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Geisha: A Life



Synopsis

GEISHA, A LIFE "No woman in the three-hundred-year history of the karyukai has ever come forward in public to tell her story. We have been constrained by unwritten rules not to do so, by the robes of tradition and by the sanctity of our exclusive calling...But I feel it is time to speak out." Celebrated as the most successful geisha of her generation, Mineko Iwasaki was only five years old when she left her parents' home for the world of the geisha. For the next twenty-five years, she would live a life filled with extraordinary professional demands and rich rewards. She would learn the formal customs and language of the geisha, and study the ancient arts of Japanese dance and music. She would enchant kings and princes, captains of industry, and titans of the entertainment world, some of whom would become her dearest friends. Through great pride and determination, she would be hailed as one of the most prized geishas in Japan's history, and one of the last great practitioners of this now fading art form. In *Geisha, a Life*, Mineko Iwasaki tells her story, from her warm early childhood, to her intense yet privileged upbringing in the Iwasaki okiya (household), to her years as a renowned geisha, and finally, to her decision at the age of twenty-nine to retire and marry, a move that would mirror the demise of geisha culture. Mineko brings to life the beauty and wonder of Gion Kobu, a place that "existed in a world apart, a special realm whose mission and identity depended on preserving the time-honored traditions of the past." She illustrates how it coexisted within post-World War II Japan at a time when the country was undergoing its radical transformation from a post-feudal society to a modern one. "There is much mystery and misunderstanding about what it means to be a geisha. I hope this story will help explain what it is really like and also serve as a record of this unique component of Japan's cultural history," writes Mineko Iwasaki. *Geisha, a Life* is the first of its kind, as it delicately unfolds the fabric of a geisha's development. Told with great wisdom and sensitivity, it is a true story of beauty and heroism, and of a time and culture rarely revealed to the Western world.

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Customer Reviews

I first got interested in geisha reading Arthur Golden's MEMOIRS OF A GEISHA, then decided to go hunting for more information on geisha to see how accurate his account was. I started with Liza Dalby's GEISHA, and then came to read this. Mineko delivers an absorbing account of her life and training as a very top geisha in Gion, the most exclusive of Kyoto's geisha districts. For those who are comparing her tale to Golden's, keep in mind that Golden is writing fiction, in fact, almost fairy-tale-esque fiction (complete with wicked stepsister, wicked stepmother, fairy god-mother, handsome prince, etc.) Mineko's tale is true, and archly told; Mineko herself comes across as a very strong, in some places almost domineering personality, as one would expect given her position in the family she was adopted into and her family's high-status position in Gion. The strength of her personality makes reading this book a wonderful pleasure. However, Mineko's position within the geisha hierarchy was very atypical. She was at the very top of the heap, with all sorts of perks and privileges due to her station that many other geisha did not have (atotori so everyone respects her from day one; she gets personal access to the Big Mistress, tremendous financial and professional support in launching her career from her very-high-status okiya etc.), and it's not clear in the book that she understood this at the time, or indeed understands this now.

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