



As I Crossed a Bridge of Dreams: Recollections of a Woman in Eleventh-Century Japan

Lady Sarashina , Ivan Morris (Translator)

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In the mainstream of Japan's literary tradition, *As I Crossed a Bridge of Dreams* not only reveals much that is most appealing in Japanese literature but also stands on its own as a remarkable and haunting portrait of a woman.

Born in A.D. 1008 at the height of the Heian period, Lady Sarashina (as she is known) probably wrote most of her work towards the end of her life, long after the events described. Thwarted and saddened by the real world with all its deaths and partings and frustrations, Lady Sarashina protected herself by a barrier of fantasy and so escaped from harsh reality into a rosier more congenial realm. She presents her vision of the world in beautiful prose, the sentences flowing along smoothly so that we feel we are watching a magnificent scroll being slowly unrolled.

'It is like seeing a garden at night in which certain parts are lit up so brightly that we can distinguish each blade of grass, each minute insect, each nuance of colour, while the rest of the garden and the tidal wave that threatens it remain in darkness'--Ivan Morris

As I Crossed a Bridge of Dreams: Recollections of a Woman in Eleventh-Century Japan Details

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From Reader Review As I Crossed a Bridge of Dreams: Recollections of a Woman in Eleventh-Century Japan for online ebook

J. Watson (aka umberto) says

A few years ago while reading some stories on Japanese literature, I came across a Heian classic entitled “As I Crossed a Bridge of Dreams” and longed to read it since it’s written as recollections of a woman called Lady Sarashima in eleventh-century Japan, that is, 1,000 years ago. It’s simply amazing how some Japanese women then were so literate that this authoress herself could write “an important piece of Japanese literature” (back cover). In retrospect, we can’t help wondering, I think, how advanced they were, linguistically, because they should have passed an interesting learning/teaching process till this lady scholar could eventually write her own lauded diary. Moreover, as for other countries, what were they literally doing then? It seems to me Japan’s literacy has since far advanced and been developed as one of the civilized nations in the world.

Some may wonder why we should read her narration, and, if there is anything worth reading or reflecting on due to its obviously ancient/remote context from our twenty-first century world. However, I think we can find some traces of ancient wisdom left to posterity that has since belonged to humankind, in other words, Japanese people would be happy to share their pride and scholarship if they know there’re global readers interested in reading Lady Sarashima from its translated version. Just imagine how they would feel and think when there’re more Japanologists/Japanese scholars, for instance, Prof. Donald Keene, Prof. Royall Tyler, Prof. John Nathan, etc. who have studied, read Japanese classics and translated such works into English. One of the reasons is that studying to master a foreign language like Japanese simply needs one’s lifetime, therefore, reading its English translation is fine and enjoyable for some keen readers including me.

Treating its reading as if we were in a time machine, we could not help visualizing and sensing something sentimentally and wistfully magic in relation to our great Mother Earth, especially her text on the famous, awe-inspiring and unique Mount Fuji 1,000 years ago on which, I think, we simply can’t read and reflect anywhere, in any language. However, we need to be content with its English version and would be a bit envious of those scholars capable of reading and appreciating it in Japanese as an L1, not L2 or L3. The extract I mean is as follows:

In Suruga stands Mount Fuji, which I used to see in the West from the province where I grew up. There is no mountain like it in the world. It has a most unusual shape and seems to have been painted deep blue; its thick cover of unmelting snow gives the impression that the mountain is wearing a white jacket over a dress of deep violet. At the summit is a level place from which smoke emerges, and in the evening we actually saw a fire burning there. (pp. 39-41)

From the last sentence in the extract above, that implies there was evidence of a classic observable by the naked eye on the trace of seemingly lately extinct Fujisan as primarily written for herself and famously recorded for us posterity to read and know what happened there around a millennium ago; this also proves the power of words that still exists through time, unbelievably, into the present 21st century and beyond.

Justin Evans says

A lovely example of 'autobiography', and a lovely example of the two great paradoxes of art and religion:

i) religion suggests that we should concern ourselves more with the ultimate results of our behavior (i.e., heaven, rebirth etc...) than the proximate results (i.e., enjoyment, sensual gratification etc...) It can only do this effectively by using the language (broadly speaking) of this world, because we don't know the language of the next. But this use of language leads us to value the language and objects of this world, which distracts us from heaven/rebirth.

ii) art makes life bearable; at the same time it draws us away from the 'real world,' including our problems dealing with the first paradox.

For 'Sarashina', the religion is syncretic Shinto/Buddhism, the art is the tales of her time and place, Heian Japan (e.g., *Genji*, *The Pillow Book*). As translated by Ivan Morris, her prose is lovely and her poetry readable, though forcing them into English misses a lot, I'm sure. I'm also skeptical because I feel entirely at home in Sarashina's world; there seems to be no important difference between her and me. Since she was an 11th century Japanese woman, it's just possible that Morris has made the translation a little too smooth.

Juliana says

My review: <https://theblankgarden.com/2017/08/02...>

Paul Christensen says

Most of this woman's problems stem from negative thinking.

She should be more like Donald Trump.

Yet the melancholic beauty of her writing struck a chord in my soul.

Jo says

Think of this as an ancient Tumblr; a collection of the thoughts, poetry, daily goings-on and grievances of a privileged girl from long, LONG ago. Indeed the phrase "first world problems" comes to mind.

"Lady Sarashina" was part of a well-off upper class of Japanese women who lived in palaces in the 11th century. We know neither her real name nor this book's intended title - both were lost, and substitutes invented on her behalf by academics centuries later. Make sure you read the translator's amazing foreword as it's beautifully written in its own right and provides much-needed context. It's basically a miracle that we're able to read this book today at all, and just like Sei Shoganon's *The Pillow Book* I cherish the ability to channel someone whose life has so little in common with mine.

"Sarashina" writes of nothing but her own life and things that immediately concern her - seasons changing, misty sunsets, morning dew - even as civil wars rage around her, as massive civil unrest takes place that she may not even have been aware of. But just as today, first world problems are still real problems - people die, parents move away, thieves come in the night - and at the end of the day, she is an amazing poet.

Her personality shines through in patches through the many distortions of time, like a distant shortwave radio signal that you can never quite tune to properly. Whoever owned my copy of this before me wrote "32" in the front page, and then circled chapter 32, which reads in full:

To a close friend from whom I had heard nothing since my husband's death, I sent the poem:

Do you suppose that I have left this world?

Alas, I linger on in tears.

Orinoco Womble (tidy bag and all) says

This is not a "diary" in the conventional Western sense of the word but rather a memoir. It starts out giving an immediate account of a young Japanese girl's travels from the capital (Kyoto) to her father's new posting far from the city. Later, the tone changes and we realise that the text was all written late in the author's life, after her husband's death. She reminded me somewhat of St Teresa of Avila, with her fascination for "tales" such as Genji Monogatari, etc. and her self-castigation for her own "frivolity" and refusal to obey the dreams that encouraged her to engage more deeply in religious life.

It is interesting that all the fiction we have from the Heian period was written by women; men engaged more in scholarly writing and poetry. The author was apparently a fan of The Pillow Book and perhaps wished to emulate that work; however, given her circumstances as only a part-time member of the Imperial court, Sarashina is more a string of personal memories and anecdotes interspersed with the author's own poetry. Again, her husband is only a shadow in the background, and her three children are only mentioned in the footnotes.

Be warned that in this particular edition of the book, the "Diary" itself constitutes less than a third of the printed text. The rest of the over 200 pages is front matter and afterword, as well as footnotes to the text itself. There are some good cultural notes in there, but most of it is self-congratulatory elucubrations on the part of the translators/editors on how good a job they did, how much better their translation is than the ones that have gone before, and basically how wonderful they are.

Well, maybe. I was a professional translator myself for decades, and one of the cardinal rules is that the translator, like a good ghost writer, should not be evident. Our task as professionals is to allow the original text to shine through, in rhythm and tone as well as meaning. It's not about us, or at least it shouldn't be. And yet the Goodreads entry doesn't even credit the lady's assigned name: it says "By Moriyuki Ito (Translator) and Sonja Artzen (Translator)." Niice. I know court ladies did not go by their own names in print, but come on! And WHY do they state in the notes that the text doesn't mention when her husband died, and yet their translation gives a detailed timeline of when he grew ill and that he died a few weeks later? Did they just add that in? And if they did--!!!

Four stars for the "diary", two for the dirty finger-marks the translators left smudged all over it.

Henry Avila says

"Night after night I lie awake, listening to the rustle of the bamboo leaves, and a strange sadness fills my heart"...She walked on Earth 1,000 years ago, looking at the beauty of the Moon shining brightly in the heavens, illuminating the land, viewing the exquisite flowers as they blossomed in many shades, seeing the magnificent snow-capped white mountain top of Mount Fuji and the purplish color below its summit, the prettiness of a blue lake (Biwa), still there as waves flowed by on their boat, the green hills of the rolling countryside spreading out to infinity, the rainbow brightness of a sunset when the Sun sinks slowly under the horizon, the sweet sounds of birds passionately singing in trees to each other ...still her real name is unknown today....Called Lady Sarashina by some now, an alias the woman never heard in her short life 1008-1059, in the busy old capital of Kyoto, Japan, population 175,000, now 1.5 million. As a lady-in - waiting to a Princess, a daughter of the Emperor and Empress of Japan, she didn't even live in the main palace, in a lesser one, but the job was not glamorous, babysitting a girl of four, a thankless occupation. Non important women were known by nicknames then, she was the " daughter of Takasue no Musume ", a sometimes governor of not very prestigious provinces. A shy girl who loved reading...writing poems to friends and relatives and receiving back more, devouring the Tales of Genji, as they came out chapter by chapter in 1021, all 54, dreams were her reality, "I live in the dream world", she felt comfortable in a state of unconsciousness, when awakening making notes quickly about them good or bad, so not to forget...they were prophecies of the future, she believed. Hipersensitive, crying as people succumbed, even strangers she never met, a gloomy, timid, melancholic nature not suited for this society. Her devoted middle class father worries, his daughter, (they are quite close) having reached the ancient age of 31, unmarried just beginning her career as a lowly servant to a royal child, she must stop daydreaming and become serious. Pilgrimages to Buddhist shrines start to occupy her time, crushed by the death of her dear sister, visiting famous temples, praying for good fortune, days on end, talking to the priests and nuns, but something is missing she lacks the proper belief, however nature, the beauty of it, the mysterious atmosphere, that is different. Getting away from her husband and children, two boys, one girl (Lady Sarashina at long last marries at 36)...be free of responsibilities, observe the surroundings, the majestic tapestry of a simple river roaring through, a bird flying high above and falling until the last second, soaring again, the thrill of looking at countless stars in the night sky, the rains bringing life and snow making a winter pretty...Autumn leaves changing their pigment to brilliant reds, yellows, oranges, purples, blues, browns...she must write about this for posterity...A wonderful, vivid description of the golden age of Japan..the Heian period at its height, a superb book with a short, thoughtful poem or two on each page.

Juliana says

3,5 stars. My review: <https://theblankgarden.com/2017/08/02...>

Mrs. Fujiwara says

I spent such a long time working hard on my studies that I almost forgot how much I used to enjoy making reviews of my books, albums and films, so, thinking about that I decide to continue with this pleasant job. Well, because of my latest activities at a History Congress here, I wrote this article about Japanese Rock Gardens and their connection with Zen Buddhist thoughts at medieval times. It was delightful to learn more

about relations between Japanese people and Japan nature as a whole. And one of the books I used to specifically present this symbiosis to my public was "As I Crossed a Bridge of Dreams", a kind of diary (though professor Ivan Morris doesn't seem to agree with that term) from Lady Sarashina, a woman who lived at the Heian Era (VIII-XII). I've already read this, but I end up re-reading it to pick up details and, mainly, because I've learned that you can't really emit a great/academic opinion about someone else's work just by reading it once (my Professor says we have to read it, at least, five times AND make notes!). That said, I have to admit that this little book became certainly one of my favorites from Japanese Literature. It is not easy for a person that doesn't have any idea on how life at Classic Japan was and it certainly won't gain their attention either. Lady Sarashina seemed to be a really calm, quiet and thoughtful woman. A really dreamy girl, who liked fairy tales (as the famous "Tale of Genji"), sensitive to the point of crying out her eyes when she knew someone far, far away, not related to her at all, have died. Like most women at her time, she also guided her emotions by changes in the weather and used to sit at her balcony, gazing at the full moon or at the beauty of momiji trees on autumn nights. And, as most girls at our time, she also dreamed with a shining prince, like the ones we admire in tales, what makes me wonder that, no matter how far we live, what culture we absorbed, how many time have passed... We all have the same heart and long for the same things over and over. It's a lovely and delicate book, full of simple poetry (like any other book of that time), metaphors and wishes.

Peter says

This slim volume manages to cover an entire life in 80 pages of prose and poetry. Her life in retrospect appears as one long existential dilemma. There are some very sad and touching observations near then end, and you can practically hear the sighs. Beautifully melancholy.

Susan Budd says

An intimate and elegant memoir. This is a lovely book. As I read, I felt a personal connection to this lady whose name I don't know, who lived a thousand years before me on the other side of the planet. This translation is by Ivan Morris. It is vastly better than the older translation by Kochi Doi and Annie Shepley Omori.

R. says

An excellent chronicle, a bejeweled *artifact*, plume-in-ink'd from the pen of a bookish young woman (known by scholars only as Lady Sarashina) livin' and lovin' in Heian period Japan.

Luxurious observations of landscapes long eroded and scents sadly diminished. The tale much-told of the quest for a book to treasure, a treasured book, in this case Lady Murasaki's *The Tale of the Genji* ("I was desperately impatient to read some Tales").

Much enjoyment from the introduction - not usual for me, as the introductions to books usually offer nothing new to this noggin' -- but I guess the less I know about something, the more I'm apt to get off from the twenty or so pages of scholarly harrumphing, throat clearing, cock-measuring, brittle coughing, blackboard-pointing.

Interesting to learn that poems traveled thick and fast during this time period, a primitive Twitterstorming of anecdotal emotions to/from nuns and nurses that, despite being written in delicate whorls and whirls of black ink on water soluble rice paper *survived*, survived despite the clouds.

My copy - purchased at the library - had some ephemera of note: a torn-notebook page with the legend, "Vivien - I borrowed your Ger Ed book. If you need it, just come and get it from me. Thank you! Shellie" and a single large-font word, newspaper-clipped: "Beauty". On the reverse, it makes mention of a 48-year-old Sylvester Stallone. So there's that. And so I can now (after using the shreds as bookmarks for the main text and the notes) toss these scraps, as they've now been given permanent residence in The Cloud.

Hope you got what you wanted from that German textbook, Shellie, you lightfingered thief.

7jane says

Lady Sarashina was not as accomplished (or cool) as Sei Shonagon or Lady Murasaki, nor was her life as exciting, but she did leave us some accounts of traveling in Ancient Japan, from one home place to another, and some shrine visits. One can read in her story also how daydreaming - or how we act in certain situations - can sometimes let us miss chances in life that could've made a clear difference. But perhaps the way her life went was the best for her. Nonetheless, this makes an easy reading and one could ponder on how she and the other two ladies are different in life and in character... and also compare their personal writings to see the difference.

Maybe not the first to read of the three (Sarashina, Shonagon and Murasaki), but definitely worth it.

Annie says

Continuing on with my Heian period survey.

I like the translator (Ivan Morris) a lot. His foreword got me excited for the Pillow Book which I'll be reading soon— he makes Sei Shonagon sound like a brilliant, badass spitfire.

Lady Sarashina, in contrast, is a shrinking violet of average intelligence whose deepest desire is to be left alone with her few loved ones and a wealth of juicy romance books. Like, her fantasy is for a hot guy to fall in love with her, but for her to live on a remote mountain by herself, and her boy visits her exactly once per year, and leaves her alone the rest of the time to "live [her] lonely existence, gazing at the blossoms and the autumn leaves and the moon and the snow."

That's *hilarious*.

She also fangirls hard over *The Tale of Genji* and prays every night that she'll be able to finish it. Girl, same.

Though I think Murasaki is more intelligent, Sarashina's diary is infinitely more readable/interesting than Murasaki's was.

marissa sammy says

If you ignore the condescending foreword from the Ivan Morris translations, you'll find this to be an excellent, cleverly-arranged book that Takasue's Daughter/Lady Sarashina designed as a multi-layered morality tale about the superficiality of fable as well as a way in which to subvert the Heian Buddhist belief that women could not attain enlightenment. A shallow reading of the book creates a picture of a naive girl growing into a lonely old woman, but if you look a little deeper, the real complexity of the narrative its cheeky sense of humour and its profound spirituality shine through clearly.
