

# Into the hidden depths of Fukushima. An enthralling graphic narrative by a member of the decontamination team

Anyone in search of an anti-nuclear tirade should look elsewhere, because not a word of criticism against the nuclear industry can be found on any of the 550 pages of the graphic novel trilogy *Au cœur de Fukushima [In the Heart of Fukushima]*. On the contrary, the author, who hides his identity behind the pseudonym 'Kazuto Tatsuta', goes to great lengths to dispel the 'false rumours' circulating about the decontamination operations. 'I told myself that this was my chance to talk about my own experiences at the power plant, and to reveal the "hidden truth" which had never appeared in the media,' he writes as justification for his *manga* trilogy.

Although he is reluctant to reveal specifics about himself, the *mangaka* (manga artist) who follows his heartfelt dream of working in Fukushima emerges as an odd character. We find out that his passion for *manga* does not by itself pay enough for him to continue living in Tokyo, and that he is therefore forced to undertake a variety of odd jobs on the side to make ends meet – until March 2011, when the tsunami and the resulting nuclear disaster awaken in him a desire to serve his country.

Although Tatsuta's unshakeable commitment to producing an impartial account of his experiences is ultimately irritating, it also heightens the impact of his tale; the fastidiousness with which he depicts his work in graphical form makes for an enthralling read, and the veracity of his drawings and the attention to detail in his descriptions of the different parts of the site and the equipment used (such as radiation detectors) open doors for readers which would otherwise have remained closed.

Despite his stated wish to avoid any controversy, Kazuto Tatsuta reveals fascinating details of the inner workings of the nuclear industry, perhaps without even realising that he is doing so. The first volume of the trilogy describes the many twists and turns he was forced to navigate before finally being allowed through the gates of the Fukushima plant, betraying the opacity of a recruitment system which involves vast numbers of intermediaries but which prevents ordinary Joes being

deployed immediately on tasks in the vicinity of the damaged reactors. After applying through a temping agency, he is recruited by a small company on the bottom rung (level six of six) of the sub-contractor scale used by TEPCO, the famous Japanese nuclear operator.

He portrays the owners of these small companies as dodgy individuals sporting thin moustaches and wearing black pinstripe suits; 'They secure a name for themselves as sub-contractors by getting as many people onto their books as possible, even if they have never been awarded an actual contract. Some of them pocket the training bonus for new recruits and then vanish off the face of the earth.'

His job involves performing maintenance and logistics tasks in a break room used by workers carrying out decontamination operations – a thankless role which is mainly limited to cleaning toilets, but one which Tatsuta (as might have been guessed) performs, 'without passion, but without complaining'. Before long, he gets bored, however, and attempts to rise up through the ranks of sub-contractors to a role more in keeping with his ambition to become a 'decontamination soldier'. He expresses his regret that 'I haven't managed to find a role in a high-activity area'.

After a hiatus of several months, during which he returns to Tokyo, Tatsuta is taken on by a company responsible for repairing the coolant lines to the spent fuel storage ponds, and he finally gains access to the holy of holies.

Fukushima Daiichi Unit 3 Reactor, or more precisely its metal skeleton, which is all that can be seen on the images shared and reshared on the Internet after it was hit by a hydrogen explosion, has become an enduring symbol of the events of March 2011. Tatsuta's drawings of the Unit 3 Reactor are chillingly beautiful, all the more so because the *mangaka* limits himself to a palette of black and white. 'This whole area gives me the creeps,' admits the normally intrepid author, who by this stage has finally succeeded in donning the uniform worn by the decontamination team.

Tatsuta differs from many other undercover journalists in that he makes no attempt to expose the failings of the system.

Nevertheless, his drawings – such as those showing waste removal operations in the depths of the Unit 3 Reactor – cannot fail to raise questions in the reader's mind.

The rubble is cleared by robots, since any humans coming into direct contact with the waste would be exposed to levels of radioactivity with immediate health impacts. The job of the four-man team to which Tatsuta was assigned is therefore to work as fast as possible to deliver a robot as close as possible to its work site, before running away and taking refuge behind thick mobile lead shields. After finding that the 50-m cable tethering the robot (developed by the US army) keeps snagging, the workers come up with the idea of placing cones (identical to those used around construction sites) between the cable and the angles of adjoining walls. One could interpret this 'DIY' solution as evidence that decontamination teams are forced to think up work-arounds of their own in order to carry out their work.

As a good nuclear soldier, Tatsuta never betrays the slightest doubt that his country has the technical and human capacities to overcome a disaster on this scale. Western readers will find it hard to avoid drawing parallels with the willingness (famous to the point of cliché) of the Japanese people to sacrifice themselves for others, particularly given that the author closes his trilogy with the following words; 'I would at least like to keep working here until I reach my annual radiation dose limit.'

– Denis Grégoire

**Au cœur de Fukushima. Journal d'un travailleur de la centrale nucléaire 1 F [In the heart of Fukushima. A worker's memoir of the 1F nuclear power plant]**

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