Donald Keene Receives Japanese Order of Cultural Merit Award

BY KATIE MOORE

The Japanese government has awarded Shincho Professor of Japanese Culture Emeritus Donald Keene for his distinguished scholarship and translations of Japanese literature. Keene received the Order of Cultural Merit—one of the highest prizes for cultural achievement in Japan. Last year, he attended a dinner for honorees hosted by the Emperor and Empress at the Imperial Palace in Tokyo.

"I was surprised and moved with this once-in-a-lifetime honor," said Keene. "As only the second, non-Japanese in the history of the country to be acknowledged with the Order of Cultural Merit, I also hope to set a precedent for Japan’s consideration of other foreigners for this high privilege as well."

Keene is a recipient of dozens of awards and honors including the Kikuchi Kan Prize of the Society for the Advancement of Japanese Culture (1962); the Order of the Rising Sun, Second Class (1993) and Third Class (1975); the Shincho Grand Literary Prize (1985); and the renowned Ashai Prize (1998).

He was the first non-Japanese writer to receive the Yomiuri Literary Prize for the best book of literary criticism (awarded in 1985 for the original Japanese version of Traveling in Japan with Modern Japanese Novelists, a book of essays entitled Five Modern Japanese Novelists. His Yoshimasa and the Silver Pavilion, a study of Japanese tastes, will appear in the fall.

In the past year, Keene has published three books to add to his tremendous collection of over 25 publications—critiques of Japanese culture and literature as well as translations of Japanese texts—written over the course of his career. The latest include the acclaimed biography, Emperor of Japan: Meiji and his World, 1852-1912, The Breaking Jewel, a translation of a novel by Makoto Oda about World War II and a book of essays entitled Five Modern Japanese Novelists. His Yoshimasa and the Silver Pavilion, a study of Japanese tastes, will appear in the fall.

"I am from an earlier generation of Japanese scholars who, because of our small numbers, became versed in so many different genres of Japanese studies—from history to art, culture and literature," said Keene. "Today, I am delighted to see so many wonderful books being published by specialists. Yet, I’ve been blessed with a lifetime of exploration on almost every aspect of Japanese civilization."

Keene, a graduate of Columbia College, with an M.A. and Ph.D. from Columbia University, began teaching here in 1955 and at eighty, is still offering his seminar in Japanese literature this Spring.

NOTE

The article "Business School Alumni Fine-tune Leadership Roles at Lincoln Center" appearing in the Feb. 24 Record was reprinted courtesy of the Business School publication Hermes. The article originally appeared in the Hermes Fall 2002 edition. The photo was courtesy of Chris Lee, New York Philharmonic.