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Geisha



Synopsis

In this classic best-seller, Liza Dalby, the only non-Japanese ever to have trained as a geisha, offers an insider's look at the exclusive world of female companions to the Japanese male elite. Her new preface considers the geisha today as a vestige of tradition as Japan heads into the 21st century.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In the mid-1970s, an American graduate student in anthropology joined the ranks of white-powdered geisha in Kyoto, Japan. Liza Dalby took the name Ichigiku and apprenticed in the famed Pontocho district, trailing behind "older sisters" bemused by this long-legged Westerner intent on learning their arts and customs. In *Geisha*, this observant ethnographer paints an intoxicating picture of the "flower and willow world" to which she gained entry. "Why are you studying geisha?" asks one slightly belligerent older sister. "Geisha are no different from anybody else." Not quite, says Dalby dryly, pointing out that geisha and wives play utterly divergent, though complementary, roles in traditional Japanese society. "Geisha are supposed to be sexy where wives are sober, artistic where wives are humdrum, and witty where wives are serious." While hardly feminists, they reap freedoms unknown to other women. Dalby illustrates broader cultural differences, too, with a million tiny details about boisterous customers, how many hundred-weight of tabi (split-toed socks) geishas go through, what defines *iki* (chic), why *maiko* (young apprentices) are drawn to the life, and what geisha wear, from the skin out. Acknowledging that her growing personal stake in the masquerade prevented objectivity, Dalby frees the reader to enjoy a fluid and fascinating look at one aspect of Japanese culture. --Francesca Coltrera

"A meticulously researched work of scholarship. . . a delightfully personal account. . . . The bible of geisha studies to this day." -- The Times "An engrossing account of a society shrouded by centuries of mystery. . . . Dalby brings us the real women behind the white face paint and silk kimonos. Her patient exploration of the nuances and ambivalences inherent in geisha life leaves the reader with a new understanding, and respect, for these hardworking often lonely . . . 'curators of tradition.' . . . She has given us an unprecedented perspective on a fascinating society." -- Kathryn Jankowski, San Francisco Chronicle Book Review "Based on her experiences, [Dalby] provides the sort of information that should -- once and for all (set the legends, tall tales, assumptions and prejudices straight." (Sheryl Fitzgerald, Newsday

I did not know what i was getting myself into when i purchase this book alongside Arthur Golden - Memoirs of a Geisha but then i questioned myself...this is from a lady who was a geisha herself, who knows what more mysteries she can add to my own revelations...and she did not let me down. I cannot put down this book.... I jus can't. She detailed every little thing and more and i am sooo glad because when my friends ask how i knew so much of the floating world and some of Japan history...though most of it was learnt from Anime and watching documentaries... i can safely say "read Liza Dalby's book and you will learn their unique discipline and honour bound relations...you will be amazed at how they respect everything in life and you will be inspired". This books makes me want to dress up as a geisha...not sure if i have the discipline to become one...hahaha...but i respect these ladies who made the history and sustain Japan livelihood from the Shogunate era to the now Modern world... Ladies keep doing your best...

A Triumph of Anthropology, and of Personal Courage Others have said the many ways this book is a great and informative vicarious experience. My main point, as a rather timid person, is just my admiration for the courage it must have taken for an American young woman to sign up to work as a geisha in Japan. I mean, for goodness sake, Japan is well known as a place where there a lot of customs about just how to behave in various circumstances. I can't get over the fact that she could step up to play the geisha social role as she did, Talk about dangers of committing faux pas!

I love this book. An excellent explanation about the intimate and secretive world of the geisha. What makes this book a good read is that Dalby is an anthropologist who is heavily involved in the Japanese culture and does a great job explaining why the West will never fully understand the

geisha, or why Japanese men pay big bucks for their company and alcohol, since geisha are not prostitutes and sex is not involved. The problem is the West does not have anything comparable to the geisha. For those who are fans of Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*, or the movie, you may be interested to know that Golden pays tribute to Dalby for her extensive knowledge of the geisha. Although Dalby did not go through the normal process to become a geisha, nor was she a geisha that long, she completely immerse herself and was well accepted. Instead of just being a description of geisha, it is a very personal account of her relationship with her geisha sisters and house mothers. A very interesting look at how different Japanese culture and its mind set is in contrast to Western way of thinking. I couldn't believe I put aside my *Game of Thrones* books so I could read this book. I still have five other geisha books to read, but those will have to wait until I finish Book 4 of the *Game of Thrones*.

Liz Dalby's book from the late seventies is a portrait in time of the flower and willow world of Geisha that no other Western author has ever been able to capture. This makes Arthur Golden's book *Memoirs of a Geisha* laughable compared to the poignancy of the stories of real Geisha and the lives they led at the time of writing. Dalby also gives plenty of history (she is an anthropologist) as well as becoming her own test subject by actually portraying geisha herself. These personal accounts are worth every penny for the privelage. I would have much rather seen a film of this book! There is so much that is deeply moving about her relationships with the Geisha and the dramatic losses of real life that are interwoven throughout the book. I would love to see a follow-up to the book, to see how all of this ultimately became part of her life. There are excellent photos throughout, though some in color would have been nice. This is a true anthropological memoir but it is never dry, never overly intellectual. Dalby is not a great writer but she is a terrific journalist. I've read many books about Geisha and this stands alone as the finest.

Arthur Golden used Liz Dalby's book as a key into the secret world of geisha so I wanted to read it primarily to learn what it was like to be the only American geisha. It isn't a book that you will want to read in one sitting but the chapters are clearly divided into smaller sections and reading one or two sections a night is very satisfying. Although I had hoped for more personal details of Liz Dalby's experiences, once I got used to her style of presentation I became interested in all the other information which she felt it was important to include. By the last chapter, I truly wished the book was longer and decided to order her book on Kimono to extend the pleasure of her writing style for a while. At the very beginning I was afraid her interest in anthropology would make this rather a dry

book but as she warmed to her subject matter, I grew to enjoy her slightly clinical distance from what she described. For those who are looking for the passion of *Memoirs of a Geisha*, you should probably read Arthur Golden's book -- which is much more detailed than the movie. For those who will enjoy an objective but sympathetic view of life as a geisha from the 1930's to the mid 1970's, I recommend this book.

However, be warned, it is not a novel about Geisha as some people seem to want. She is an anthropologist and she documents and writes like an anthropologist. She casts a keen anthropologist's eye on the culture and how people act and interact. May well be too detailed for some people. I know I got a little bogged down in the last third of the book. But, really answers a lot of questions about the whole process including the trainers, dressers, wig stylists, kimono makers, etc. And I think she does a good job of updating the fact that the Geisha are a lot different now than they were even ten or twenty years ago. They've become pretty modern and the girls are much more in control of their lives. I've read 2 or 3 other books on Geisha and this is the best and most comprehensive by far.

So much insight to the life of a Geisha

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