



Geisha, A Life

By Mineko Iwasaki

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No woman in the three-hundred-year history of the karyukai has ever come forward in public to tell her story—until now.

"Many say I was the best geisha of my generation," writes Mineko Iwasaki. "And yet, it was a life that I found too constricting to continue. And one that I ultimately had to leave." Trained to become a geisha from the age of five, Iwasaki would live among the other "women of art" in Kyoto's Gion Kobu district and practice the ancient customs of Japanese entertainment. She was loved by kings, princes, military heroes, and wealthy statesmen alike. But even though she became one of the most prized geishas in Japan's history, Iwasaki wanted more: her own life. And by the time she retired at age twenty-nine, Iwasaki was finally on her way toward a new beginning.

Geisha, a Life is her story -- at times heartbreakingly sad, always awe-inspiring, and totally true.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Now in her 50s, Mineko Iwasaki was one of the most famed geishas of her generation (and the chief informant for Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*). Her ascent was difficult, not merely because of the hard, endless training she had to undergo--learning how to speak a hyper-elevated dialect of Japanese and how to sing and dance gracefully while wearing a 44-pound kimono atop six-inch wooden sandals--but also because many of the elaborate, self-effacing rules of the art went against her grain. A geisha "is an exquisite willow tree who bends to the service of others," she writes. "I have always been stubborn and contrary. And very, very proud." And playful, too: one of the funniest moments in this bittersweet book describes a disastrous encounter with the queen of England and her all-too-interested husband.

Revealing the secrets of the geisha's "art of perfection," this graceful memoir documents a disappearing world. --*Gregory McNamee*

From Publishers Weekly

From age five, Iwasaki trained to be a geisha (or, as it was called in her Kyoto district, a geiko), learning the intricacies of a world that is nearly gone. As the first geisha to truly lift the veil of secrecy about the women who do such work (at least according to the publisher), Iwasaki writes of leaving home so young, undergoing rigorous training in dance and other arts and rising to stardom in her profession. She also carefully describes the origins of Kyoto's Gion Kobu district and the geiko system's political and social nuances in the 1960s and '70s. Although it's an autobiography, Iwasaki's account will undoubtedly be compared to the stunning fictional description of the same life in Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*. Lovers of Golden's work--and there are many--will undoubtedly pick this book up, hoping to get the true story of nights spent in kimono. Unfortunately, Iwasaki's work suffers from the comparison. Her writing style, refreshingly straightforward at the beginning, is far too dispassionate to sustain the entire story. Her lack of reflection and tendency toward mechanical description make the work more of a manual than a memoir. In describing the need to be nice to people whom she found repulsive, she writes, "Sublimating one's personal likes and dislikes under a veneer of gentility is one of the fundamental challenges of the profession." Iwasaki shrouds her prose in this mask of objectivity, and the result makes the reader feel like a teahouse patron: looking at a beautiful, elegant woman who speaks fluidly and well, but with never a vulnerable moment.

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From Library Journal

Iwasaki, who started training for her demanding profession at age four, here takes readers into the rarely glimpsed world of the geisha.

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Jacquelyn Lopez:

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