

# American Stories - Kafu Nagai

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Although Nagai Kafu is one of the most important modern Japanese writers, his classic collection, *American Stories*, based on his sojourn from Japan to Washington State, Michigan, and New York City in the early years of the twentieth century, has never before been translated into English. Like de Tocqueville a century before, Kafu casts a fresh, keen eye on the vibrant and varied America he finds -- world fairs, concert halls, and college campuses; saloons, immigrant underclass, and red-light districts. The stories paint a broad landscape of the challenges of American life for the poor, the foreign born, and the disaffected, peopled with crisp individual portraits that reveal the daily disappointments and occasional euphorias of modern life. Mitsuko Iriye's detailed and insightful introduction provides important cultural and biographical background -- Kafu's upbringing in rapidly modernizing Japan -- and literary context for the stories. In the first in the collection, "Night Talk in a Cabin", the reader eavesdrops on three young men sailing from Japan to Seattle as each reveals how poor prospects, shattered confidence, or a broken heart has driven him to seek a better life abroad. In "Atop the Hill", the narrator meets a fellow Japanese expatriate at a small religious Midwestern college, who slowly reveals his complex reasons for leaving behind his wife in Japan. Caught between the pleasures of America's cities and the stoicism of its small towns, he wonders if he can ever return home.

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