



## Madame Sadayakko: The Geisha Who Bewitched the West

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The critically acclaimed author of *On the Narrow* and *Women of the Pleasure Quarters* tells the enthralling true story of the woman who became the most celebrated geisha in Japan and the first to tour the United States and Europe.

At twenty-seven, she captivated the world's stage. The crowned heads of Europe vied for her favors. Picasso sketched her portrait. Puccini based the title character of *Madame Butterfly* on her and used one of her haunting melodies. Gide, Debussy, Degas, and Rodin were among her devoted fans. She was Sadayakko, Japan's most notorious geisha-and its first international superstar.

In this real-life *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Lesley Downer, journalist and author of *Women of the Pleasure Quarters*, hailed as "artfully intelligent... compelling...comprehensive and illuminating" (*The Associated Press*), re-creates the life and times of this extraordinary woman and cultural icon. Sadayakko's adventures and travels lift the veil on the secretive world of the geisha and are told against the backdrop of the beguiling era when Japan and the West were meeting for the first time.

Drawing from meetings with Sadayakko's family members, including her granddaughter, who granted rare access, and others who knew her intimately, this noted geisha expert chronicles the pivotal moments of Sadayakko's dramatic life. As an exquisite young geisha, her virginity was sold for an exorbitant amount to Japan's most powerful man, the prime minister. She shocked the Tokyo geisha world when she left her lucrative career to become the wife of the rebellious-and penniless-actor and political maverick Otojiro Kawakami. He took her to the United States, where posters and crowds hailed her arrival, and to Europe, where she became the toast of Paris, a muse to writers and artists, and an influence on women's fashion.

*Madame Sadayakko* tells the story of an unlikely rebel who carved out her own path, and reveals a missing piece of history from the turn of the last century, when Japanese women were wearing bustles and learning the waltz and European women were wearing Sadayakko kimonos.

## Madame Sadayakko: The Geisha Who Bewitched the West Details

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## **From Reader Review Madame Sadayakko: The Geisha Who Bewitched the West for online ebook**

### **Elle says**

Halfway between a biography and a novel because the author chooses to interpret Sada's feelings and motivation, it is still an enjoyable read, and well grounded in the sociopolitical era.

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### **Julieanne Thompson says**

The title is misleading because the book was more about how she overcame traditional stereotypes through responsible subversion. Sadayakko cleverly maintained a thin veneer of idealised Japanese geisha womanhood while leading, inspiring and creating new emerging forms of art in theatre. While managing the character flaws of the men around her and her troupe she innovated quietly but determinedly because she had to or die of hunger in numerous instances. She had a feel for what western audiences wanted and lived precariously from hotel room to hotel room at times. She gave people a vision of fragility, delicate in form and nature and seemingly reliant on men but underneath she was a revolutionary icon and leader. Not afraid to play on her femininity or to use her wiles she quietly manipulated the male dominated institutions of the day including fashion, drama, theatre and made her genre and style famous. The book stayed true to her in this regard.

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### **margot elm says**

ok, real talk, the author tends to be hella problematic (especially with language, i wasn't into her describing japanese women speaking as "prattling" and "chirruping," v. patronizing and dehumanizing) and doesn't engage with the concept of orientalism in a really satisfying way. i could kind of tell when she came up with conclusions that were based in her own misconceptions versus actual research.

the saving grace of the book is the fact that sada koyama was such a beautiful, intelligent, witty, and vibrant person. her brilliance shines through the mire. this book made me wish koyama was my best friend. this book is a compelling read due to a combination of koyama's narrative, the politics of the development of avant-garde japanese theater, as well as the west's greedy and misinformed consumption of japan and how that plays into histories of colonialism and imperialism

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### **Elizabeth Reuter says**

Others have pointed out how Ms. Downer blurred the line between biography and speculative fiction by guessing at how her subject, geisha Sadayakko, felt during her life. She also, in my opinion, blurred the line between the modern and the historical.

To be clear: I am a feminist, and would never criticize Ms. Downer for being one. However, Sadayakko did

not live in a feminist era, and so Ms. Downer's constant insistence that Sadayakko wasn't the obedient woman her time would have expected her to be seemed suspicious to me, particularly when she had no proof beyond a couple of anecdotes about things like Sadayakko briefly resisting her husband's infidelities at one point (and then giving in, but Downer glosses over that).

However, this book is entertaining, and an interesting look at the history of both Japan and Japanese theater. If you're interested in either, or enjoy rosy looks at history--think romance-novel whitewashing--this book should be perfect. Take it with a grain of salt if you're reading to learn about Sadayakko herself, but for historical study or entertainment value, there's a lot to enjoy.

-Elizabeth Reuter  
Author, *Demon of Renaissance Drive*

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### **lostinabookbrb says**

Madame Sadayakko by Lesley Downer is about a geisha who turned actress in the early 1900's. It's an interesting book in that I learned about Japan's attitude toward the west in that time frame and how actors/actresses were treated in that time. Lesley Downer does provide citations to support her theories on some of the events in Sadayakko's life but I felt like I was reading more from a fan's perspective than from an objective source. While having a somewhat subjective tone in a nonfiction is not a horrible thing (in fact, at times it adds to the work), if you're more into an objective standpoint, this may not be the book for you.

This is a good book to read if you're wondering more about how girls became geisha and what geisha actually do. There's also information regarding how works like "Madame Butterfly" gave a misrepresentation of geisha back in those times.

Overall, it was an enjoyable read.

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### **K. O'Bibliophile says**

This could have been a lot more interesting if it didn't feel like the author's fantasy. It was often hard to figure out where facts stopped and conjecture began. Despite the fact that I know that every detail of Sada's life isn't going to be available, phrases that cropped up often--"You can imagine," "There might have been," &etc-- didn't help the feeling that this was more "based on" Sadayakko's story than even an attempt at a biography.

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### **Linda says**

Madame Sadayakko was the ultimate geisha, so exquisite that the prime minister of the day paid a fortune to deflower her. But she was a rebel who wanted to carve her own path in life. In 1899 she married a subversive avant garde actor and, with a troupe of other actors, they set out on the first ever tour of the West by a Japanese theatre company.

Sadayakko took to the stage and became an instant star. She danced for the American President and for the Prince of Wales in London, Picasso painted her, Gide swooned over her and Rodin admired her. But back in Japan, she suffered the stigma of being an ex-geisha and an actor and was forced, in the end, to make a terrible choice - between respectability and love.

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### **Lady Socióloga says**

Decir que la vida de esta mujer es fascinante es quedarse corta. Yo no sé si hay parte de ficcion en la historia o no, imagino que lo tendrá, igual que presenta problemas al estar escrita desde la perspectiva de una mujer occidental actual... pero sí sé que me ha encantado leerla.

Esposa y amante de algunos de los hombres más influyentes de la política, economía y teatro de final del S. XIX y principios del XX de Japón, hasta prácticamente la segunda guerra mundial. Ayudó a que su país fuera reconocido en todo occidente como algo menos bárbaro (que ya era bastante en el cambio de siglo), a revolucionar el teatro japonés dos veces (antes de marcharse a EEUU y tras la vuelta de París) ...Y, como pasa con demasiadas mujeres, olvidada tras su muerte y relegada a la sombra de su marido, y de sus amantes.

Una auténtica pena que tantos documentos sobre su vida ardieran durante la guerra.

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### **A Miuda Geek says**

Comprei este livro a esperar uma história complexa e cativante, tal como a Historia de Uma Gueixa, mas não posso dizer isso.

A vida de Sadayako é tenho que ressalvar isto, foi interessante, e certamente insólita: ela veio de uma família influente e com dinheiro, que de repente empobrecida, é vendida a uma casa de gueixas para ser educada e, eventualmente se tornar uma.

Ela pisou riscos e limites e gozava de uma reputação e consideração imensas até se casar com Otojiro, um actor e assim, descer na escala social japonesa. O percurso desde essa altura é cheio de altos e baixos, com Sada a "cair" para o papel submisso de esposa japonesa, em vez da gueixa rebelde, que fumava charuto e conversava com os seus patronos quase de igual para igual.

O problema para mim foi o esforço da autora em tornar cor-de-rosa a vida deles, até quando estavam prestes a morrer de fome, nos Estados Unidos. Achei a escrita de certo modo forçada, tediosa em determinados pontos, demasiado descriptiva em outros e no geral com muitas conclusões tiradas pela autora. Também a linguagem que é atribuída a citações de Sada me parece um pouco moderna demais para o inicio dos 1900's e para uma japonesa que mal falava o inglês e que provinha de uma sociedade tão fechada.

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### **Julia Hutchinson says**

**Fascinating insight into a 20th century Japanese woman's life**

I enjoyed learning about someone I'd never heard of but who had such influence across East and West. I would have loved to see photos alongside the story to bring it to life, as I found it difficult to visualise some of the descriptive passages, excellent as they were.

I looked up what I could on line however would have preferred photos linked to the chapters to get a clearer picture of Sada Yakko and her life.

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### **Karolien says**

I loved this book. The story is told in a fluent way. I have read other books by this author and it is always a real pleasure.

The photographs in the book are nice plus. You can see how the woman talked about actually looked. This story gives a new perspective on Japan and how Japanese people see the Western world.

The story is set in the 1890's and early 20th century.  
It tells the story of a former geisha who travels around the world with her husband.

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### **Cherop says**

I read this book a few years ago. I was interested in it because it is a true story of Madame Sadayako, a geisha. I found the book a bit tediously written which was a bit surprising given the subject matter and the extensive travelling undertaken by the book's subject. Nonetheless if you can stick with it, it will open your eyes to a better understanding of Japanese culture and times and the roles of women in it, in the early 1900s.

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### **Jan says**

Lesley Downer has brought Sada Kawakami to life through the pages of this book. Known as Yakko during her geisha career and Sadayakko during her acting career, Sada had been largely forgotten after her death. When she was remembered, it was in disparaging terms. But Sadayakko was a ground breaking woman. She was the first Japanese woman to work as an actress. She established a training academy for other women who wanted to act. With her husband Otojiro she changed the nature of drama in Japan and introduced aspects of Japanese culture to the West. She performed across America, in Paris, Vienna, Berlin and London. She inspired Puccini when he was adapting the play Madame Butterfly for his opera. Sadayakko knew Sarah Bernhardt and Ellen Terry, and worked with Isadora Duncan. But in Japan, to be an actress was seen as something shameful, and at the end of the Meiji era to step out from behind your husband was anathema. Downer's research into contemporary accounts of Sadayakko's career and her conversations with Sadayakko's family provides the basis for an engaging and entertaining biography. Sadayakko knew key figures in Japanese society following the Meiji Restoration, and their inclusion in this biography provides a more human angle to Japanese political history. As a young geisha, her first danna was Prime Minister and later Prince Ito. Her first love Momosuke married into the Fukuzawa family and had become an important businessman by the time Sadayakko re-encountered him. Sadayakko certainly had a rich and varied life. I was immersed in this biography, and didn't really want it to end. The only reason it doesn't get 5 stars is because Downer describes many photographs throughout the book, but not one is reproduced other than the

cover photograph. I don't know whether that's only true of the Kindle version, but I wish the photos had been included.

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### **Jean says**

I love everything geisha (except, of course, the gender and occupational-based discrimination associated therein). Madame Sadayakko was a very interesting person living and defining her career in a time of great importance for the development of culture and man's journey towards globalization. Downer does well to illustrate the cultural climate of the late 19th century and the struggles and triumphs of this artist's rise to fame. My only criticism is that she intuited Sadayakko's thoughts and feelings too often. "She must have felt....", "she must have thought..." etc. However, in her defense, this style did well to make a non-fiction book read like a novel.

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### **Tracey says**

This was a Borders "cheap book" purchase sometime in the spring of 2010.

Read this while on vacation (May 2010) - a fascinating "fish out of water" story where a strong woman challenges her society's expectations and becomes a success not only in what was a man's world, but in a totally different culture as well.

Downer's research on both the Japanese and American sides of the story seems quite solid and in line with what little I know of this time period and culture. The writing is very engaging and really brings Sadayakko to life, as well as the two loves of her life - Otojiro and Momosuke. I'm sure a chunk of the story was conjecture, but considering the lack of direct source material, I felt Downer did the best she could.

I appreciated the photos that were included but would have liked even more - especially when the author described a given image in detail, but did not include it.

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