Thumbs Race as Japan’s Best Sellers Go Cellular

Japan’s younger generation came of age with the cellphone, and created its own popular culture by tapping thumbs on keypads.

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Published: January 20, 2008

TOKYO — Until recently, cellphone novels — composed on phone keypads by young women wielding dexterous thumbs and read by fans on their tiny screens — had been dismissed in Japan as a subgenre unworthy of the country that gave the world its first novel, “The Tale of Genji,” a millennium ago. Then last month, the year-end best-seller tally showed that cellphone novels, republished in book form, have not only infiltrated the mainstream but have come to dominate it.

Of last year’s 10 best-selling novels, five were originally cellphone novels, mostly love stories written in the short sentences characteristic of text messaging but containing little of the plotting or character development found in traditional novels. What is more, the top three spots were occupied by first-time cellphone novelists, touching off debates in the news media and blogosphere.

“Will cellphone novels kill ‘the author’?” a famous literary journal, Bungaku-kai, asked on the cover of its January issue. Fans praised the novels as a new literary genre created and consumed by a generation whose reading habits had consisted mostly of manga, or comic books.

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Rin, 21, tapped out a novel on her cellphone that sold 400,000 copies in hardcover.

Ko Sasaki for The New York Times

Rin wrote her novel while commuting to her part-time job.

Ko Sasaki for The New York Times

Critics said the dominance of cellphone novels, with their poor literary quality, would hasten the decline of Japanese literature.

Whatever their literary talents, cellphone novelists are racking up the kind of sales that most more experienced, traditional novelists can only dream of.

One such star, a 21-year-old woman named Rin, wrote “If You” over a six-month stretch during her senior year in high school. While commuting to her part-time job or whenever she found a free moment, she tapped out passages on her cellphone and uploaded them on a popular Web site for would-be authors.

After cellphone readers voted her novel No. 1 in one ranking, her story of the tragic love between two childhood friends was turned into a 142-page hardcover book last year. It sold 400,000 copies and became the No. 5 best-selling novel of 2007, according to a closely watched list by Tohan, a major book distributor.

“My mother didn’t even know that I was writing a novel,” said Rin, who, like many cellphone novelists, goes by only one name. “So at first when I told her, well, I’m coming out with a novel, she was like, what? She didn’t believe it until it came out and appeared in bookstores.”

The cellphone novel was born in 2000 after a home-page-making Web site, Maho no i-rando, realized that many users were writing novels on their blogs; it tinkered with its software to allow users to upload works in progress and readers to comment, creating the serialized cellphone novel. But the number of users uploading novels began booming only two to three years ago, and the number of novels listed on the site reached one million last month, according to Maho no i-rando.

The boom appeared to have been fueled by a development having nothing to do with culture or novels but by cellphone companies’ decision to offer unlimited transmission of packet data, like text-messaging, as part of flat monthly rates. The largest provider, Docomo, began offering this service in mid-2004.

The affordability of cellphones coincided with the coming of age of a generation of Japanese for whom cellphones, more than personal computers, had been an integral part of their lives since junior high school. So they read the novels on their cellphones, even though the same Web sites were also accessible by computer. They punched out text messages with their thumbs with blinding speed, and used expressions and emoticons, like smilies and musical notes, whose nuances were lost on anyone over the age of 25.

“It’s not that they had a desire to write and that the cellphone happened to be there,” said Chiaki Ishihara, an expert in Japanese literature at Waseda University who has studied cellphone novels. “Instead, in the course of exchanging e-mail, this tool called the cellphone instilled in them a desire to write.”

Indeed, many cellphone novelists had never written fiction before, and many of their readers had never read novels before, according to publishers.

The writers are not paid for their work online, no many how many millions of times it is
viewed. The payoff, if any, comes when the novels are reproduced and sold as traditional books. Readers have free access to the Web sites that carry the novels, or pay at most $1 to $2 a month, but the sites make most of their money from advertising.

Critics say the novels owe a lot to a genre devoured by the young: comic books. In cellphone novels, characters tend to be undeveloped and descriptions thin, while paragraphs are often fragments and consist of dialogue.

“Traditionally, Japanese would depict a scene emotionally, like ‘The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country,’” Mika Naito, a novelist, said, referring to the famous opening sentence of Yasunari Kawabata’s “Snow Country.”

“In cellphone novels, you don’t need that,” said Ms. Naito, 36, who recently began writing cellphone novels at the urging of her publisher. “If you limit it to a certain place, readers won’t be able to feel a sense of familiarity.”

Written in the first person, many cellphone novels read like diaries. Almost all the authors are young women delving into affairs of the heart, spiritual descendants, perhaps, of Shikibu Murasaki, the 11th-century royal lady-in-waiting who wrote “The Tale of Genji.”

“Love Sky,” a debut novel by a young woman named Mika, was read by 20 million people on cellphones or on computers, according to Maho no i-rando, where it was first uploaded. A tear-jerker featuring adolescent sex, rape, pregnancy and a fatal disease — the genre’s sine qua non — the novel nevertheless captured the young generation’s attitude, its verbal tics and the cellphone’s omnipresence. Republished in book form, it became the No. 1 selling novel last year and was made into a movie.

Given the cellphone novels’ domination of the mainstream, critics no longer dismiss them, though some say they should be classified with comic books or popular music.

Rin said ordinary novels left members of her generation cold.

“They don’t read works by professional writers because their sentences are too difficult to understand, their expressions are intentionally wordy, and the stories are not familiar to them,” she said. “On other hand, I understand how older Japanese don’t want to recognize these as novels. The paragraphs and the sentences are too simple, the stories are too predictable. But I’d like cellphone novels to be recognized as a genre.”

As the genre’s popularity leads more people to write cellphone novels, though, an existential question has arisen: can a work be called a cellphone novel if it is not composed on a cellphone, but on a computer or, inconceivably, in longhand?

“When a work is written on a computer, the nuance of the number of lines is different, and the rhythm is different from writing on a cellphone,” said Keiko Kanematsu, an editor at Goma Books, a publisher of cellphone novels. “Some hard-core fans wouldn’t consider that a cellphone novel.”

Still, others say the genre is not defined by the writing tool.

Ms. Naito, the novelist, says she writes on a computer and sends the text to her phone, with which she rearranges her work. Unlike the first-time cellphone novelists in their teens or early 20s, she says she is more comfortable writing on a computer.

But at least one member of the cellphone generation has made the switch to computers. A year ago, one of Starts Publishing’s young stars, Chaco, gave up her phone even though she could compose much faster with it by tapping with her thumb.

“Because of writing on the cellphone, her nail had cut into the flesh and became bloodied,” said Mr. Matsushima of Starts.

“Since she’s switched to a computer,” he added, “her vocabulary’s gotten richer and her sentences have also grown longer.”
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