

# Japanese writer and illustrator Kentaro Miura, author of influential *Berserk* series, dies at 54

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On May 6, Japanese writer and illustrator Kentaro Miura, best known for the dark fantasy *Berserk* manga series (1989 to the present), died unexpectedly from acute aortic dissection [a tear in the inner layer of the large blood vessel of the heart] at the age of 54. News of his death wasn't made public until May 20, when Miura's publisher Hakusensha posted an obituary.

The wide array of artists and admirers who mourned Miura's passing speaks to his influence. Adam Deats, assistant director of Netflix's animated *Castlevania* series, noted the impact of Miura's work on *Castlevania* and how *Berserk* had shaped his team's understanding of the genre. Numerous manga [a style of Japanese comics or graphic novels] artists and those who worked on *Berserk*'s anime adaptations posted their condolences on social media, many of the former mentioning how Miura's work inspired aspects of their own. Thousands of fans gathered in the online role-playing game *Final Fantasy XIV*, many playing as the Dark Knight class, inspired by *Berserk*'s protagonist Guts, to pay tribute to Miura.

Miura worked on *Berserk* for more than three decades, shaping it into one of the best-selling manga series ever created. Over its lengthy run, Miura's art, characters and storytelling attracted a strong following in and outside Japan.

Miura was born on July 11, 1966, in Chiba, Chiba Prefecture, Japan. He was the son of an art teacher and a storyboard artist. That influence quickly manifested itself, as Miura produced his first manga, *Miuranger*, at the age of 10 in a student publication. Miura created his second manga, *Ken e no Michi* (????, "The Way to the Sword"), in 1977 and entered into an art curriculum in high school.

At age 18, Miura started working as an assistant to Jyoji Morikawa, author of the well-known boxing manga *Hajime no Ippo* (?????, literally "The First Step"). Morikawa dismissed the young Miura following a short stint after acknowledging the latter's prowess and explaining he had nothing to teach the budding artist. One year later, in 1985, Nihon University's College of Art accepted Miura. Part of his application included submitting a small manga project, *Futatabi* (??, "Once More"), which later garnered him the 34th Newcomer Manga Award from Weekly Shonen Magazine. While in college, Miura also did illustration work for manga writer Yoshiyuki Okamura [Burtonson], whom Miura later cited as a major influence, on *King*

*of Wolves* (??, *Or?*) (1989) and *Japan* (1992).

Like every other artist, Miura was influenced by the general social and cultural conditions and atmosphere of his time. The mid-1980s-early 1990s was an era of ascending political reaction, culminating in the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, and cultural stagnation. The labor bureaucracies everywhere strangled the fierce efforts by workers to oppose the ruling class policies of wage cuts, factory closures, privatization and deregulation. Meanwhile the upper middle class turned toward hedonism and self-absorption, ultimately expressed, among other things, in the form of identity politics.

The artistic difficulties expressed themselves, above all, in an inability to probe beneath the surface and a tendency to pass on *uncritically* the growing violence and chaos of global life and the nihilistic, anti-social moods developing with certain layers of the population. Artists tended to justify themselves by arguing they were merely expressing what was going on around them. However, the responsibility of artists is not merely to *reflect* reality, but to *make sense* of it. Miura stands somewhere on the border line here. That is to say, he both criticized and accommodated himself to the existing circumstances.

While continuing to hone his craft, Miura absorbed various cultural works from the 1980s, splicing bits and pieces of them into what later became *Berserk*. In a 2017 interview, Miura stated, "*Berserk* was, in fact, a hodgepodge of things I enjoyed and found interesting at the time, such as Hollywood movies and *Fist of the North Star* (by Burtonson and Tetsuo Hara)." He went on to refer to James Cameron's *Terminator* (1984) and Paul Verhoeven's *RoboCop* (1987) as being among the works he borrowed from while emphasizing the dark mood he aimed to achieve early on in *Berserk*. It is not to his credit that he was attracted to the glossy, simplistic and superficial works, albeit complete with anti-establishment tints, of Cameron and Verhoeven.

The impact of the various economic and political processes, given the ideological difficulties of the time, led to an overall cultural degradation, including in Japan. New technologies in the 1980s offered immense possibilities, reflected in the explosive rise of Japan's animation [anime] industry, which drew increasing international attention. At the same time, not coincidentally, serious Japanese cinema, which had played such an enormous role in the postwar years (Kurosawa, Mizoguchi, Ozu, Naruse,

Ichikawa, Imamura and others), faded into near insignificance, a state of affairs that continues today, with certain honorable exceptions.

While some sparks of genuinely critical art emerged from the anime and manga genres, notably Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira* (manga first appearing in 1982 and anime film adaptation in 1988), the majority of works remained dulled by the oppressive atmosphere of the period. So how did Miura's titular series fair?

Like that of the 80s' works inspiring *Berserk*, its environment is bleak: a Western medieval setting straddling the line between reality and fantasy ruled over by feudal lords, kingdoms and religious organizations reminiscent of the Catholic Church. Starvation, war, poverty and other social ills penetrate every aspect of life in *Berserk*'s universe.

Guts, our ultra-violent yet emotionally layered protagonist, faces this horrific world head-on, tearing through every monstrous force thrown at him. After the betrayal of his former ally Griffith, who chose to sacrifice his former companions to ascend to the ranks of the powerful demonic entities, known collectively as the Godhand, Guts seeks bloody revenge, traveling the world in search of the Godhand and their monstrous apostles.

Two years into his journey, Guts realizes the love he has for his regressed lover Casca (who barely survived Griffith's onslaught) and the strength he finds in his companions provide greater salvation than any amount of revenge. While his journey remains equally difficult and under constant threat by demonic forces, Guts' Party becomes a force of hope and potential in a world increasingly consumed by those of fear and desolation.

In *Berserk*'s brutal, corrupt world, one can see an attempt by Miura to reflect on his surroundings and the general state of things in the late '80s and early '90s onward. The contempt for humanity embodied in the goals of the Godhand and their encroachment on every aspect of life and the sociopathic religious and feudal lords feel related to the real-world corporate elite hell-bent on draining every drop of blood from the working class at any cost. These forces are juxtaposed to the humanity of Guts' Party and those they inspire, which provide the otherwise unbearably gloomy world with some of the most passionate and heartfelt scenes in the manga genre. While limited by the processes working on him as an artist and member of society, Miura attempts to offer a positive artistic answer to the harshness and reaction of the epoch.

The primary antagonist in *Berserk* is an abstract, god-like force born out of humanity's suffering, fear and supposed need for a supernatural "reason" for these daunting social maladies. The "god," through the actions of the Godhand and by manipulating fate, aims to perpetuate the same misery that created it to grow ever stronger.

The reader encounters an unresolved contradiction: must humanity somehow discover "hope" to overcome "evil" or must society undergo profound social change to eliminate the conditions that breed misery? These weaknesses and unresolved elements detract from *Berserk*, but they do not cancel out its interesting themes and expressions of genuine human emotion and human relatedness. The themes and ideas communicated in this decades-long series deserve further examination, but that would require a focused comment outside the scope of this article.

*Berserk* continued to pick up steam and became a success, Miura founded his manga studio, Gaga, supplying him with assistants who expanded his ability to work on other projects.

Outside of *Berserk*, Miura created two other series worth mention, the fantasy mangas *Giganto Maxia* [Gigantomakhia] (2013)—his first new work in 24 years—and *Duranki* (2019).

*Giganto Maxia* is a short, stand-alone work that offers a snapshot of Earth 100 million years after an event, known only as the Great Destruction, has wiped out civilization as we know it. Now, Earth, populated by humans [Hyuu], mythical beings, monsters, god-like beings and demi-humans, has become the battleground between the Empire of Olympus (resembling ancient Rome) and those that stand in its way. Our protagonists, the gladiator Delos and his mythic partner Prome, must end the bloodshed while breathing new life into the planet. While short, *Giganto Maxia* presents thoughtful characters and gut-wrenching scenes suggesting the horrors of imperialism.

*Duranki*, a work heavily inspired by ancient Greek and Mesopotamian myths, follows in the healthy footsteps of *Giganto Maxia*. We will never know what its full dimensions might have been, as the series' production was cut short by Miura's death. What little we get to see in the first six chapters is promising, presenting us with the genderless protagonist Usumu, the child of two gods of wisdom.

The world inhabited by Usumu and the other characters brims with spirits and gods, and Miura seems to be bringing to the forefront his faith in humanity and the strength of its ingenuity as instrumental to the progress of society. Nearly every scene sees Usumu creating new inventions (like a crossbow and an aqueduct system) or responding quickly to dangers with a clever strategy. While left unfinished, the series seems to be posing a clash between this boundless positive creativity and the reality of war and nation-states embodied by the city life Usumu experiences.

Miura faced challenging cultural conditions. However, it seems fair to say that the artist managed to contribute a substantial amount of critical art that resonated with reality. Miura was one of those artists with the skill and sensitivity to tap into a deeper understanding of the difficult times in which he worked.



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