

You can't judge a book by its cover in Japan either – a country where diverse personalities are hidden behind prescribed manners and uniforms. But one look at Doi Kazuhiro and you know you're in for a good story. In fact, Doi is a librarian of sorts. In January of 2005, he took to the road on a mission to visit every library in Japan, creating his own "bicycle library" on the way.

He wears a black kimono and blue scarf, and his straight hair is swept out of his light brown eyes. With a scar on his upper lip and dirt under his fingernails, he could have come off the set of a fantasy movie. But beneath his kimono he wears rainproof pants and worn hiking boots, and beside him is a road-bike saddled with battered canvas bags. Behind the bike, he pulls a rickety-looking waterwheel that comes up to his shoulders. Each paddle on the wheel is a pocket holding two or three books.

"Before I started this, I was thinking of starting a traveling bar," he says. But in 2004, he had an encounter that sent him down a totally different path. Doi's rough hands tell the beginning of the tale; he used to maintain and restore houses in Aichi. One day on the way home from work, he came across *One Hundred Years of Idiocy*, a 100-page collection of photos showing environmental devastation in the 20th century. Doi was horrified by the images of destruction, from landfills to oil spills, deforestation to nuclear tests. "I knew about half of the things in that book. They were images I'd seen many times before in my life, but I went on pretending I didn't know."

Paging through the poignant images in the book, he reflected on his past. "After I encountered it, I was thinking and feeling and remembering a lot of things," he says.

Doi grew up in Naruto, Tokushima, where he took a ferry to school everyday. He loved nature, climbing mountains, and building campfires for fun. "When I was in school, I was really concerned with environmental issues. At that time, ozone depletion was a big deal, so if there was a symposium about that I would go, or if there was someone talking about it on TV, I would try and get in contact with that person. I read the newspaper every day and cut out articles about environmental issues and kept them in a scrapbook."

In high school, Doi suddenly had the chance to go beyond taking an interest and start taking action. When a Russian tanker spilled 2,800 kiloliters of oil near the Echizen coast, he traveled alone to the site, cleaning oil-soaked sea birds with volunteers from all walks of life.

He gazes downward and his voice grows impassioned. "In school, I knew that these things were really important, but then I graduated and went out into society and, well, my life was full of other things. Realizing that I'd become that way, I thought to myself, Why aren't I more concerned?"

After wrestling with what he should do, he

became convinced that other people needed the book as a reminder in their daily lives. Doi started loaning the book to friends and then began asking libraries to put it on their shelves.

In the beginning, it was rough. "Some people didn't want to talk to me at first," he said, "They thought I was coming to sell something." One misunderstanding with a librarian ended with the police getting involved. Still, he was undaunted in his quest to communicate his message to more people. Working his way through Hokkaido in May of that year, he attached a wooden cart to his bicycle that held various books about the environment. These he handed out to the people he met. But this first bicycle library was no match for the icy roads of Sendai and met its end in a traffic accident. Ever optimistic, Doi took the loss as a chance to design a new library, one that recalls an age before highways and cars.

At the end of 2007, Doi made it back to Aichi where his journey began three years ago. In that time, he has ridden through Hokkaido and most of Honshu, given away over 900 books, and visited over 1,700 libraries. And since Doi's reputation has grown, librarians more often recognize him than try to chase him away. He was even welcomed at a national library convention, where he shared his motivations, experiences, and thoughts about the nature of libraries.

The bicycle library's books are to be read and handed on, like a *kairanban*, a community notice that is passed from house to house. It isn't merely information that Doi seeks to spread, but a concrete reminder. "When we see something on TV, we only see it once. It can be something that makes us think and feel deeply, but then it's gone and we forget. Seeing things again and again is important. Books are there for us to pick up as many times as we want."

Doi is happy to tell his story, but something in his face says that it won't be complete without a book. Spinning the weathered wheel past the broken paddle-pockets, I pull out a slim volume. He opens the small hardback carefully, almost tenderly, to the back page. With a brown calligraphy pen he draws a smiling tree, thoughtfully adding a single tiny leaf, and in a slow, immaculate hand, an inscription for future readers: "After reading, draw a leaf."

After visiting Kansai, Kyushu, and Okinawa prior to his 30th birthday next year, what will Doi tackle next? "I'm not sure, but I have some ideas." One is to hunt wild boar in Kyushu. Or, he envisions, another earth-friendly trek across Japan, this time on horseback to obtain landowners' permission to create a network of equestrian roads.

"I want people to know the facts. I want people to be able to make choices on their own. Not just among things, but lifestyles. So many people these days only see one road and they aren't aware how many ways there are. People just aren't choosing. And choosing is so much fun." **KTO**

BOOKING AROUND

Jody Godoy catches up with a bicyclist and his mobile library

