The impact of the book came from the extraordinarily powerful images (roughly a third taken by Aileen) and equally powerful words, combining to produce a tragically beautiful and sympathetic portrait of the Minamata patients and their lives. One chapter described Aileen's visit to First Nations people in Ontario, Canada poisoned by mercury dumped into the English-Wabigoon River system by a chemical plant. The book also included as back matter a Minamata chronology and a medical description of Minamata disease by Harada Masazumi.

Minamata was first published in Japanese (with the title written in Roman letters rather than Japanese characters) by San'ichi Shobō in 1980, and translated by Nakao Hajime. A revised version came out in 1991. These Japanese editions included all of the original chapters and photographs and updated versions of the same back matter. The book under review here is an entirely new Japanese edition published in 2021 by Crevis. It retains the Smiths' original photographs and chapters in Nakao Hajime's translation, but entirely replaces the original back matter with a greatly expanded section.

This new back matter begins with the essay by the Smiths' assistant Ishikawa Takeshi, mentioned above, which traces their entire Minamata experience. Ishikawa is best able to describe Motomura's suggestion that they come to Japan, their renting a home and setting up a darkroom in Minamata, the making of the famous photograph of "Tomoko in Her Bath," the

10 Miyamoto, *Mada nazukerarete inai mono e mata wa*.

beating of Eugene at Chisso's Goi factory, and the planning and creation of the *Life* and *Camera 35* photo essays and the book. The next essay is by Yamagami Tetsujirō of Siglo シグロ, Tsuchimoto Noriaki's film production company, and is titled "Kaikō no foto hisutorī" 邂逅のフォトヒストリー (pp. 182–85). He focuses on the impact of the Smiths' photographs, particularly through the exhibitions in Japan that often accompanied showings of Tsuchimoto's documentaries on "caravans" around Japan and in department store and museum galleries, and suggests that these exhibitions sparked demand for a Japanese edition of the Smiths' book.

Next are former *Asahi shinbun* 朝日新聞 journalist Saitō Yasushi's very useful detailed chronology ("Minamatabyō kanren nenpu" 水俣病関連年譜, pp. 186–87) and his separate chapter giving a narrative history of events from before the construction of the Minamata factory in 1908 up to 2017, with a map and bibliography ("Minamatabyō: Rekishi to kaisetsu" 水俣病: 歴史と解説, pp. 188–97). Saitō closes with a reminder that even today the Minamata disease issue is far from resolved. This is followed by a "medical report and explanation" of Minamata disease by Yorifuji Takashi, a brief introduction to the disease and its history, replacing the original essay by Harada Masazumi ("Minamatabyō: Igaku kara no hōkoku to kaisetsu" 水俣病: 医学からの報告と解説, pp. 198–201). Yorifuji, like Harada and the Smiths, pays special attention to congenital patients. The book closes with an essay of reminiscences and thanks by Aileen Smith ("Shashin wa miru gawa ga kansei saseru kara" 写真は見る側が完成させるから, pp. 202–5). Her insights into Eugene Smith include the way he combined an idealism exemplified by his constant emphasis on integrity with a realism focused on the need to convey his message to viewers. In this way, she writes, art and journalism were not enemies but essential parts of the same whole.

Eugene Smith's prologue ends with the words "To cause awareness is our only strength" (p. 7 in the 2021 Japanese edition reviewed here; p. 8 in the original edition; quotation is from the English original). The book causes that awareness, not by illustrating and explaining the story of the "Minamata incident" in chronological order but by bringing the reader along with the Smiths. We are first introduced to life in Minamata and to Minamata disease. The book then moves back and forth between introductions to individuals and families in Minamata and its environs, and events such as demonstrations, negotiations, and meetings, exemplified by figure 1 showing patients negotiating with Chisso's president after their 1973 court victory, demanding that the company pay fair compensation to all patients.

Living in Minamata from September 1971 to November 1974 gave the Smiths time to get to know their subjects as neighbors and often friends. In the years when he created his classic photographic essays at *Life* magazine Eugene had frustrated his editors by taking a great deal of time to observe and understand the lives of his subjects and gain their consent; as well, he refused to hand over his negatives, instead printing his photographs himself so that he could choose which were used and exactly how they appeared. Now he was entirely free to work as he wanted, and those same qualities made him the right person to show Minamata to the world. He developed and printed photographs in the small house he and Aileen rented, dodging and burning as he printed to bring attention to certain parts of each image, often the subject's eyes.

The bright, unseeing eyes of congenital Minamata disease victim Kamimura ("Uemura" in the book) Tomoko 上村智子, and the loving gaze of her mother as she holds Tomoko in the bath in a composition reminiscent of Mary holding Jesus in Michelangelo's *Pietà*, hold the viewer's attention in the best known photograph in the book (pp. 138–39 in both the new Japanese edition under review and in the English original). "Tomoko in Her Bath" has become not only the single photograph that most powerfully represents Minamata disease, but also one of the defining images of the second half of the twentieth century, along with others such as Nick Ut's 1972 photograph of Kim Phúc fleeing naked from a napalm attack in Vietnam and the several images of "Tank Man" blocking advancing tanks in Beijing the day after the violent suppression of the Tiananmen protests in June 1989. Eugene pressed the shutter for this most famous photograph he ever took, but it was in fact a joint creation of the Kamimura family, Aileen, and Eugene.

Aileen Smith rapidly became an accomplished photographer in her own right. Her most powerful contribution to the book is the section on congenital Minamata disease patient Sakamoto Shinobu 坂本しのぶ ("Shinobu: Hiroiatsume ikiru inochi" しのぶ: 拾い集め生きる命, pp. 150–69 in the new Japanese edition under review; "Shinobu: To Gather a Life," pp. 150–69 in the English original). Aileen got to know Shinobu soon after moving to Minamata. They remain close friends over fifty years later, and Shinobu remains one

of the best-known faces of Minamata disease. Shinobu was a strong-willed middle school student when the Smiths met her, determined not to let the disease stop her from walking or talking, or holding chopsticks or a pencil. She had learned how she got the disease only when, on a school trip in third grade, she overheard one teacher telling another that Shinobu was sick because her mother ate the polluted fish. Photographs show her struggling to force her contorted body to march with her classmates on a school sports day, and preparing with her mother and other patients to attend the first United Nations conference on the environment in Stockholm in 1972. She says to Aileen: "If Chisso could understand me, I want to say to them … To die to die to die … no, to come alive again … no no … to die again … again.… To give me back my feet, mouth … I want it given back … to be given back … to be like you, Aileen, like a human being … like everyone else" (p. 159 in both the new Japanese edition under review and in the English original; quotation is from the English original).

The photographic genius, the humanism, and the years invested by Eugene and Aileen Smith resulted in a book that makes the effects of an invisible poison visible, not in animals now protected by the U.S. Endangered Species Act such as northern spotted owls or snail darters but in "unprotected" human beings. Their images present those human beings not as far away but as familiar and sympathetic, with palpable pain, anger, and hopes. They close their book with hope for change: "Historians might find in Minamata the healthiest roots of a new industrial revolution. Looking back, they might find that from this arena emerged the strongest realization that industry has no divine right to pollute in the name of gross national product. They might find—if humankind ever decides to assume true responsibility for its stewardship of this planet—that they are looking back into a kind of soul-force of courage, a force that might save our children from the plunders that began with the first industrial revolution. That would be a victory" (p. 172 in both the new Japanese edition under review and in the English original; quotation is from the English original). Such optimism may seem naive half a century later, but Eugene Smith's work always reflected faith in the basic goodness of regular people. And even if not optimistic, perhaps the book can still inspire us to hold on to hope—and to work for environmental justice.

An entirely different book on Minamata was also published in 2021. *The Minamata Story: An EcoTragedy*, written by Seán Michael Wilson and illustrated by Akiko Shimojima with a foreword by activist and Minami Kyushu University faculty member Brian Small, is a *manga* (graphic novel) in which we follow the central character in learning about what happened in Minamata in the early, dramatic years of acute Minamata disease and sometimes violent demonstrations in the 1950s, and what patients and supporters have done to rebuild lives and community in recent decades. At the end of the book, along with a list of materials for further reading, are capsule biographies of people on whom characters in the book are based: four congenital Minamata disease patients and one of their supporters.

Wilson is Scottish and lives in Kumamoto City, less than thirty minutes by bullet train from Minamata.[11] He and Shimojima have both won awards for their books. Wilson is the author of over thirty graphic novels, with many different illustrators. His books include *manga* versions of *Hagakure*, *The Book of Five Rings*, the *Tao Te Ching*, *Wuthering Heights*, *A Christmas Carol*, and Murasaki Shikibu's *Tale of Genji*. Another ten of his books are his own fictional stories. One book (with an introduction by Jeremy Corbyn) covers the history of trade unions in the United Kingdom, another is a history of radical thought, and another (with an introduction by Noam Chomsky) is about participatory economics and the American left-wing economist and activist Michael Albert.

Given these interests, it is no surprise that Wilson chose to write about Minamata and to have his college student protagonist conclude that, "In lots of places around the world young people are protesting against injustice and environmental damage. Whatever their theory or language or culture is, the basic aim is the same: they are trying to make things better. I think we should be doing the same in Japan. And from now on, I will" (p. 101).

The book begins with the factory's pollution causing strange behavior and deaths in cats in the mid-1950s, and then jumps to the home of college student Tomi in Kumamoto City in 2020. Tomi, whose father is British and mother Japanese, must write a term paper on Minamata disease. His mother reveals that she was born

11 For information on Wilson's graphic novels, see his website at https://seanmichaelwilson.weebly.com. For his "newspaper articles, internet articles and various views on culture, history, art, sociology, etc., from a radical left wing perspective," see his "Radical Fun" website at https://radicalfun.weebly.com.

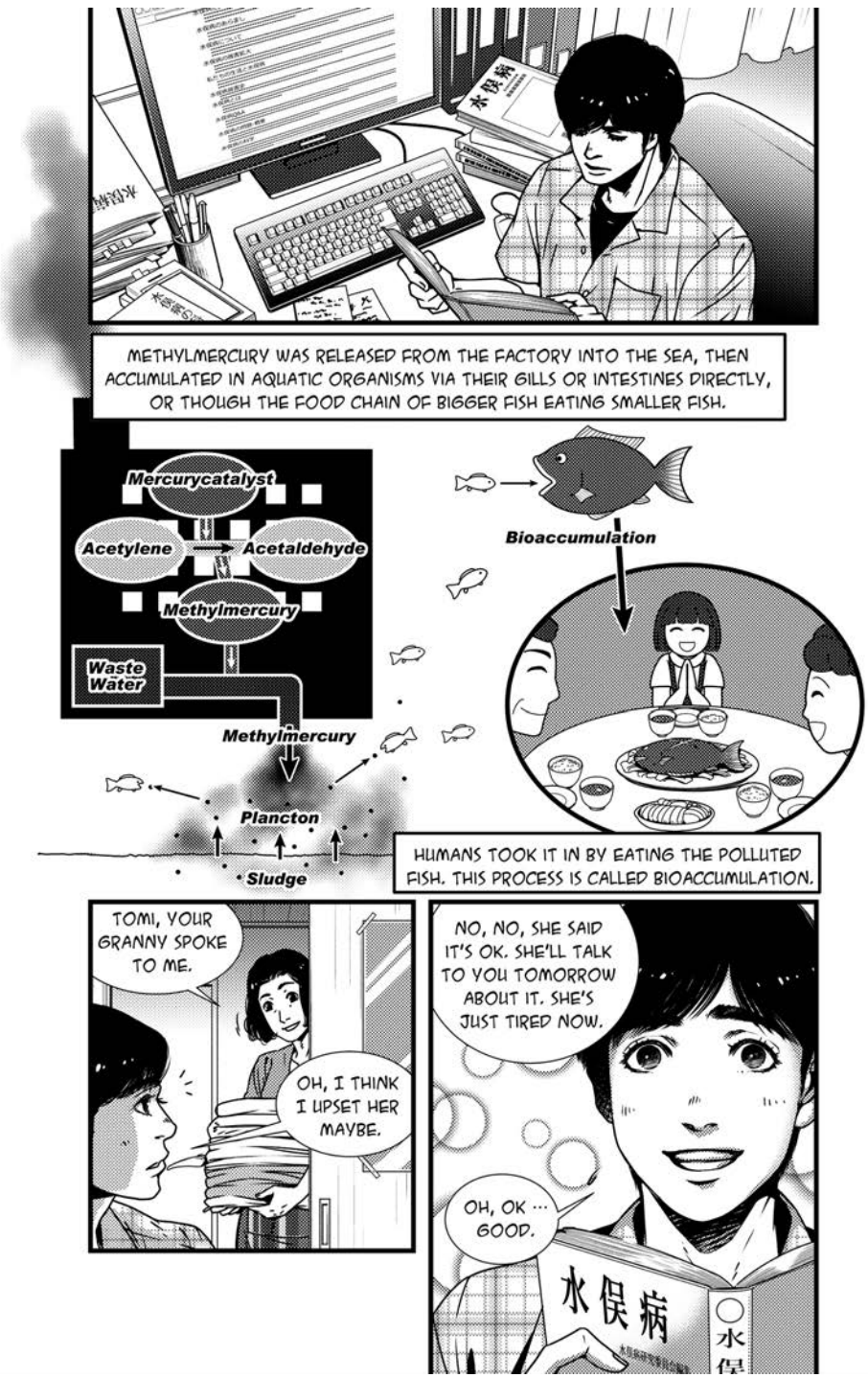


Figure 2. Bioaccumulation. From Wilson and Shimojima, *The Minamata Story*, p. 16, with permission.

in Minamata and brought to Kumamoto as a child by her parents, who kept their Minamata origins secret. His grandmother tells him about the struggles of fishing families in the early days, when Chisso would not compensate them and shops would not sell their fish. She agrees to accompany him to Minamata, having not been back for over thirty years. As Tomi prepares, we learn along with him how through the process of bioaccumulation the factory's methyl mercury waste was absorbed and concentrated in the aquatic food chain and finally consumed by humans.

On their visit to Minamata they are hosted by Katō Takeko at Hotto Hausu, a real person and place despite the fictional story. They learn about Hotto Hausu, a mutual support center, day care center, and workplace for patients who produce goods such as shopping bags from recycled materials; they also help make visitors and others aware of the Minamata disease story. A patient tells them of being bullied as a child, and they visit a former neighbor of Tomi's grandmother. The two women reminisce, jumping from memories of Eugene and Aileen Smith, to shopkeepers refusing to take money from patients in the 1950s for fear the disease was contagious, to the way in which fish floated on the surface, birds died, and fishing was decimated in the early days of the outbreak. The pre-disease past is depicted as a golden age, though with a reminder of the dangers of glossing over its difficulties: "It was especially hard when we thought back to how simple, clean and beautiful the sea was before.… It's easy to feel sentimental about the past. But sometimes it really was better" (pp. 56–57).

Tomi then visits a Kumamoto University doctor who had trained under Harada Masazumi. He learns how the medical question of diagnosing Minamata disease became a political and economic issue because more official certifications meant more costly compensation payments from Chisso and medical care from the government. The doctor tells him about the early patients with acute Minamata disease and those with milder symptoms who are still alive, and describes the fishermen's riots and invasions of the factory in 1959. The doctor is disappointed that young students in Japan today are now "so timid and apolitical," unlike those of his own college days or those today in Hong Kong, Europe, and America, saying: "We could do with more protesting here, like it used to be. The world needs young people to keep pushing for positive change" (p. 86).

As Tomi prepares his report, his grandmother confides that when her parents left Minamata they chose not to move to Tokyo because it was too polluted. She attends his presentation on Minamata disease in his college class, and after he finishes his prepared talk he tells how his family, like many others, felt they had to hide their Minamata roots. His closing challenge to his classmates is clearly Wilson's challenge to his readers: "I told you about the doctor at the university. Something he said affected me a lot. When he was about my age he went to help the sufferers in Minamata and campaigned with them to get recognition and payment from the company and the government. What have I done compared to that? And please ask yourself, what are you doing? What are you doing to help make things better?" (p. 100). This is, no doubt, the moral of Wilson's story. But one more point is made through Tomi's grandmother's praise of him after they leave Hotto Hausu in Minamata: "You were respectful enough to go to meet the Minamata people, and listen to their stories" (p. 66).

Wilson had to choose his focus for the limited text space in a graphic novel of 104 pages, so events before the mid-1950s are omitted and those from the 1960s to the 1980s are hardly mentioned. *Minamata Story* gives the reader an overview of events from the mid- to late 1950s, an introduction to bioaccumulation, and a sense that patients today are working to support each other and tell the story of Minamata disease as a warning as well as an inspiration to recycle and to prevent or stand up against pollution. Tomi is a model for readers, who are challenged to learn and to act. There are few typographical errors or awkward phrasings, but the map on page 2 shows a far larger area as "Minamata" than is actually encompassed by the city. The central character is a college student, and Wilson often rightly explains elsewhere what all Japanese know—that graphic novels are not only for young persons. The book can and should be read by adults, but its language and messages seem aimed primarily at readers of middle shool or high school age. One may wonder why Wilson did not make Tomi younger. In fact, the book won a 2021 Freeman Book Award Honorable Mention in the "Young Adult/High School Literature (Graphic)" category. In sum, in both its focus and format—and its likely audience—*Minamata Story* complements more than it overlaps the Smiths' *Minamata*.

Why publish, or update and republish, books on Minamata in 2021? What makes Minamata still important? One thing that makes these books timely is the

new movie *Minamata*, starring Johnny Depp as Eugene Smith and Minami as Aileen Smith and directed by Andrew Levitas. An extra cover sheet on the new Japanese edition of the Smiths' *Minamata* advertises the opening of the movie in Japan, and Johnny Depp's visit to Minamata is mentioned in *Minamata Story*. Harada Masazumi published a book titled *Minamatabyō wa owatte inai* (Minamata disease is not over) in 1985, and the books under review here join Harada's and many others in combating the mistaken assumption that the 1973 settlement "solved" the Minamata disease problem.[12]

The year 2021 marked sixty-five years since the official "discovery" of Minamata disease, when Dr. Hosokawa Hajime 細川一, who headed Chisso's hospital, reported to the Minamata public health office that there was an outbreak of "a disease of the central nervous system of unknown cause" after hospitalizing two young sisters, and then other patients, the previous month. One of those girls was Tanaka Jitsuko 田中実子, whom Eugene Smith felt he never successfully photographed: "Jitsuko-chan: A vibrant child who has become a stillborn adult. A loved beautiful human being aborted from useful life by the waste products of industrial progress. A breathing, haunting, beautiful nineteen-year-old young lady who will never know a lover. A still complex and remarkable human being unable to function in any of our accepted normalities. She cannot walk. She cannot talk. It is said that if she were to fall into a fire she would not realize her pain" (p. 74 in both the new Japanese edition under review and in the English original; quotation is from the English original).

This year, 2022, is the fiftieth anniversary of the Smiths' article and photographs of Minamata in *Life* magazine. It is also the fiftieth anniversary of the UN conference on the environment in Stockholm, where Sakamoto Shinobu by her very presence testified vividly to the effects of Minamata disease. Sakamoto continues to struggle to travel and to force her uncooperative lips and tongue to speak about Minamata disease, repeating her hope that no one else should suffer what she has. Aileen Smith writes in her new closing essay for this Japanese edition that while the bravery of the victims portrayed in the book led to some improvements in the environment in Japan, Minamata is not over and global problems with mercury and other pollutants remain. She has republished the book not to look back but because of the need to move forward, "Because the photograph is completed by the viewer" ("Shashin wa miru gawa ga kansei saseru kara," p. 205).

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12 Harada, *Minamatabyō wa owatte inai*.