



Strawberry Yellow

Naomi Hirahara

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Curmudgeonly Japanese American gardener and unwitting detective Mas Arai is back in this fifth in the Edgar Award-winning series. Naomi Hirahara has created a memorable protagonist unlike any other: a Hiroshima survivor, Los Angeles gardener, widower, gambler, grandfather, and solver of crimes. In *Strawberry Yellow*, he returns to the strawberry farms of his youth and encounters family intrigue, danger, and murder.

The series' most compelling and evocative mystery yet is set in the strawberry fields of Watsonville, California, where young Mas first arrived as a Hiroshima survivor in the 1940s. He returns for the funeral of a cousin and quickly gets entangled in the murder of a young woman. Was his cousin murdered, too? Mas has to figure out what happened, keep himself safe, and uncover the mystery of the Strawberry Yellow blight and a new strawberry varietal so important that it could be inspiring a murderer.

Naomi Hirahara is an engaging speaker who's always a hit at bookstore and mystery events. She's very active in the Japanese American community in California and is a past president of the southern California chapter of the Mystery Writers of America. She won the Edgar Award for Best Paperback Original Mystery for *Snakeskin Shamisen*, the third in the Mas Arai series.

Strawberry Yellow Details

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Author : Naomi Hirahara

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Carol says

Excellent. Review to come.

Tony says

There seems to be a minor boom in recent years of crime series featuring crotchety old men who prefer to be left alone, but find themselves grudgingly (an grumbly) involved in murder. The interesting twist in this series which I'd not heard of before, is that the crotchety old man is Japanese-American who lives in LA working as a gardener. This appears to be the 5th book in the series, and I picked it up because it takes place further north in and around Watsonville, quite close to where my wife grew up.

The plot has Mas Arai driving up from LA in his rickety ancient pickup to attend the funeral of his cousin Shug, whom he spent formative years with, but hasn't been close to in a long time. Shug was a strawberry breeder who was working on some kind of variety that would resist the (fictional) virus that threatens the entire California strawberry crop in the book. Despite Mas's attempts to leave, various family obligations keep compelling him to stay, and eventually start poking around into the murky world of strawberry breeding and his cousin's death.

The story also delves deeply into the past of the Japanese-Americans who settled in that part of California, and of their imprisonment in World War II internment camps. I guess it's kind of interesting as a glimpse into that history, and it's always nice to have protagonists with more diverse backgrounds. Mas is certainly a colorful character, but his grumpiness is more gimmicky than charming on the whole. More importantly, the plot itself never really grabbed me, and so it's not a series I feel compelled to seek out and read more of.

Dick Peller says

A very unique voice in a mystery novel. I'm glad to read more.

Lori says

Mas Arai, a Japanese-American gardener who survived Hiroshima, returns to Watsonville, California to attend his cousin Shug's funeral. Then a woman turns up dead, apparently poisoned, and Mas finds himself in the midst of a murder investigation. Some of the plot deals with strawberries and hybridization. I had a difficult time getting into this. I never connected with any of the individuals. Perhaps my difficulty stemmed from not reading earlier installments. Perhaps the choppy English spoken by the Japanese-Americans contributed as well. I almost abandoned this one several times, but I convinced myself the year is too young to abandon one. I'll pass on the rest of the series.

Elizabeth says

This story fleshes out more of Mas Arai's past. Mas is an intriguing character and I do hope there will be more of his adventures. These novels also have a historical backdrop that is fascinating.

Colleen says

Mas Arai has as little to say in this mystery as he does in the earlier ones, and yet his character is so fascinating. This new mystery takes place in the world of California strawberry growers and has an interesting sub-plot about genetically engineered foods. Plus it expertly weaves together current issues with California history. A smart, unusual mystery.

Chris Cutler says

I've loved all the Mas Arai books, and this is a good enough conclusion to the series. I did feel that Hirahara was trying a bit too hard to make this one bigger and *more* than the others because it closes the series, and for that reason the personal impact on Mas (a highlight of the previous books) seemed forced and more ephemeral, despite the descriptions that asserted him being deeply affected.

As a biologist I initially rolled my eyes at the treatment of GMOs, but quickly remembered that the characters were acting exactly like much of the U.S. population actually does.

Spuddie says

#5 Mas Arai series; protagonist: Mas Arai, 70-something Nisei (American born of Japanese immigrants) who is a gardener and lives in LA. Mas (short for Masao) went with his parents to live in Japan and he is a survivor of the Hiroshima bomb, after which he returned to his native California.

This series has become one of my favorites and I was very happy to see this newest entry published a short time ago after a break of several years. I always get a bit of culture shock at first getting inside Mas' head because...well, because he's not a white, middle aged Midwestern woman I guess. LOL What I mean to say is that the author does a wonderful job of making you believe from the inside out that Mas is who she says he is.

In this book, Mas is off north to Watsonville (his hometown) for the funeral of his second cousin, Shigero "Shug" Arai. Being a bit of a loner and not one given to emotional displays, Mas really isn't eager for all the nostalgia he feels seeing his old stomping grounds and friends from his youth and hopes to return quietly home after the funeral, having done his duty by attending. However, Minnie, Shug's widow, corners him and tells him that she believes her husband was murdered. Unlike the humble Mas, who works in the dirt and drives an old beat up Ford pickup held together with duct tape and love, Shug was a college-educated man who became a famous strawberry breeder and his company was about to reveal a new strain of berry that was

described as revolutionary, and immune to the yellowing disease that plagues strawberries from time to time.

When a young hakujin (white) woman who was having an affair with Shug's son is found murdered soon after the funeral, Mas begins to wonder if the widow isn't right and agrees to stick around for a day or two and see what he can discover. Besides, the police have told him they may have "more questions" for him, since he provided the alibi for their chief suspect, Shug's son, so he's not really free to leave anyway. Then his motel room is broken into and searched and the brake line on his truck is tampered with, and Mas gets deeper and deeper into tying together the old wounds of the past to present-day motives for revenge.

Poor Mas! He always ends up putting his foot in it, when he'd like nothing more than to do his work and live a quiet, peaceful life—a cold beer, a game of dice or cards with his friends now and then. He's a delightful, well-fleshed character with a definite personality and each of these books have provided a focus on a different cultural facet of Japanese-American life that I have very much enjoyed learning about from the inside via Mas. Some people have said they didn't like the sort of accented pidgin-English Mas speaks and thought it was demeaning. I personally thought it added flavor and seemed quite realistic and helped with the whole believability factor of the character. I very much look forward to the next installment in this series. I also have to admit that I will probably never look at those plastic clamshells full of red, ripe strawberries at the market in quite the same way again! Highly recommend this series, although it's always better to start from the beginning with *Summer of the Big Bachi*. Enjoy!

Richard says

As soon as I heard this was in the works, I pre-ordered it -- months and months ago -- and started reading it as soon as it arrived. I've really enjoyed all of the Mas Arai mysteries, and this is a great addition! For some reason while reading it I found it more melancholy than some of the previous books -- but that's OK, because the circumstances were sad... In the latter 1/4 of the book there are a couple of real shocks and unexpected twists. (I kind of hoped that Genessee would have a larger role, but maybe my hopes will be fulfilled in the next book...)

I like Hirahara's writing style. It's very smooth and a little spare, and I like the occasional mixture of Japanese words/phrases that enhance the authenticity. Mas is a real quirky character, and I've known some people kind of like that, so he really comes to life for me.

Jenny C. says

I was interested to look into this Japanese-inspired series by an Edgar-Award winning author. The story is set in Watsonville, home of strawberry culture. In fact, the fruit is pivotal to the plot. I really liked how Hirahara pulls in the different characters (all connected together), weaving in their stories and providing numerous clues and red herrings. I also liked how grumpy Mas Arai navigated the crisscrossed network and solved the case. My only issues with the protagonist, though, came from his speech: 1) Mas uses broken English, which although realistic because of his background, distracted me in understanding the story, and 2) There are Japanese words interspersed throughout the story, most of which are too thoroughly explained when inference only would have worked better. I also thought the beginning chapters of this mystery were a little

bit slower than I would have liked; I wanted to jump into the mystery head-on.

Kate says

Hirahara writes this interesting series set in a little-known (to most of us) American sub-culture, which I think only adds to the value of the book. I have read several in this series, featuring Mas Arai, an elderly Japanese-American gardener in the L.A. area who often is drawn into mysteries through no desire of his own. Arai is a fascinating character: gruff, solitary, curious and never quite assimilated into American culture.

Born in Japan, transplanted to the US, then taken back to Japan at the start of WWII by his parents when all people of Japanese heritage were told to either leave or be relocated to the infamous camps, Arai returned to California as a teenager after Hiroshima to pick strawberries and other produce.

Other books have dealt with more contemporary times, but in this story Mas Arai's memories of those times surface. The plot here has its roots in those long-ago days although the story begins as Mas comes north to attend the funeral of an old friend.

I don't want to give away too much of this story, but suffice it to say that I found the conclusion both compelling and horrifying, as well as related to a very timely issue - that of genetic engineering.

Susan says

I haven't reviewed many of Hirahara's wonderful books, as I read them before joining Goodreads. But if you haven't started this series, by all means, do! Mas Arai was born in California, but taken to Japan as a baby and stayed through World War II, before returning. He has had little education and his English is not good; his conversation contains many Japanese words. He worked as a landscape gardener in Los Angeles before retiring. A widower, he loves but does not understand his Americanized daughter. Here Mas returns to his home town for his second cousin's funeral, only to get more involved than he likes in the complicated business of growing strawberries. Most of us do not know much about Mas's world, and not the least of the pleasures of this series is seeing how foreign the world that we do know seems to Mas and his friends. Not to be missed!

Deborah Ledford says

It's always a thrill to read the latest release from an author you admire, and especially when it comes to the immensely talented Naomi Hirahara. Mas Arai is one of my favorite male mystery characters and his appearance in Strawberry Yellow does not disappoint. This time Mas is uprooted from his comfort zone of Los Angeles and is essentially stuck in the region of his younger years. Danger awaits at the end of every field of crops and Mas cannot seem to break away from the people he grew up with. All Mas wants to do is go home--but his former "home" is one of grief, puzzling situations and baffling characters leaving Mas to question his past and if he will ever get out his present situation alive. You will enjoy this tasty gem of a mystery.

Beth says

This is the 5th in the series but my first one. Lovely study of Japanese-American culture in nearby towns of the valley. Main character is great - doesn't speak much but thinks a lot! will try and read more.

Patrick Sherriff says

I really enjoyed this glimpse into the lives of a community of Japanese-Americans living in the shadow of the Second World War. In Mas Arai, Hirahara has created a great amateur sleuth who speaks in monosyllabic broken English and Japanese, but who despite his advancing age and limited language ability is the hero Watsonville needs. Hirahara weaves in issues about the Japanese-American internment camps, the A-bomb and GM crops into a surprisingly good murder whodunnit set amid the strawberry fields of California. This is the fifth in the series, and while it reads perfectly fine as a standalone, I'm excited to know there are more adventures in the series worth picking. I listened to this as an audio book and should say that Brian Nishii was a great choice of voice actor.

Download my starter library for free here - <http://eepurl.com/bFkt0X> - and receive my monthly newsletter with book recommendations galore for the Japanophile, crime-fiction-lover in all of us.
