



The Maids

Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, Michael P. Cronin (Translation)

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The Maids is a jewel: an astonishing complement to *The Makioka Sisters*, set in the same house, in the same turbulent decades, but among the servants as much as the masters. *The Maids* concerns all the young women who work—before, during, and after WWII—in the pampered, elegant household of the famous author Chikura Raikichi, his wife Sanko, and her younger sister. Though quite well-to-do, Raikichi has a small house: the family and the maids (usually a few, sharing a little room next to the kitchen) are on top of one another. This proximity helps to explain Raikichi's extremely close observation of the maids and their daily lives, although his interest carries with it more than a dash of the erotic, calling to mind Tanizaki's raciest books such as *Diary of a Mad Old Man* and *The Key*.

In the sensualist, semi-innocent, sexist patrician Raikichi, Tanizaki offers a richly ironic self-portrait, but he presents as well a moving, nuanced chronicle of change and loss: centuries-old values and manners are vanishing, and here—in the evanescent beauty of the small gestures and intricacies of private life—we find a whole world to be mourned. And yet, there is such vivacity and such beauty of writing that Tanizaki creates an intensely compelling epic in a kitchen full of lively girls.

Ethereally suggestive, sensational yet serious, witty but psychologically complex, *The Maids* is in many ways *The Makioka Sisters* revisited in a lighter, more comic mode.

The Maids Details

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From Reader Review The Maids for online ebook

Chiara Carnio says

Un romanzo lento, ozioso e flessuoso che mi ha fatto pensare, per tutta la sua durata, alla "danza dei ventagli", ballo tradizionale giapponese. Il ritratto di un Giappone che cambia, quel paese anteguerra che non esiste più, travolto e cancellato da una nuova epoca

Questo cambiamento è descritto attraverso la vita delle varie e diverse domestiche che hanno prestato servizio in casa dello scrittore Chikura Raikichi per un ventennio, dal 1938 al 1958, "studiate" con occhio attento del padrone di casa, che amava attorniarsi di giovani donne capaci ed affidabili, veicoli per conoscere l'altro sesso.

Un racconto intimo e domestico incentrato su una quotidianità normale ma non banale, con un registro stilistico notevole, che ci fa entrare nella lenta e piacevole routine passata. Incantevole nella sua, apparente, semplicità.

Cherise Wolas says

Junichiro Tanizaki's The Makioka Sisters is considered the greatest Japanese novel and is a favorite of mine. It's about the familial and marital dilemmas of four sisters in an upper-class family, and in it, their maids are merely shadows. In Tanizaki's final novel, The Maids, originally published in 1963, and for the first time translated into English this year, he focuses on those shadowy maids, a retinue who work in the various households of Chikura Raikichi, a famous elderly novelist, and his wife Sanko. When one thinks of upper-crust families and their help, the formal distance between them is mostly a given, but not here. There is a great familiarity between employers and employees; the homes, as luxurious as they may be, are small, everyone is on top of everyone else. Raikichi and Sanko discuss the maids, judging them on their skills as housekeepers, cooks, account-keepers, as well as on their liveliness, conversational skills, and aesthetic sensibility, including talent for calligraphy. Raikichi has favorite maids, has them join him for walks, or for dinner. Indeed, Raikichi and Sanko become stand-ins for far away parents, attending their maids' weddings, Raikichi is asked frequently to provide a name for the newborn infant of a maid. A first-person narrator is telling the story of these women who work and live and are an integral part of the Chikura's households, and yet moved around like chess pieces. The narrator, ostensibly a stand-in for the elderly novelist, is also likely loosely based on Tanizaki himself. His focus is the pleasure and drama of everyday life, but also encompasses an ethnographic view, highlighting provinces that have been renamed, distances between train stations, and how the maids are addressed. The ethnographic elements kept me at a distance in the beginning, reading about distances between train stations and what they were once called, but when I settled into it, this small gem of a book, blossomed for me. And the maids, once a group of undefined women, become fully defined, as we learn who they are, where they come from, how they speak, how they peel vegetables, what they look like, who they love, what their distinct gifts and flaws and personalities are.

Adventuresofabusymom.com says

Pointless book :(I just couldn't get into it or even follow a storyline

Sweetmongoose says

This is a fascinating book for those with a strong interest in Japan (1930s to 1960s) and for those with an interest in Kyoto in particular. I enjoyed the writing style and structure, which is more complex than it at first appears. The book provides intriguing glimpses of attitudes toward class differences, regional differences, lesbianism, master & servant relationships, epilepsy, female beauty, marriage, sexual relations, cooking & food, fashion... and so on. The main characters are the maids. Their personalities are given centre-stage, which must have been quite unusual for the times. The novel could be read as a sort of love letter from the author to these quirky and strong-willed women (which is not to say that attitudes towards them, and women in general, are egalitarian, not by any means).

This quotation, late in the book, tells a lot about the aims and values of the author. The master, Raikichi (a version of the author) and his wife, Sanko are discussing the maids:

"...while most people had both strong point and weak points--that's normal, after all--Suzu was just about average in all of her abilities. While each of the other maids--starting with Hatsu, and then Koma, Sada, Yuri, and Gin--had possessed some special quality that no one else could imitate, they said, each also had her undeniable faults; and, even though you could find faults in Suzu too if you nitpicked, she had very few. On the other hand, that sort of personality wasn't very interesting, and compared to Koma, Yuri, and Gin she provided little in the way of diverting material for conversation."

I thoroughly enjoyed the book. Read The Makioka Sisters first, if you wish, but The Maids is certainly a stand-alone volume.

(from an advance readers' copy)

Mary says

A bit difficult to start with but it grows on one. A companion novel to one about the homeowners, this is not an "Upstairs, Downstairs" tale. The Japanese treated their help more like distant relatives. Now I have to read the other book

Martina says

La storia - o le tante storie minute - inizia negli anni trenta e si conclude più di un ventennio dopo, un tempo piuttosto lungo e portatore di grandi cambiamenti nei costumi, nei pensieri e nei comportamenti dell'intero paese. In primo piano ci le domestiche a servizio dello scrittore Raikichi e della moglie Sanko, una serie di ragazze descritte con dovizia di particolari. Di loro sappiamo la provenienza, l'aspetto fisico, quale sia la loro famiglia d'origine. Apprendiamo anche dell'abitudine di cambiare il nome delle ragazze - una forma di rispetto, quasi che il vero nome fosse una proprietà esclusiva dei genitori. Di ognuna conosciamo le preferenze alimentari e seguiamo, negli anni, dapprima la vita sentimentale e poi quella coniugale. E' chiaro che la famiglia Chikura instaura con le domestiche un rapporto di fiducia, che si occupa di loro con la benevolenza del 'buon signore' che si preoccupa della felicità e del benessere dei suoi 'sottoposti'. La cosa che mi ha lasciato un pò perplessa è che non c'è traccia dei grandi avvenimenti storici. Non si parla della guerra, né della bomba su Hiroshima, si accenna giusto qualcosa qui e là. Il tempo che cambia è

sottolineato, ancora una volta, dai dettagli in quella che è la vita delle domestiche.

Prima volta che affronto questo autore e devo dire che forse mi aspettavo qualcosa di più. Il ritmo di tutto il romanzo scorre lento ed inesorabile, ma nonostante questo resta sempre una piacevole lettura che consiglio a chi è amante della cultura Giapponese.

the gift says

all literature is gossip: exhibit one...

Libby says

This was an interesting portrayal of the lives of maids in an upper-class Japanese family in the 1940s and 50s. For me, the main problem was the lack of any kind of annotation--I found many passages difficult to understand due to a lack of cultural knowledge.

Jason says

It would hardly be radical (may in fact be totally lame, not stopping me) to suggest that the core of the Japanese spirit may be found in the haiku: the concision, the restive quality, the foregrounding of the natural, the concern with the seasonal suggesting pattern at the heart of time's ineluctable flow. Tanizaki maintains a formidable reputation as (less confoundingly than you might think) both a radical and a traditional Japanese voice, representing as he does an Edo sensibility grappling (almost meditatively) w/ modernization (which in some sense means post-war Westernization). THE MAIDS, his final novel, appearing first in serialized form, is concise, restive, and buttressed by the flow of time. It is in many ways simply a compendium of observances regarding a series of maids, but one would be remiss in failing to acknowledge that the novel sublimates a very rigorous and multifaceted scaffolding. A lot of places, people, and incidents are interwoven herein w/ great finesse. The novel is fluid and digressive; it almost feels free-form. Linearity is suspended. We are never given particularly firm grounding temporally, and the various localities where Chikura clan (plus its offshoots) reside w/ their maids have a tendency to blur. One would almost have to methodically diagram the book whilst reading it in order to get a proper sense of its timeline and geography. What stands out are individual idiosyncrasies (primarily of the maids themselves), relationships, and the drift of relational politics over time. Traversing the sociocultural landscape from pre-war to post-war there is a sense of current and subtle-to-the-point-day-to-day-imperceptible transformation. The novel's central intelligence belongs to Tanizaki stand-in Raikichi, head of the Chikura clan. He is attentive and sympathetic (for the most part) to the many maids who come to serve his family at their various residences. There is a combination in him of both the paternalistic and the clinical / curious (in a manner that fundamentally speaks to sexuality, but in the least ostentatious way imaginable). This sensitivity to women who serve, toil, and negotiate the dramas and upheavals of their circumscribed worlds, links Tanizaki to my two favourite Japanese film directors, Kenji Mizoguchi and Mikio Naruse, men not much younger than Tanizaki himself.

Patrick McCoy says

Junichiro Tanizaki's last novel was *The Maids* (posthumously published in Japanese in 1974, but has just been published in English in 2017). It can be seen as a companion piece to his greatest triumph, *The Makioka Sisters*. It is the keenly observed lives of several maids who worked for a well-off author and his family, Raikichi Chikura (a stand in for the author) through the post war years and three house holds (Sumiyoshi in Kobe, Atami in Shizuoka, and Yuagara in Kanagawa). It also calls to mind the sexually infused novels of observation like *The Key* and *Diary of a Mad Old Man* in his obsessive observations and considerations of the young maids that have lived among the Chikuras over time. There are a number of episodic vignettes about the different maids that are essentially character portraits. Tanizaki is a displaced Tokyo-ite who moved to the Kansai area and immersed himself in Japanese culture. The fact that the majority of the maids in this tale come from Kagoshima in the southern most main island of Kyushu allows for him to list the characteristics of the women from the region as well as note the dialect much like an ethnographer. I think it belies Tanizaki's preoccupation with the fairer sex-although Raikichi is absent from sexual escapes some stories recount how certain maids were wooed for marriage and in one case he recounts how two maids who end up in a lesbian affair that scandalizes everyone. I found it entertaining and full of life. There's an informative afterword by translator Michael P. Cronin included as well.

Shu says

An interesting insight to the life of Maids pre and post WWII. Thought the style of writing was choppy and jumped around different stories confusingly.
