



# Truth from a Lie: Documentary, Detection, and Reflexivity in Abe Kobo's Realist Project (Studies of Modern Japan)

By Margaret Key

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Critics typically regard Abe Kobo (1924-93) as writing against realism, due to his avant-garde aesthetics that challenged the Naturalist realism dominating the literary mainstream and the Socialist realism of the orthodox Left in postwar Japan. He considered his work thoroughly realist, however, and starting in the early 1950s in a series of avant-garde art and literary groups, he championed the possibility of a vital, contemporary realism that challenged the reader to question the "reality" represented in the text through increasingly self-conscious writing strategies. Through a reassessment of the texts in which he worked out his theory of realism, this study traces the development of his commitment to making "truth from a lie"—to fiction, drama, and reportage that openly display their artifice. Key argues that the reflexivity of Abe's texts, which lay bare their own processes of artificial construction in order to reflect how our everyday sense of reality is constructed and maintained, created a critical space for metatextual ideas that were not acknowledged by the literary establishment of his time and have yet to be recognized by critics today. Undergirding his theory and practice of realism was a critique of conventional documentary and of the classic detective story. The texts examined here expose the degree to which the documentarian and the detective are active fabricators of meaning rather than neutral observers of fact. By paying close attention to the tension between the documentary and the fictive in Abe's works, Key draws out the ethical implications of his documentary approach, arguing persuasively that the documentary qualities of his writing, such as its valorization of objectivity over psychologism and the realm of "concrete things" over abstraction are strategies for challenging the dominant assumptions about what constitutes good ethics and good art, as well as the relationship between these two spheres.

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- Sales Rank: #4091291 in eBooks
- Published on: 2011-05-05
- Released on: 2013-03-19
- Format: Kindle eBook



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### Editorial Review

#### Review

Abe Kobo's writings are as fresh and relevant today as they were when he wrote them between 1948 and 1991. Margaret Key's analysis of them is a joy to read. Abe has been best known as a novelist of the absurd, but Key utilizes newspaper reportage and plays to read him in a new light. In a tight argument rendered in supple and sure prose, Key deftly locates Abe within Japanese intellectual history and restores to his work the ethical realist dimension it so rightly deserves. (Bruce Baird, UMass)

Dr. Key's study takes the unconventional view of focusing on the realisms in Abe's texts and through it sheds light on an aspect of his oeuvre, and of postwar Japanese literature in general, that has been too long neglected. Examining the ties between documentary movement and its offshoots to changing perceptions of political consciousness, Dr. Key sheds light on the complex interplay of politics, philosophy, and literary representation in this unique period of modern Japanese history. (Mark Gibeau, Australian National University)

*Truth from a Lie: Documentary, Detection, and Reflexivity in Abe Kobo's Realist Project* is an illuminating book that complements the existing English-based scholarship on Abe. (*Journal of Asian Studies*)

Margaret Key is to be congratulated for writing an extremely intelligent book, one that is thoroughly researched and endowed with an understanding of Abe Kobo that is both broad (in the sense of the scale of information provided) and deep (in the sense of theoretical acuity). Japanese literary scholarship in the United States frequently suffers from an imbalance in offering up great reams of empirical data that are held together by frameworks and methodological assumptions that remain disproportionately slight and underexamined. Key's work is quite unusual in this regard, and it is clear that she attains this depth by thinking not only of Abe but of literature in general. (*The Journal Of Japanese Studies*)

#### About the Author

**Margaret S. Key** is associate director of the East Asian Studies Center at Indiana University.

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