



# JAPAN'S MASTER BOOK RESTORER ON THE ART OF MEMORY

By [Joji Sakurai \(@byline\\_media\)](#) 10 Feb 2017

What's in a book? Craftsman Nobuo Okano is tasked with restoring a son's treasured memories of his father

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Like many of Tokyo's hidden treasures, master book restorer Nobuo Okano's workshop lurks in a drab building in a drab corner of the sprawling metropolis.

Japan's anonymous office buildings—like its proverbial anonymous salarymen—are often the repositories of fascinating surprises, the individual panache concealed, perhaps protected by, the unpromising exterior.

Open the decidedly unpromising door of Okano's workshop Livre (with a rattle of its cheap metallic handle) and you enter one of these finds: a ramshackle Dickensian space with a Japanese accent.

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‘I’M A RESTORER OF MEMORIES. AND WHEN I’VE STRUGGLED OVER A BOOK AND IT TURNS OUT WELL, IT CREATES A MEMORY FOR ME AS WELL.’

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Rolls of parchment reach up to the ceiling; shelves overflow with paint pots, brushes and scraps of leather; books squeeze into every gap of rickety cabinets; and on a long, elbow-worn worktable, the instruments of trade arrange themselves in an obscure logic. It's the organized chaos of the master craftsman.

Here, Okano—a gruff man with sunken cheeks—brings books battered beyond hope back to life. It's painstaking work.

He will use tweezers to tease open every fold of often decades-old books, then smooth out the corners of each page with a miniature pink iron. (Whatever works.)



Okano examining a tattered old copy of *Les Plus Belles Poésies Françaises*

Okano is known in this part of Tokyo, which is famous for its secondhand bookshops, as one of Japan's best bookbinders.

He sees himself differently: ‘I’m a restorer of memories,’ he says. ‘And when I’ve struggled over a book and it turns out well, it creates a memory for me as well.’

I have knocked on Okano’s door as a supplicant with an armful of tattered memories of my own. They are my late father’s editions of *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, *Anna Karenina* and an anthology of *Les Plus Belles Poésies Françaises*.

He treasured these books—jotting thoughts and word definitions in the margins—while studying at university in the US, soon after leaving war-defeated Japan to learn science in America.

The Shakespeare has taken to rocking back and forth due to a detached spine (like a craven, port-soaked Falstaff). Patches of the Tolstoy cover have long disappeared, as if nibbled by rats. And the French poetry collection is so fragile its pages threaten to fall apart at the touch.



To give an old book a new lease on life, Okano has to destroy it first

I hold my breath as Okano subjects the dilapidated tomes to silent scrutiny—turning the pages and testing the spines—at the wooden table where he has restored countless books since opening *Livre* in 1980.

Emerging from his thoughts, he clears his throat and begins to lay out a game plan. The Shakespeare, he explains, will be pulled apart to refit the spine and then reassembled, the cover re-sewn and every wrinkle in the pages ironed smooth.

‘There are some jottings here,’ Okano suddenly says, pointing to a torn back page. ‘Do we want to keep them?’

I'd never noticed the mathematical equations my father had scribbled there as a young physics student. They're a precious part of the life of the book, so we agree that the page will be restored with paper fitted unobtrusively at the back.

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‘THERE’S NO WAY TO FIX A BOOK UNLESS YOU KNOW HOW TO MAKE ONE.’

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Okano needs to work some magic with the Tolstoy, finding a matching red paper to lie beneath the cover to replace the missing patches, so that only close inspection will reveal the handiwork.

The most complicated job is the French poetry collection. It's in a parlous state, and must be completely dismantled and rebound.

Okano will clamp the book in a wooden vice, scrape off the original glue and start from scratch—as if making a new book instead of restoring an old one.

Finally, it will acquire a new cover of goat leather—‘the strongest and supplest kind,’ Okano says—with the original paper cover used as the inner frontispiece.

It's an appropriate solution. In France these kinds of quality paperbound books, after a first reading, were traditionally rebound in leather to be placed in the owner's library.



A half-hearted effort to restore a book will do far more harm than good, according to Okano

Okano, who runs a workshop at Livre on the art of crafting books from step one, says there's no way to fix a book unless you know how to make one.

Cosmetic touchups to tattered tomes, he adds, can do more harm than good. 'There's a bookbinder manual called *The Enemies of Books*,' Okano says.

'Along with bugs, heat, water and dust, it says the bookbinder himself can be the enemy of the book. So, if you restore with half-formed technique you'll end up ruining the book.'

There's a touch of melancholy to Okano's work. Each book he works on starts to feel like his own. 'But it's not my book, and to part with it always feels a little lonely,' he admits.

My father's books will be a part of Okano's life for a full year. The jobs are complicated and Okano has a mountain of orders to complete before turning to mine. He promises to finish before Christmas.

The anticipation of discovering how it all turned out will be one to savor.

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Joji Sakurai will be back later this year with the second part of his tale of the memory restorer. Stay tuned!

*Photos: Kiichi Kawamura*

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