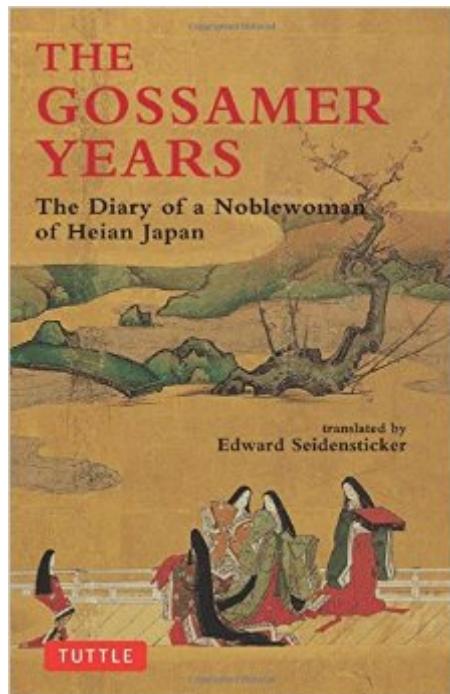


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The Gossamer Years: The Diary Of A Noblewoman Of Heian Japan (Tuttle Classics)



Synopsis

Kagero Nikki, translated here as The Gossamer Years, belongs to the same period as the celebrated Tale of Genji by Murasaki Shikuibu. This remarkably frank autobiographical diary and personal confession attempts to describe a difficult relationship as it reveals two tempestuous decades of the author's unhappy marriage and her growing indignation at rival wives and mistresses. Too impetuous to be satisfied as a subsidiary wife, this beautiful (and unnamed) noblewoman of the Heian dynasty protests the marriage system of her time in one of Japanese literature's earliest attempts to portray difficult elements of the predominant social hierarchy. A classic work of early Japanese prose, The Gossamer Years is an important example of the development of Heian literature, which, at its best, represents an extraordinary flowering of realistic expression, an attempt, unique for its age, to treat the human condition with frankness and honesty. A timeless and intimate glimpse into the culture of ancient Japan, this translation by Edward Seidensticker paints a revealing picture of married life in the Heian period.

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Customer Reviews

As is usual in books by women from the Heian period, her real name is unknown. She is chiefly known as "the mother of Michitsune", and to all intents and purposes she should be faceless, another drop of water in the great clepsydra of time. It is only through her diary, here called "the Gossamer Years" that we can get an impression of her at all. But what an impression it is! Her uncompromising honesty reveals much that is unpleasant. Her evil glee when trouble strikes a rival

for the attentions of her husband, Fujiwara no Kaneie, is really quite reprehensible. Still it, and the motivations for it, are described so graphically that one can almost hear the swishing of her skin as she rubs her hands together. Her honesty also gives us an intense understanding of her wants and views and needs. For all her darker qualities, for all her inability to be content with her many blessings, she is also intelligent, sensitive and perseverant. Having read her most intimate thoughts, we come away with a feeling of deep insight, of understanding, and even of sympathy. This edition of the book is excellently produced. The notes (a considerable number of them) are at the end of the book, and shed a very informative light upon the body of the main text. It pays to read the book through twice; once without the notes, and once with. All in all a rewarding, interesting and strangely timeless volume.

If you are new the Heian period, this should not be your first book; The Tale of Genji by Murasaki Shikibu and The Pillow Book by Sei Shonagon are required reading, along with excepts from the Kokinshu. However, if you're already familiar with the literature and history of the Heian period, and want to know more about the lives of women in this time period, then this diary is an excellent source. Teachers of Japanese literature might find it useful to pair readings from the idealized novel Tale of Genji with similar episodes in the real life Gossamer Years -- all too often students are left dazzled by the brilliance of Murasaki's novel and tend to believe it represents an accurate view of court life in the Heian period. Murasaki's novel is high literature and possessed of significant psychological insight and truly deserves its status as a great work of world literature, but it is fiction. The Gossamer Years, written by a real woman about her real life, gives a very different view of how it felt to actually live with a philandering husband and court intrigues, as well as worrying about more ordinary tasks such as sewing and raising a son. The reader who wants more exciting stories and courtly tales from the Heian period would probably be better entertained by works such as The Changelings (a tale of a brother and sister who swap places in life), The Tale of Ise (poetry and episodes from the life of a gentleman famous as a poet and a lover), and the The Tale of the Heike (the epic tale of the rise and fall of the House of Taira, a sequence of events which formally ended the Heian era and ushered in the rule of the samurai).

(written on light-grey paper, with a sprig of rosemary tied into the ribbon around it) I came into this book knowing absolutely nothing about the Heian period of feudal Japan, and left knowing enough to stand my own. The details revealed are absolutely fascinating, and the writing is rich and evocative. It is a lifestyle of an age long gone, brought to life again. The noble writer of the diary is,

as has been promised, not entirely an angel (her life does sound a bit talk-show-ish at points), but she does certainly have an eye for detail and storytelling. I doubt even non-history-freaks would find this difficult going. Easy to read and digest, with lots of neat looks at life in a very exotic place. I cannot say enough about the book's usefulness as a sourcebook for the period. The copious notes at the end are almost as fascinating as the book itself. I wouldn't have minded more pictures, but I suppose one can't have everything. Those into history, Japanese history, biographies/diaries, etc., will find this a fascinating and informative read.

The author was far away in time, place, and culture from where I am now. Her self-induced misery is completely up to date, though. This piece is divided into three books. The first was mostly a series of conversations, held in short, oblique poems, often in terms of proverbs lost to history. My western eye found little to cling to. The second book is more readable, describing the long slow fall of her relationship. She was concubine to Kaneie, second to his actual wife. Even so, she had a large household of her own. Perhaps she was a she was a kept woman, but she was very well kept. Not well enough for her taste, though. She constantly demanded more of Kaneie's time, but seemed to reward him, most often, with excuses or aloofness. She really could not see how hard she worked to put him off, while faulting him for being put off. The third book completes her estrangement from Kaneie, not in any harsh way, but with a mutual numbing of interest. It's not for me to say - still, I wonder whether this is a first-person account of clinical depression. She finally shifts her interest to her son's future, then leaves us with the most dramatic cliff-hanger ending in all of literature. "Gossamer Years" is a good addition to a well-rounded library of Eastern classics. I wouldn't suggest that it be among the first in that library, though. Shonagon's "Pillow Book" is a much more enjoyable piece of Heian women's literature.

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