



Above the East China Sea

Sarah Bird

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Above the East China Sea Sarah Bird **A *Seattle Times* Best Book of the Year**

In her most ambitious, moving, and provocative novel to date, Sarah Bird makes a stunning departure. *Above the East China Sea* tells the entwined stories of two teenaged girls, an American and an Okinawan, whose lives are connected across seventy years by the shared experience of profound loss, the enduring strength of an ancient culture, and the redeeming power of family love.

Luz James, a contemporary U.S. Air Force brat, lives with her strictly-by-the-rules sergeant mother at Kadena Air Base in Okinawa. Luz's older sister, her best friend and emotional center, has just been killed in the Afghan war. Unmoored by her sister's death and a lifetime of constant moving from base to base, Luz turns for the comfort her service-hardened mother cannot offer to the "Smokinawans," the "waste cases," who gather to get high every night in a deserted cove. When even pills, one-hitters, Cuervo Gold, and a growing crush on Jake Furusato aren't enough to soften the unbearable edge, the desolate girl contemplates taking her own life.

In 1945, Tamiko Kokuba, along with two hundred of her classmates, is plucked out of her elite girls' high school and trained to work in the Imperial Army's horrific cave hospitals. With defeat certain, Tamiko finds herself squeezed between the occupying Japanese and the invading Americans. She believes she has lost her entire family, as well as the island paradise she so loved, and, like Luz, she aches with a desire to be reunited with her beloved sister.

On an island where the spirits of the dead are part of life and your entire clan waits for you in the afterworld, suicide offers Tamiko the promise of peace. As Luz tracks down the story of her own Okinawan grandmother, she discovers that, if she surrenders to the most *unbrat* impulse and allows herself to connect completely with a place and its people, the ancestral spirits will save not only Tamiko but her as well.

Propelled by a riveting narrative and set at the very epicenter of the headline-grabbing clash now emerging between the great powers, *Above the East China Sea* is at once a remarkable chronicle of how war shapes the lives of conquerors as well as the conquered and a deeply moving account of family, friendship, and love that transcends time.

Above the East China Sea Details

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From Reader Review Above the East China Sea for online ebook

Rana says

I almost gave up on this book because it's got a slow start but I am so glad that I stuck with it. The payoff was an amazing story that moved me, such a happy/sad ending. But really the best part? Reading about a place and time that I know nothing about, I love it when a story teaches me something and pushes me to learn more. I've already put on hold at the library one of the books that the author mentions as one of her main sources for historical information, *The Girl with the White Flag*.

Sarah-Hope says

I have a new favorite book of the year: Sarah Bird's *Above the East China Sea*. This is one of those deeply satisfying reads that works on many levels. It moves among several settings: the U.S. military base on Okinawa in the present day and Okinawa outside of the base; Okinawa during World War II when the Island served as a defensive barrier between Japan and U.S. warships; the Okinawan spirit world, led by spirits called *kami*.

This book is the story of two young women and is narrated in their voices. The first, Luz James, is a military brat (a term she uses to describe herself), daughter of a single mother. Luz's world has been torn apart by her older sister's unexpected enlistment in the Air Force and her death in Afghanistan. She is responding to her sorrow with drug use and risk-taking, common pastimes among her two groups of friends: the "Quasi" crowd composed of other military brats (quasi because that's the only sort of friendship one can establish with the constant moves of military life) and the Smokinawans, the local stoners.

The second young woman is Tamiko Kokuba, an Okinawan originally a fanatical supporter of Japan (many Okinawans at the time considered it a compliment to be mistaken for Japanese), who works in the cave hospitals set up on the island for the Japanese forces, and who, pregnant at age fifteen after being raped by soldiers on both sides of the conflict, chooses to commit suicide. Okinawan custom requires recovery of the body and regular tending to the remaining bones in order to have a life after death. Because she has committed suicide by throwing herself into the sea and her body was never recovered, Tamiko and her unknown child have been unable to move on. Their spirits await guidance by the *kami*, hoping the *kami* will provide them with a body whose spirit they can displace, which will allow them to move on to the afterlife. Tamiko spends the years as a waiting spirit by recounting her life story to her unborn child.

Luz and Tamiko's paths cross in both literal and spiritual senses as Luz contemplates suicide and Tamiko waits for a body to house her spirit. At several moments I was sure I'd guessed how these two different crises would be resolved, but Bird's nuanced story-telling keeps adding complexity to the narrative, taking it to deeper, richer places than I'd imagined.

I don't want to say more than this because readers deserve the pleasure of following the several paths of this novel without having parts of the narrative revealed ahead of time. Whatever your preferred genre—history, historical fiction, contemporary fiction, mystery, fantasy—*Above the East China Sea* offers a satisfying read that will stay with you long after you close the book.

Baglady says

This is the most memorable, thought provoking, emotional book I have read in a long long time. Set in both WWII and current eras, the setting was described in such vivid detail I found myself back on Okinawa, and the base at Kadena, where I spent limited time in the 90's. The rich portrayals of families and cultural practices, in both eras, drew me right into the scenes. Few people are aware that Okinawa was not always a part of Japan (or a significant US military location) and know little of its rich history which is accurately and colorfully represented. Though the main characters are youth, this is not a book for the young, but for people who understand what it means to be family, have connections, value (and search for) one's place in terms of heritage, and struggle through life in it's most devastating and rewarding moments. There is both humor and sorrow, belief and suspension of belief, love stories and stories of break-up in families. Read this.

Lori says

I had no knowledge of Okinawa before picking up this novel... I have never read anything pertaining to Japan come to think of it! That said I learned so much from this about the Okinawan culture and the strong ancestral beliefs they hold! It truly fasinated me! This was told in a past/present format that worked perfectly to give the reader a true sense of the Okinawan culture and the part they played in WW II! I really enjoyed!

Lauri Saplad says

This book was truly unique for me. Living in Hawaii, I have many Okinawan friends. This was the first book set in Okinawa that I've every come across. I know a little about the culture. I found the book very enlightening. We all know that Japan took advantage of Okinawa during WWII, but I had no idea as to what extent!

Ms. Bird expertly wove the past in with the future to make the island come to life. Kami (spirits of the dead) narrate their own story, while the modern day element takes the shape of high school age Luz, an Air Force brat whose tougher than nails mom gets stationed at Kadena AFB. Again, no spoilers ever, but the way the drama plays out will move you deeply.

Krystal says

I didn't even do any status updates, that's how amazing this story was. I felt the author was very clear about the tragedy that Okinawa played in history, and it really takes me back to the course I took in college on Japanese Colonial rhetoric.

After losing my mom this year, I'm a particular softy for afterlife stories. Okinawans have such a deep connection with ancestry, that I could feel it through a fictional tale.

Alice Liu says

Half of "Above the East China Sea" is historical fiction chock full of Okinawan folklore, and centers around Tamiko, an Okinawan girl living during WWII. The other half is a YA (Young Adult) social situation story about Luz James, an army brat in present day Okinawa. Add an additional element that readers will probably describe as either paranormal or spiritual, and the result is a complex, lush journey that reveals that when we heal our ancestors, we also heal ourselves.

Though alternating viewpoints, we see how Luz is cut off from a sense of home, identity, and belonging. It is during her suicide attempt that she awakens an energetic (spiritual, quantum, karmic) connection to the long deceased Tamiko. The story that Sarah Bird spins from here reveals the depth and complexity of Luz's life as it has been molded through the wounds of generations. Tamiko's life is told from her watery grave and reveals the way that Japanese culture imbued a kind of self-hatred among the Okinawans, and how that was used against them. The Japanese pride-filled propaganda machine rivaled American bombs in destructiveness, as it robbed the Okinawans of the ability to make wise choices and led them toward sure annihilation.

What was most interesting to me, however, was the experience of women during war and in its aftermath. Ironically, we learn most of the sordidly truthful things from a rather crass, indifferent old man. I also appreciated the brief acknowledgement of Korean comfort women. Amazingly, Sarah Bird brings Luz and Tamiko's stories together into a tight, serendipitous conclusion. I'm kind of surprised that this was not released as a YA book. I think its cross-genre nature would fit well into the huge YA fantasy market, while exposing young readers to the historical at the same time. Epic read!

Elizabeth Coluby says

This is on the top of my favorites list. There are two stories that move along quickly. I read it fast the first time to follow the story. It carried me along. Then (and I usually don't do this) turned around and read start to finish immediately again. I loved the story both times. The first read was for the story and the second for more details. I highly recommend it.

Nancy says

This is one of my favorite books of 2014! It's a compelling and very interesting story of two teenage girls living in Okinawa. In the present day, there's the daughter of a military mom, living on the air force base with challenges beyond the usual teenage angst. The second teenager lived seventy years prior and faced very different challenges, in the midst of the war and the American occupation. As you might expect, the stories evolve and get closer as the book progresses. Another wonderful book by Sarah Bird!

Cathi Davis says

Two stories twined around each other, Okinawa during WWII and Okinawa today. But what a story, starting as a coming of age teen fiction, moving on to a war story, fragments of magical realism entwined throughout.

This is my favorite book this year. Well written, good plot and oh so satisfying ending...some things are well telegraphed but not annoyingly so...more satisfying. "Ah so that is who that is" And how could I have lived there in the mid 60s and not known that almost a third of the civilian population died? True I was only 10, but still many of the okinawans I met had lived through unimaginable carnage...and they were/are amazing.

Caratstick says

I love this book. It's beautiful. And fascinating. The characters are well-written and have believable strengths and weaknesses. The book is occupied by ghosts (spirits), maybe as a book that covers WW2 should be, but it is not a supernatural or occult book. The horrors here are all too real, too man-made. It offers a perspective on WW2 that I admit I'd never considered. And some knowledge about Okinawa that is new and...unsettling. Read it.

Terri says

Review also found at <http://kristineandterri.blogspot.ca/2014/05/review-of-the-unseen.html>

I received an advanced copy of this book from the publisher Knopf via Edelweiss in exchange for an honest review. The expected publication date is May 27, 2014.

This story started a little odd for me. Talking about spirits and the spirit world and giving a voice to those who have left the earth. I was concerned that the story was going to be different than I expected and one that I would have to say. One piece of advice that I would give to anyone who is reading this and feels the same is to stick with the story. It becomes worth it.

As the story tells the present day story of Luz and her struggles to come to terms with the loss of her sister it also tells the story of Tamiko and the battle that occurred on the island of Okinawa during world war II. You know while reading the story that their stories are intertwined somehow however I will not be the one to divulge how.

The highlight of this story is the Island of Okinawa and it's history during the war. Although I know this story is one of fiction it baffles me how I can learn a piece of our world history that I did not know about through pieces of literature. As I am a big fan of stories written about the war I really enjoyed learning about another piece of it that doesn't appear to be widely known, at least it wasn't to me.

As the story progressed it left me with a haunting feeling which is always a sign of a good book to me. I can't put my finger on what it was that has stayed with me but all I can say is that the reader is left rewarded after a somewhat shaky start to the book.

If you are a fan of wartime stories, tragedy and a little bit of romance then this is a book that I would recommend. A little different from the usual string of wartime stories however not too far from the formula that one can not sit back and be lost in the pages. I really enjoyed this book.

Kasa Cotugno says

Ten years ago, Sarah Bird's *Yokota Officer's Club* was one of my favorite books. She returns to the world she knows well, that of being a military dependent, with this stunning, original, illuminating and multi layered story. Two fifteen-year-old girls, both living in Okinawa 70 years apart, form the nexus of a complex, beautifully realized story, encompassing the grief, beauty and turbulent history of Okinawa. Okinawa was a colony of Japan, with its own traditions, language, and strong spiritual connections. The blurb above best describes the plot, so I won't go further except to say this is a great read.

Phoebe Fox says

I always love Sarah Bird's books--the funny ones and the lyrical ones, the ones that show me the world and make me think, and the ones that take a microscope to the everyday challenges and . . . oh, look at that, make me think. Bird hits a chord with me every time with her tight, beautiful prose and her universal yet unique stories. This is among her best--a tale that effortlessly bridges the lives of a modern military brat and a World War II Okinawan girl thrust into the war. Beautiful, evocative, moving, and relatable, *ABOVE THE EAST CHINA SEA* is a haunting read that stays with you long after you close the cover.

Gina says

Having won this historical fiction book on Goodreads, I couldn't wait to read it. It was a hard book to get into however I'm glad I stuck with it. Any book that enlightens me on a subject is a winner to me. I had no idea of the plight of the people from Okinawa whether from the Japanese or later the Americans. The dual story of the two girls was well told. I wasn't sure about the "spirit" part but I now understand what an important part of Okinawan life it is.

Diane S ? says

A dual story line, two teenage girls, one Luz on a Okinawa military base in present day and the other Tamiko, living in Okinawa during World War II. These girl have more in common than is known at the books beginning.

I found both stories fascinating and they are tied together seamlessly. The present day story takes place during Obon, three days where the dead are invited to return to their families for days of feasting and goodwill, until they are chased away at the end of the third day. Luz has had a tragic occurrence and her searching for answers will bring more than she ever could have thought possible.

Tamiko lives in Okinawa with her family, they are very loyal to the Japanese emperor and have no doubt that they will win the war. Her older sister is a Princess Lily girl, one of the highest aspirations a girl from Okinawa could have. The war will turn their world upside down and few would survive.

I learned so much about their culture, their belief in the spirit world where all would be reunited, if they are buried together. So many bones have turned up harmony of them sit in warehouses waiting to be identified, an overwhelming task. The invasion later 82 days, and 222 Lily girls, girls unused to the sight of horror were commandeered from their schools and made to act as nurses for the wounded Japanese soldiers. Japan did not think highly of the Okinawans and basically sacrificed Okinawa as a killing field. I was astonished to learn that more people died here, than in Hiroshima and Nagasaki together. The survivors would find little left of the place they called home.

A powerful book that highlights the consequences of war, past and present. A look at a culture I knew little about and a story about two teenagers connected by that past. A look at military life and the challenges that presents for family.

Kim McGee says

This is a new Sarah Bird. "Above the East China Sea" reads like a love letter to the people of Okinawa in that there is a sadness about how the Okinawans have been treated by the Americans. It is a ghost story that matches a very real story of the school girls who acted as nurses to the wounded troops on the island and the current day teens of American Air Force personnel stationed in Okinawa. A grisly discovery will help Luz reunite a ghost girl with her family spirits. Beautifully crafted with an obvious love of the Japanese way of life this book will haunt you for some time.

Kathy Fields says

Wonderful Book

Gillian Redfearn says

I think this is one of Sarah Bird's best books. I was resentful that life got in the way of reading this in one sitting as I wanted to completely lose myself in the lives of the two protagonists. I found that I cared very deeply for them. I am also a fan of any book that teaches me about something I really don't know anything about as this one did about Okinawa in two different times, 1945 and current time. This book, simply put, has so much heart in both its fictional characters and historical fact.

Jodi says

Loved this book. To me, it's a book about our connections to our ancestors, our families and to history. It so happens that the story takes place on Okinawa and is told in two timeframes. One is during WWII and one is contemporary--the two principal characters being teenage girls who are suffering loss and depression. The contemporary girl, Luz, is a beautiful nuanced character. Some reviewers find this to be a ghost story, but in my view, that is a disservice to the book. The story does personalize the influence of ancestors in our

lives, but in a lovely, philosophical way.
