

## そこに生えたようなベンチで —The Witness に表された定着への願望—

On a bench that looks as if it might have grown there:

Desire to take root in *The Witness*

久保田 文

Aya Kubota

### 要旨

オザークスの地域研究に関わりを持った立場から、ノラ・ロバーツにとって記念すべき200冊目の舞台としてオザークス地方が選ばれた点に着目した。森の香りやスマイルの織りなす紫のカーペットといったものは、純文学における心象風景などとは異なり、オザークス地方そのものへの関心を掻き立てる。また同時に、本作品ではアメリカの大衆文学が果たす道義的役割についても垣間見ることができる。

ノラ・ロバーツは、心を癒す地域社会が持つ教育力や、金銭より自然を愛する住人達を描き、「たとえ世界が減びるとも、正義は行われるべきである」というマンスフィールド卿の言葉さえ引用している。N. Y. タイムズのベストセラー・リストで第一位の常連であり、総計3年半以上アメリカで一番本を売上げた彼女の影響力は到底無視できない。彼女の信奉者達は、本作の価値観を、オザークスと連想する傾向に至ったはずである。この点で、*The Witness* は、『大草原の小さな家』のような作品と同じ系譜にあると言える。ファミリーがオザークス地方に移住して家庭を築いたように、転居を繰り返すアメリカ人が潜在的に持ち続ける定住への願望も、そこには読み取れる。

●キーワード：アメリカ小説 (American novels)/ オザークス (Ozarks)/ ノラ・ロバーツ (Nora Roberts)

It is said that 48% of paperback books sold in North America 20 years ago were romance novels and that paperbacks were not highly thought of in public libraries. In many libraries, paperbacks were not put in the formal lists, and lending records were not taken precisely. In his essay “The Cold Relationship Between Romance Novels and Libraries,” Tomoyuki Suzuki noted that librarians had a tendency to regard paperback romance novels as worthless items that were not appropriate for their fortresses of knowledge and culture, purely on the basis of a glance at their covers.<sup>1)</sup> Nevertheless, in the *New York Times* bestseller list of 1994, there were seven hard-cover romance novels. It can be safely said to have been the turning point. Romance novels have been getting a higher status, and according to Wikipedia, they are “the most popular literary genre in North America, comprising almost 55% of all paperback books sold in 2004.” Since then, the share in paperbacks has become meaningless because top romance novelists have come to prefer to publish in hardback, with refined covers. In

any case, it is becoming increasingly difficult for literary scholars and lovers of serious literature to ignore the existence of the romance novel genre and disregard its social influence. Nora Roberts’s books alone “have spent a combined 198 weeks as the number one spot on the *New York Times* bestseller list—that’s over 3.5 years,” and “her books are published in over 34 countries.”<sup>2)</sup>

Japanese people seldom read American romance novels, but their counterpart might be an original Japanese literary genre, the “light novel.” The light novel was born in the 1970s and its essential feature is the love story. However, most of the readers of light novels are teenagers, and take an interest in virtual reality and futuristic novelty. For instance, in the work titled *Accel World*, Tokyo is divided into seven domains, and the heroine, a junior high school student in reality, is at the same time, the queen of one of the domains in virtual reality. Many teenagers decide to buy or not to buy light novels just by glancing at the covers and spreads, so illustrators are instructed to depict cute

girls or handsome guys. In terms of their content, while American romance novels are similar to Hollywood movies, Japanese light novels are like animation films. The sales of light novels are on the increase, but they are still said to be only 18% of the total sales of *bunkobon*, small pocket edition paperbacks. Compared with this genre, American romance novels are reaching a time of maturity.

Hard-covered copies of *The Witness*, published by Putnam have beautiful front covers, with an image of the Ozarks' natural beauty. Contrary to expectations, what readers learn at the beginning of the novel is that Susan Fitch, chief of surgery at Chicago Silva Memorial Hospital, inseminated herself with a deliberately selected donor's sperm to have a faultless child. As a result, the daughter, named Elizabeth, was perfectly engineered to require only two accelerated semesters of college. Susan was planning to make her daughter into a surgeon, like her. Elizabeth's physical condition was properly taken care of by her mother's nutritionist and her trainer. The mother engaged one of the top child therapists in Chicago, and Elizabeth was in therapy for as long as she remembered. The daughter wore the clothes selected by Susan's personal shopper. Elizabeth was very obedient to instruction, but at 16, the situation was already unsatisfactory. She secretly wished to major in criminology and computer science. She had a thirst for friends and ordinary relationships with people. Above all, Elizabeth desperately needed motherly love, and she shouted at Susan, "I don't need therapy! I need a mother who listens, who gives a shit about how I feel." Her mother just answered in a cold detached way: "That kind of language only shows a lack of maturity and intellect."<sup>3)</sup> Afterward, Susan goes off to a medical conference, leaving her daughter behind. Elizabeth's inner words, "Love me enough. Just this once," let readers understand that she was brought up in a dysfunctional family regardless of the wealthy environment.

Roger Lea MacBride, Laura Wilder's adopted grandson, described a completely opposite example of a family in his novel *Little Farm in the Ozarks*, published in 1994. Laura's daughter, Rose, was deeply loved by

her parents, whose magnanimity is open even to a little intruder. One night, someone broke into the Wilders' henhouse, and Mr. Wilder found a thief looking for eggs. The boy looked about Rose's age, which was eight. Mr. Wilder said to the boy, "Stealing is serious business," but gradually his voice became softer and "his eyes shone with a gentle warmth."<sup>4)</sup> Mr. and Mrs. Wilder thought he was hungry and offered him steamed beans, potatoes, and cornbread. The boy gave his name as Swiney, and he seemed to live in a tenant house with his elder brother, Abe, who was out working. Abe had left something for his brother to eat, but Swiney said, "The latch busted on the door. Raccoons got in and stole every bit." Mr. Wilder calmly taught the boy, "The important thing is that you don't have to steal from us to eat, Swiney. We'd never let a boy go hungry if we had a crumb to spare."<sup>5)</sup> Moreover, he kindly offered, "We'll fix a pallet for you to sleep on, by the fire, where it's warm. After a good breakfast we'll go to your place and see about fixing that latch." The family was economically pressed but had abundant tolerance and educational power. Mrs. Wilder looked after Swiney, bantering with him. She said, "So long as you are going to be part of this family, I'll thank you to leave skunk business to the skunks," and Swiney was made to take his bath "in a corner of the house behind a sheet Mama had hung from the rafters."<sup>6)</sup> The couple have a healthy psychological "generativity" that enables them to bring up the younger generation with love. Modernity is not the sole reason why Susan in *The Witness* did not function properly as a parent. Readers can find contrastive examples in the same work later.

Elizabeth went to a nightclub where her newfound friend Julie desired to go. The two girls met two men, Ilya and Alex, whom Julie described as "the hottest guys in the club."<sup>7)</sup> Julie liked Alex's idea that the four should move to his gorgeous house, but the visit was to end in two murders. Alex was a relative of a Russian mafia *pakhan*, and sudden intruders shot him, blaming him for having stolen from their clubs and restaurants. They also shot Julie to death, and Ilya, who looked attractive even to Elizabeth, kicked Alex's corpse. Ilya was the son of the Volkov family boss. Elizabeth witnessed all the scenes and ran away.

Irrespective of her mother's objections, Elizabeth made her decision to testify on the matter. She said to Susan, "I have to try to do what's right. That's the consequence, Mother. And I have to accept the consequence."<sup>8)</sup> Susan did not seem glad that her daughter was not hurt and just blamed Elizabeth for acting idiotically, asserting that her actions led to Julie's death. Readers realize that the lack of parental love and constant accusations caused Elizabeth's excessive self-reproach and her low self-esteem. Looking at herself in the mirror, she called herself "Freak," guessing that her appearance was the cause of her mother's "disappointment."<sup>9)</sup> Susan Fitch's attitudes contrast with those of Mr. and Mrs. Wilder; the couple practiced the saying "Hate the offence, but not the offender." With Elizabeth not going to Harvard Medical School, Susan wanted nothing whatever to do with her.

Elizabeth went into the Witness Protection Program, and she spent her happiest days with two marshals, the brotherly John and thoughtful Terry. However, on Elizabeth's 17th birthday, when the two were giving Elizabeth a happy surprise, two corrupt marshals came to blow up the safehouse. John and Terry were killed in the pursuit of their duties. Without anyone to trust any longer, Elizabeth started to obey John's last words, "Run. Don't stop. Don't look back."<sup>10)</sup>

Elizabeth's intelligent quotient of 210 enabled her to go to MIT on a forged ID and transcripts. She had a genius for computer science and could earn money at home. After spending twelve years as a runaway, she now lives in Bickford "rucked into the Ozarks," under the name of Abigail Lowery, with Bert, a guard dog, her only friend. She has been hacking into the Volkov network and anonymously leaking the information to a female FBI agent based in Chicago. Moreover, Abigail has been doing hard work on a virus to infect the Volkov's system, dreaming of ruining the family. With secrets to hide, she has been trying to avoid local people's curious gaze, but a young chief of police, Brooks Gleason, notices that she carries a gun and has a hyper-technical security system, indicating a great fear of something, which makes him think he should protect her. At first, his overly friendly attitudes irritate Abigail.

He talks to her affably, as he does to everyone in the town, saying, "I'm from the Ozarks. Long stories are a way of life."<sup>11)</sup>

Brooks was raised by his father, Loren, who is a high school teacher, and his mother, a painter whose romantic works are mythical and mythological studies. The fact that Abigail is very alone breaks the heart of Brooks's mother, Sunny, and she calls on Abigail uninvited with her homemade huckleberry pie. Abigail does not want to have much conversation with anyone, but actually she has been fond of the murals on her house. Gradually she is caught up in the stories of the woman who calls herself an old hippie. Abigail notices that Sunny smiles when she says the name of her husband. When Abigail is alone again, she remembers "the most vital and compelling statement on a relationship." That is what Sunny talked to her about: "We've been married—I count from the handfasting—for thirty-six years. He still makes me happy." Abigail thinks, "That happiness could last"<sup>12)</sup> Having a mother without the aptitude for love, Abigail assumes she also lacks the capacity, but Sunny repeats "Love finds a way."<sup>13)</sup> When Brooks falls in love with Abigail, Sunny puts her arm around Abigail's shoulders. Being moved, Abigail says to Brooks, "It was just a careless gesture. But when she did that, to me, I felt...this is what a mother does."<sup>14)</sup> The parents have a natural educational power that inspires lost people, and Brooks also has two loving sisters, who also treat Abigail thoughtfully. One sister, Sybill, describes the family thus: "We're nice people, and inclined to like anyone who makes Brooks happy."<sup>15)</sup> All of them choose and continue to live in the small town. In the 21st century, again, the Ozarks provide an ideal setting where wonderful family stories are developed.

In an attempt to add some realism to the novel, Nora Roberts wrote about a contrastive case in the Ozarks. The wealthy Lincoln Blake repeatedly pressured and threatened people to let his only child, Justin, slide when his violence ended in illegal acts. The Inn of the Ozarks is run by the Conroys, the family of Brooks's old schoolmate, and its beauty leads Sunny to call it "one of the brightest jewels in Bickford's treasure box."<sup>16)</sup> Justin stays at the suite of the place with bad

friends, destroys property, including Mrs. Conroy's beloved chandelier, and damages the rooms with red wine, drugs, and excrement. He also hits and sexually abuses people. Brooks is afraid that Justin will end up killing someone, maybe even himself. One midnight, Justin comes illegally onto Abigail's property with the intent of defacing Brooks's police cruiser and lunges at Brooks with a knife. Chief Gleason's good reflexes save him, but Abigail, again a witness, cannot help but tremble, worrying him. Afterwards, Lincoln Blake visits her house to try to bribe her, but she says, "I don't like men who raise violent, angry young men,"<sup>17)</sup> pointing out the lack of his educational power. Lincoln and Justin think money always talks, but this point of view differs from that of the local people, who prefer to avoid the urban, material world. They support the Conroys, and the judge sentences Justin strictly.

Good food always plays an important part in the expression of neighborly love. Attracted by Sunny's stories and the irresistible taste of huckleberry pie, Abigail eats nearly half of it without realizing. After Justin's violent conduct, Brooks said to Abigail, "She cried. Mrs. Conroy. This sweet, funny woman who always had peanut butter cookies in the jar, just broke down and cried. I should've found a way to put that little bastard away before it went this far."<sup>18)</sup> Kim, the waitress at Lindy's Diner, learning of the judge's sentence, says she will give Judge Reingold a pie on the house the next time he comes.<sup>19)</sup> Abigail observes a backyard barbecue party that Sunny hosts, preparing for her casual party piece a potato salad. She observes that, "A backyard barbecue had its points....A casual setting for socialization, a variety of food prepared by a variety of hands...It was a kind of ritual...and somewhat tribal, with adults helping to serve or feed or tend to the children, their own and those belonging to others..."<sup>20)</sup> The community retains the power to bring up its children physically and spiritually together.

Plants and knowledge about them are also of great value in this community. Sunny says to Abigail, "I've got some yellow flags I need to divide. I'll give you some. They'll like that sunny spot over by the brook."<sup>21)</sup> Abigail herself likes to maintain her greenhouse and

butterfly garden. After the setting moves to the Ozarks, many natural elements are scattered throughout the story. Abigail catches "glimpses of the delicate drape of toothwort, the bold yellow of trout lily catching the dappled sun along the stream bank just before the water took a quick, rumbling fall over rocks. Among those tender green leaves, wild plum added color and drama."<sup>22)</sup> Natural charms also appeal to the senses of smell and hearing; the night breeze flutters through, "carrying the scent of the woods, the steady music of the creek."<sup>23)</sup>

Collaboration between man and nature adds more beauty to the area; characters enjoy "pots and barrels of sunstruck daffodils and candy-colored tulips" on the streets.<sup>24)</sup> Natural beauty cherished by local people's thoughtfulness heals the heroine's uneasiness and grief. In the following quotation, Abigail is taking a walk with Brooks: "The wild plums popped, fragrant petals among the tender haze of green, and the willow someone had planted years before dipped its lacy fingers toward the busy water of the stream. Wood violets spread a carpet of rich purple. In the quiet, in the scent, in the color, she calmed as they walked through sunlight and shade."<sup>25)</sup> The descriptions of nature are different from those in serious literature; they are not deeply influenced by people's mental images as reflections of social situations and the atmosphere of the times. In serious literature, characters often see imagined scenery even while being in front of or in the middle of natural scenes, so readers can reach more understanding of the states of the characters' feeling. By contrast, the depictions of natural scenery in *The Witness* just make readers more interested in the charms of the Ozarks themselves.

Abigail would like to buy a bench, "something organic and woodsy. Something that looked as if it might have grown there."<sup>26)</sup> This suggests her desire to take root and settle down in the place that her lover refers to in this way. Brooks simply says to his ex-boss living in Little Rock, "I like where I am and who I am there."<sup>27)</sup> In her imagination, she was reading a book on the bench in her woods with the hills outstretched beyond, and her dog was playing in the stream. It can be inferred that something should be done to be able to

feel secure enough to bring a book instead of a gun. At this point, natural healing and people's love are changing Abigail, enabling her to step forward with a different power and confidence. Abigail finally tells her secrets to Brooks and decides to take the witness stand after a twelve-year interval. She does so out of a sense of justice for the dead people and in the hope of starting her own new life.

In contrast to Japanese light novels, in which virtual reality and augmented reality are emphasized and reality appears to be meaningless, *The Witness* says there's a comfortable and beautiful place to live in reality. The work depicts the Ozarks as a place that renders people strong enough to live a human life and gives them the creativity to enjoy life. Furthermore, the fact that the author quoted Lord Mansfield's words should also be attended: "Let justice be done, though the heavens fall."<sup>28)</sup> The heroine is ethically a good person, and her efforts bear fruit. The victory of justice can be clearly described in romance novels, so socially influential romance novelists could give guidance to the general public. Writing *The Witness*, Nora Roberts entered her sixties, and the work is her 200th book; the author must have deeply felt attached to the work. As its setting, she didn't choose Maryland, her homeland, but the Ozarks. One can tell the author's sense of values in the work; even the heroine, the IT expert who is called *otaku* by her lover, prefers to live while communing with nature. It is no overstatement to say that the Ozarks is a very special place that inspired the best-selling novelist. Without its charms, the attractiveness of the work would have been dampened entirely.

#### Works Cited

- 1) "The Cold Relationship Between Romance Novels and Libraries" <http://current.ndl.go.jp/ca1047> Current Awareness No. 197, 20 Jan. 1996. Web. 24 Mar. 2015.
- 2) <http://noraroberts.com/did-you-know/> Web. 15 May. 2015.
- 3) Roberts, Nora, *The Witness*, (G.P. Putman's Sons: New York) 2012. p. 8.
- 4) MacBride, Roger Lea, *Little Farm in the Ozarks*, (Harper Trophy: New York) 1994. p. 6.
- 5) Ibid., p. 10.
- 6) Ibid., p. 23.
- 7) *The Witness*, p. 38.
- 8) Ibid., p. 74.
- 9) Ibid., p. 9.
- 10) Ibid., p. 100.
- 11) Ibid., p. 198.
- 12) Ibid., p. 139.
- 13) Ibid., p. 174.
- 14) Ibid., p. 438.
- 15) Ibid., p. 288.
- 16) Ibid., p. 359.
- 17) Ibid., p. 312.
- 18) Ibid., p. 268.
- 19) Ibid., p. 280.
- 20) Ibid., p. 432.
- 21) Ibid., p. 288.
- 22) Ibid., pp. 218-219.
- 23) Ibid., p. 204.
- 24) Ibid., p. 219.
25. 26) Ibid., p. 229.
- 27) Ibid., p. 384.
- 28) Ibid., p. 353.