

Night on the Milky Way Train: Miyazawa Kenji's Space Odyssey 銀河鉄道の夜—宮沢賢治の宇宙空間オデュッセイア

Roger Pulvers

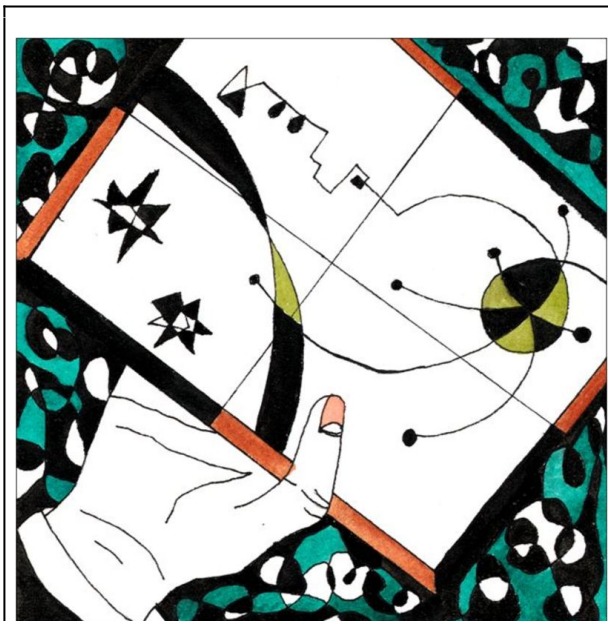
Night on the Milky Way Train: Miyazawa Kenji's Space Odyssey

By Roger Pulvers

Although Miyazawa Kenji did not start writing *Night on the Milky Way Train* until sometime in 1924, it is clear that the event that gave him the idea for the novel and, curiously, the strength to complete it, had taken place some two years earlier, on 27 November 1922, to be precise. This was the day his beloved little sister, Toshi, died, age 24. It was Kenji's way to accompany her on the journey he described in the first two lines of his poem "The Morning of Last Farewell"...

O my little sister

Who will travel so far on this day



With this ticket you can go to the ends of

the earth and beyond

Kenji worked on the story for at least seven years, probably nine, up to his own death in 1933, leaving a manuscript that was published for the first time the following year. Since then it has become Japan's greatest children's classic, akin in Japan in stature and renown to *The Wind in the Willows* or *Charlotte's Web*.

The story is simple.

Two very close friends, Giovanni and Campanella, find themselves on a train coursing through the heavens. On this train they meet all sorts of bizarre and wonderful characters. They hop off, too, to experience first hand the dazzling sights and curious events that occur near the banks of The Celestial River, as the Milky Way is called in Japanese.

At one point the conductor appears, asking for tickets.

Giovanni sticks his hand in his pocket and produces a green folded ticket that he didn't know he had. The conductor and some of the passengers marvel at this ticket that ensures passage anywhere in space and time. In fact, the chapter of the novel titled "Giovanni's Ticket" is by far the longest and most important one of the book.

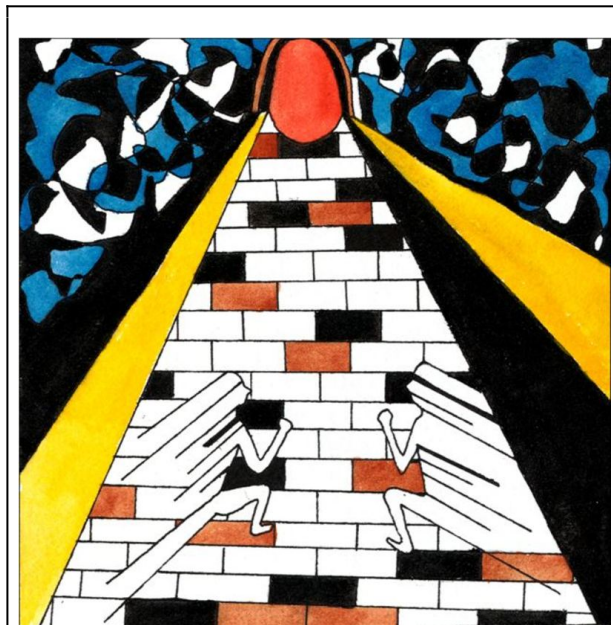
Giovanni's ticket is a free pass for the imagination; and Kenji wished to imagine himself one place more than anywhere else: together with his sister Toshi on that journey to the other world, a world he considered a far

better one than this one.

But, in a flash Campanella is gone, despite Giovanni's conviction that he could go to the ends of the Earth and beyond with him. Campanella disappears into the Coal Sack, a pitch-black bottomless pit that is actually a dark nebula in the skies of the Southern Hemisphere.

When Giovanni comes to, he is on top of a hill above town.

He runs down to the river only to discover that a boy has drowned. The boy, Campanella, tried to save another boy who had fallen in the river. The other boy, who was actually a bully, was saved. But Campanella disappeared into the depths of the river.



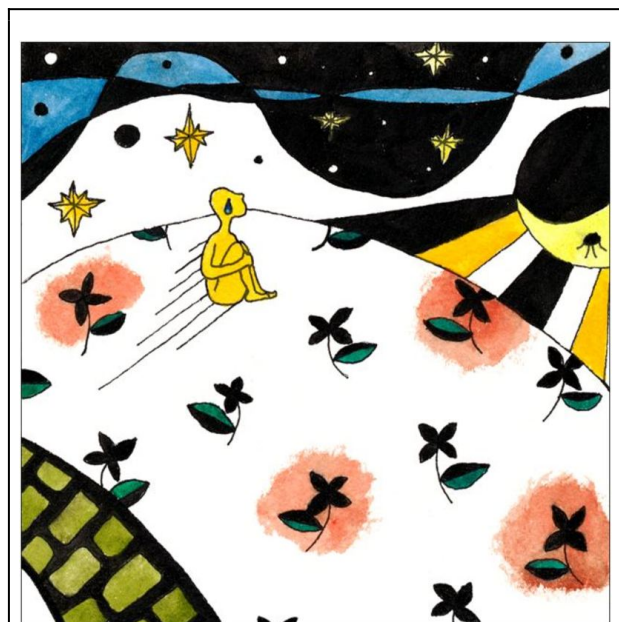
The two boys ran as fast as their two legs would take them

Campanella's father is standing on the bank of the river, gripping a watch in his hand. But after only 45 minutes, he gives up, telling Giovanni that nothing can be done ... that it is too late. He turns to Giovanni and expresses worry about him. Giovanni's father has been away and Campanella's father is sure he will be

coming home soon. Even in such a moment of intense grief, Campanella's father manages to show sympathy for the plight of others.

Giovanni thinks ... I know where Campanella went. He looks down the river, onto which the Milky Way is reflected from one end to the other.

Following the immense tragedy of 11 March 2011 in the Tohoku region, the works of Miyazawa Kenji, who was born, raised and spent most of his life in Tohoku's Iwate Prefecture, have received a new burst of interest among all age groups in Japan. His poem "Strong in the Rain," arguably the best-known and most often memorized poem of modern Japan, has been taken up as a kind of prayer or incantation, to give strength to people faced with unbearable adversity and grief. Actor Watanabe Ken's reading of it on [Youtube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...) has had nearly a million hits; and the poem has been quoted widely in the media as containing the sentiment most needed by Japanese people today.



Giovanni found himself on top of a hill

And something similar has happened with *Night on the Milky Way Train*. Its message of

hope in the face of despair—that we can overcome personal tragedy through total empathy with others and sacrifice on their behalf—has struck a chord with the people of Tohoku, who can claim Kenji as their native son.

There are other themes in this novel that make it relevant to our century. Kenji was, from age 21, a staunch vegetarian who rarely wavered. (He had a weakness for eel and soba with chicken, but was apparently able to keep his teeth clenched tight most of the time when these temptations tantalized him.) The character of the birdcatcher in the novel is a fascinating one. He earns the boys' respect because he catches his birds without killing them. Kenji was strictly opposed to any form of violence against animals. This, too, makes him our contemporary.

December I was fortunate enough to be the guest on a four-part NHK television program about *Night on the Milky Way Train*, relating it to the awful events of last year in Tohoku. The titles of the series were these: Kenji's Message; From Grief to Hope; We are All Connected; True Happiness. The link can be found [here](#).

One obsession of believers of the three religions that emerged from the Holy Land is "Why was I born?" Adherents to these religions often ask themselves—or are asked by the men of their cloth—this question. But Kenji asked himself a different question: "Why am I me and not you?" And he was able to answer this question for himself. "I am you ... and you are me."

He identified totally not only with other people, taking on their personal burdens as his own, but with the land and the sky, the trees, the water, the rocks, the air and the light. His worldview would be nothing without the notion that humans are only one small and equal element in all creation.

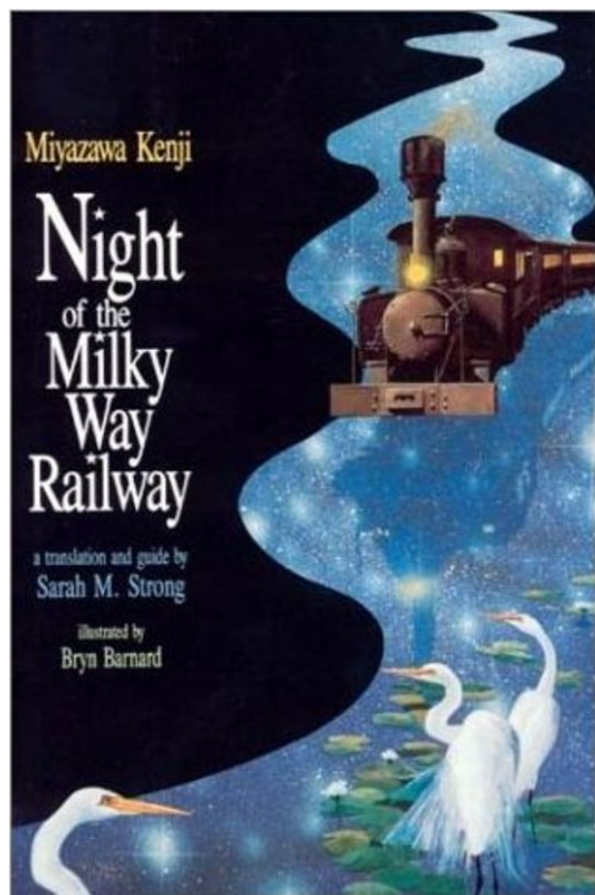
That we are bound to such a universe and that we circulate within it time and time again is the theme of *Night on the Milky Way Train*.

Since first setting down to translate this novel in 1970 I have gone through four rewrites. The first translation was too horrid to recall. The first rewrite was published in serial form in the old Mainichi Daily News, weekly, beginning in September 1973. This was the first English-language translation of the novel to appear. Subsequently it has been rendered into English by a number of other translators.

As the years went by I kept making changes here and there to the text, publishing the third version in the mid-'90s in a Chikuma Bunko bilingual edition. (This book is now in its eighth printing.) I subsequently revised this version and set it aside ... until I took it up in 2011 once again and completed what I would like to think is the final version.

My youngest daughter, Lucy, who is an artist and who has grown up with this book, which she considers her most favourite in all literature, has created 24 colour illustrations for *Night on the Milky Way Train*, and we have published it as an e-book with both the Japanese original and the (I hope definitive) translation.

The listing of the book on the site says that it is in English, but this is because iTunes requires that there be only one language mentioned. Both English and Japanese are there with Lucy's illustrations and easily accessible with a click. It is available for downloading on iPhone, iPad and iTunes on your computer [here](#).



Roger Pulvers is an American-born Australian author, playwright, theatre director and translator living in Japan. An Asia-Pacific Journal associate, he has published 40 books in Japanese and English and, in 2008, was the recipient of the Miyazawa Kenji Prize. In 2009 he was awarded Best Script Prize at the Teheran International Film Festival for “Ashita e no Yuigon.” He is the translator of Kenji Miyazawa, [Strong in the Rain: Selected Poems](#). [The Dream of Lafcadio Hearn](#) is his most recent book.

Artist Lucy Pulvers, who has loved *Night on the Milky Way Train* since she was little growing up in Japan, has created remarkable pen and ink drawings, highlighted with color, that take the reader on a spectacular visual journey. Recommended citation: Roger Pulvers, 'Night on the Milky Way Train: Miyazawa Kenji's Space Odyssey,' *The Asia-Pacific Journal* Vol 10, Issue 1 No 1, January 2, 2012.