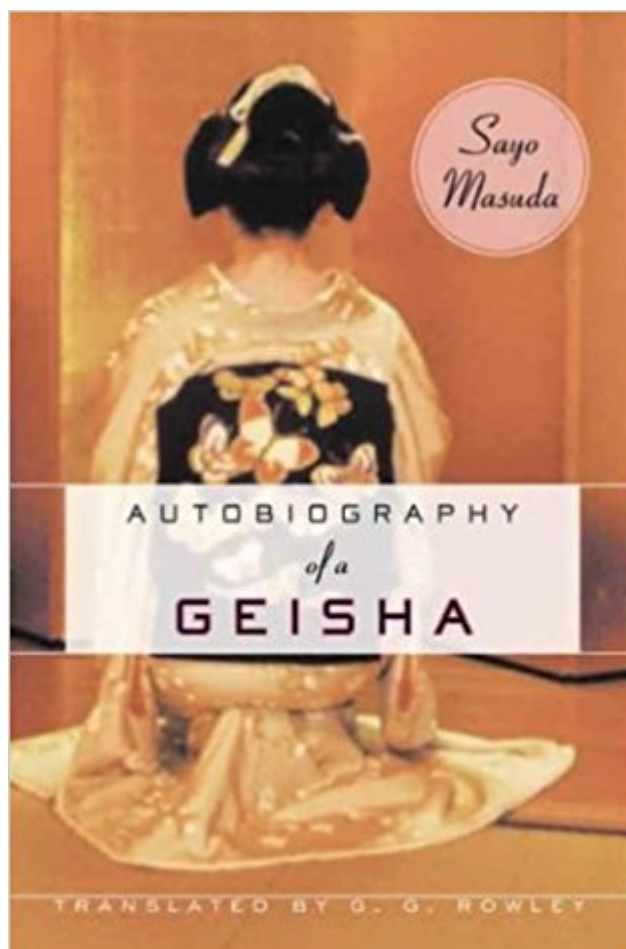


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Autobiography Of A Geisha



Synopsis

The glamorous world of big-city geisha is familiar to many readers, but little has been written of the life of hardship and pain led by the hot-springs-resort geisha. Indentured to geisha houses by families in desperate poverty, deprived of freedom and identity, these young women lived in a world of sex for sale, unadorned by the trappings of wealth and celebrity. Sayo Masuda has written the first full-length autobiography of a former hot-springs-resort geisha. Masuda was sent to work as a nursemaid at the age of six and then was sold to a geisha house at the age of twelve. In keeping with tradition, she first worked as a servant while training in the arts of dance, song, shamisen, and drum. In 1940, aged sixteen, she made her debut as a geisha. *Autobiography of a Geisha* chronicles the harsh life in the geisha house from which Masuda and her "sisters" worked. They were routinely expected to engage in sex for payment, and Masuda's memoir contains a grim account of a geisha's slow death from untreated venereal disease. Upon completion of their indenture, geisha could be left with no means of making a living. Marriage sometimes meant rescue, but the best that most geisha could hope for was to become a man's mistress. Masuda also tells of her life after leaving the geisha house, painting a vivid panorama of the grinding poverty of the rural poor in wartime Japan. As she eked out an existence on the margins of Japanese society, earning money in odd jobs and hard labor— even falling in with Korean gangsters— Masuda experienced first hand the anguish and the fortitude of prostitutes, gangster mistresses, black-market traders, and abandoned mothers struggling to survive in postwar Japan. Happiness was always short-lived for Masuda, but she remained compassionate and did what she could to help others; indeed, in sharing her story, she hoped that others might not suffer as she had. Although barely able to write, her years of training in the arts of entertaining made her an accomplished storyteller, and *Autobiography of a Geisha* is as remarkable for its wit and humor as for its unromanticized candor. It is the superbly told tale of a woman whom fortune never favored yet never defeated.

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Customer Reviews

Sayo Masuda's *Autobiography of a Geisha* offers a story of unremitting hardship faced by a hot-springs geisha, a virtual indentured sex-slave in pre-World War II Japan. Born in 1925, Masuda began work as a nursemaid at age 5 and suffered a childhood of emotional and material poverty. She was then sold to the Takenoya geisha house in Upper Suwa at age 12. While her food and clothing were provided for by Takenoya, she was subject to constant verbal abuse as an apprentice. At one point, she was heaved down the stairs by her "Mother" (the name she uses for the proprietor of the geisha house) and nearly lost a leg. During her recovery, she attempted suicide and further injured herself. Eventually, Masuda mastered the art of seduction as a geisha. The middle portion of the narrative is taken up with stories of her successful campaign for a danna (patron), of her brother's tragic suicide, and of her star-crossed love affair with a Japanese politician. *Autobiography of a Geisha*, translated for the first time into English by G. G. Rowley, was published in Japan in 1957 and has been in print in Japan steadily ever since. The tale is rendered in a simple English prose to reflect Masuda's own, untrained style (she did not have schooling and she only learned to write hiragana script later in life). For Western readers, Masuda's autobiography is a gift: a glimpse into the dark reality behind one of the most shrouded institutions in Japanese culture. --Patrick O'Kelley

Masuda's account of being a geisha in rural Japan at a hot springs resort is at once intriguing and heartbreaking. There is nothing idyllic in her description of geisha training or life between the world wars. Born in 1925, Masuda was sent to work for a wealthy landowner when she was five. At 12, she was sold to a geisha house for about 30 yen, the price of a bag of rice. During those years, Masuda writes, "I wasn't even able to wonder why I didn't have any parents or why I should be the only one who was tormented. If you ask me what I did know then, it was only that hunger was painful and human beings were terrifying." Originally published in Japan in 1957, where it is still in print, this book grew out of an article that Masuda, who didn't learn to read and write until she was in her 20s, submitted for a contest in *Housewife's Companion* magazine. Her picaresque adventures as a geisha, then mistress, factory worker, gang moll and caretaker for her young brother offer an

impassioned plea for valuing children. "Never give birth to children thoughtlessly!" she writes. "That is why, stroke by faltering stroke, I've written all this down." Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

If you've read MEMOIRS OF A GEISHA and GEISHA: A LIFE, by Arthur Golden and Mineko Iwasaki respectively, then your image of geisha is probably one of a world of glamor--high-status, highly-trained women existing in a world of glitter and flash, dealing with celebrities, scientists, movie stars of the stage and screen, mistresses of their chosen arts, and honored for their talents. While this may be true of Kyoto geisha, this experience is not representative of all geisha, or even most geisha, as Sayo Masuda's book demonstrates clearly. Masuda was a hot-springs geisha, sold into servitude at the age of twelve, to a place as different from the glamor centers of Kyoto as it is possible to get. Though she was trained in shamisen and dance, the sexual aspect of her profession was at least as important as the artistic aspect, and she routinely met with cruelty, poverty and hunger. I won't say this book shows what the life of a geisha was "really" like--Mineko's autobiography demonstrates that the glamor world of Kyoto was a real one. But it was not the only one, or even the majority one, and for a more comprehensive view of a different kind of geisha, this book here is indispensable. If Kyoto is all you know of the "flower and willow world," I recommend that you pick up Sayo Masuda's work, and expand your horizons.

We should keep in mind, *Memoirs of a Geisha* was written about a fictional character. In this book, we explore the sad life of a real character, in this instance, a hot springs geisha (or more accurately, a glorified prostitute). Her candor and reflection were fascinating. We should not expect a historical account of events from an uneducated victim of indentured servitude. I did, however, get more than I expected in the way of storytelling, as perceived by the author. If anything is the biographical counterpart to Goldman's book, this one is...absent the fancies of fiction. The author wishes to escape her past now and has surrounded herself only with people who know nothing of her past. I only hope she has recorded her life after this book ends so that when she leaves us, the rest of her story is not lost. Of all the books I have read on this subject, I enjoyed this one the most.

If you are interested in *Geisha*, this is a great book. It is well written and very interesting!

This was not exactly what I expected; however, for someone who is not familiar with the world of the geisha it will be a very nice book.

Arrived very early and was a beautiful book. It had awesome pictures very happy with this purchase. The book came with no damage at all no marks on any page or rips.

LOVE THIS BOOK

Insightful and very well written. If interested in the true lifestyle of a Geisha I highly recommend. While an accurate and brutal portrayal, also uplifting and inspiring.

I was truly surprised at how well this was written. It holds readers' attention from the first page as the book is written with charm, humor and truth. One comes away with a much different slant on the life of a geisha.

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