



The Tale of Murasaki: A Novel

By Liza Dalby

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The Tale of Murasaki is an elegant and brilliantly authentic historical novel by the author of **Geisha** and the only Westerner ever to have become a geisha.

In the eleventh century Murasaki Shikibu wrote the world's first novel, **The Tale of Genji**, the most popular work in the history of Japanese literature. In **The Tale of Murasaki**, Liza Dalby has created a breathtaking fictionalized narrative of the life of this timeless poet—a lonely girl who becomes such a compelling storyteller that she is invited to regale the empress with her tales. **The Tale of Murasaki** is the story of an enchanting time and an exotic place. Whether writing about mystical rice fields in the rainy mountains or the politics and intrigue of the royal court, Dalby breathes astonishing life into ancient Japan.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Liza Dalby's novel is a brilliantly imagined chronicle of the 11th-century Japanese writer Murasaki Shikibu. As we soon discover, our narrator has a good many doubts about the writing life. "As I pondered this question of how to be a success at court," she muses, "I came to the conclusion that literary ambition was more likely than not to bring a woman to a bad end." Happily, the real-life Murasaki persisted, and went on to become the author of the world's first novel, *The Tale of Genji*. For *The Tale of Murasaki*, Dalby draws on this groundbreaking masterpiece and on the surviving fragments of Murasaki's own diary and poetry, along with another masterpiece of the Heian period, *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*. The result is a vivid and emotionally detailed portrait of an intelligent, sensitive, and complex woman.

In Dalby's novel, Murasaki writes her first stories about Prince Genji's amorous encounters in order to entertain her friends, and to express her own creative temperament. As the stories gain a wider public, however, they are transformed into a conduit for observations on the mores and intrigues of court life. And in the end, as the narrator struggles to stay true to her literary vision, her tales are inflected by Buddhist thought and become parables on the transience and beauty of the world:

I have always felt compelled to set down a vision of things I have heard and seen. Life itself has never been enough. It only became real for me when I fashioned it into stories. Yet, somehow, despite all I've written, the true nature of things I've tried to grasp in my fiction still manages to drift through the words and sit, like little piles of dust, between the lines.

Dalby is an anthropologist by trade, who has produced two previous nonfiction studies: *Kimono* and *Geisha*. And given that her research for *Geisha* gained her the distinction of being the only Westerner ever to have trained in that much misunderstood profession, it's no surprise that she is able to reconstruct 11th-century Japan with meticulous fidelity. It's all there--the political and sexual machinations, the preoccupations with clothing and custom, the difficult and tenuous position of courtiers, the intensity of female friendships in a male-dominated society--and the author shows us precisely how Murasaki's sensibilities were shaped by the culture in which she lived. This is a rich and convincing debut, and another chapter in the current resurrection of the historical novel. --*Burhan Tufail*

From Publishers Weekly

Perfectly capturing the sensual mood of its model, *The Tale of Genji*, this imagined memoir of Murasaki Shikibu--the author of the 11th-century Japanese masterpiece heralded as the world's first novel--sensitively renders Murasaki's inner life and her times in Miyako (ancient Kyoto). Posed as a series of reminiscences discovered after Murasaki's death by her grown daughter, Kataka, the novel reveals the mind of a writer who believed that she could "shape reality by... writing." The young Murasaki dreams of serving as a lady-in-waiting at the empress's court, but her father is a humble scholar, a position that doesn't merit such honors for his children. Instead, she is betrothed to Nobutaka, a relative and family friend. Murasaki resists this match, as Nobutaka is much older, and with her girlhood friend she has invented an ideal, "imaginary lover," the shining Prince Genji. When Murasaki's family is transferred to the distant province of Echizen, she falls in love with a Chinese ambassador's son. But the pair are separated, and Murasaki finally accedes to marriage to Nobutaka. To her surprise, she enjoys a few years of quietude and continues writing the *Genji* stories, which have begun to circulate and win appreciation. Later, she is summoned to serve at court, as the regent wants "those who read the tales of *Genji* in the future to know they were inspired by [his] glorious reign." The book focuses on Murasaki's observations, rather than on national events, and the story moves at a

leisurely pace, best enjoyed for its rich, evocative descriptions--like that of the fascinating practice of communicating via brief poems. The real Murasaki's poems are included throughout, illuminating Dalby's sensitive, well-researched portrayal of the Heian-period novelist, who realizes poignantly that "literary skill will get you noticed... but it won't make you happy." Author tour; rights sold in England, Germany, Italy, Holland, Spain and Japan. (June)

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From School Library Journal

YA-A fictional biography of Murasaki Shikibu, author of *The Tale of Genji*, the most famous tale in Japanese literature. As children, Murasaki and a friend made up stories about an imaginary lover, Genji. Fascinated by her father's descriptions of life at court, she later began writing romantic tales centered around the "shining prince." The young woman has intimate relationships with both women and men, but marries her father's choice, an older gentleman of means. She is widowed soon after the birth of their daughter. Her fame as a storyteller and her friendship with the regent's daughter lead to her appointment as lady-in-waiting to the empress; she is also a courtesan, as is expected of those serving in the imperial household. After a number of years at court, with her daughter established as a lady-in-waiting, the writer withdraws to a mountain retreat and lives the life of a Buddhist nun. The novel is based on the existing fragments of Shikibu's diary and on her poetry, written in a style similar to haiku, which is included in the text in both English and Japanese. In this beautifully written tale, both Murasaki and Genji are painted in bold brush strokes yet with revealing detail. Sophisticated readers, especially those interested in Japanese history, will be caught up in the story and fascinated by the depiction of the rich culture of 11th-century Japan.

Molly Connally, Kings Park Library, Fairfax County, VA

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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