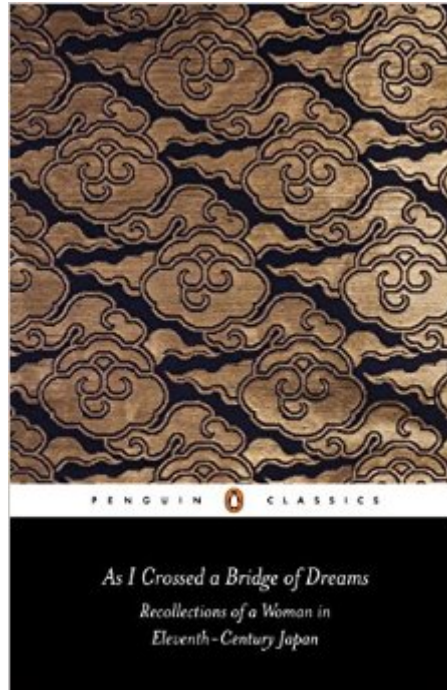


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As I Crossed A Bridge Of Dreams: Recollections Of A Woman In 11th-Century Japan (Classics S)



Synopsis

Born at the height of the Heian period, the pseudonymous Lady Sarashina reveals much about the Japanese literary tradition in this haunting self-portrait. Born in 1008, Lady Sarashina was a lady-in-waiting of Heian-period Japan. Her work stands out for its descriptions of her travels and pilgrimages and is unique in the literature of the period, as well as one of the first in the genre of travel writing. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

Short, poignant and redolent of a very individual experience of life in Heian Japan, the memoirs of 'Lady Sarashina' provide a fascinating glimpse of a woman's life slightly outside of the most exalted circles of eleventh-century life. This is a highly idiosyncratic portrait of its time, concentrating on episodes important to Sarashina herself (dreams, pilgrimages, poetic exchanges) rather than to the politically-active class as a whole. The sense of chronology is vague, the structure dictated more by mood pieces and observations than straightforward diary-keeping. As such, this probably isn't the

place to start with medieval Japanese writing, but something to try after Sei Shonagon (an altogether more ebullient and resilient character, who is at the centre of things) and Lady Murasaki. Sarashina is too withdrawn to involve herself in the customary court intrigues and liaisons, and too low-status to have much impact. Instead, she occupies herself with the fantastical world of Genji and other "Tales". Her memoirs are also notable for their account of a journey through the provinces to the capital, and for highly-praised poetry that unfortunately doesn't translate particularly well. Ivan Morris' concise introduction sets the work in its context and discusses its significance and textual history; line drawings and unobtrusive notes further build our picture of Sarashina's world. A worthwhile purchase.

Lady Sarashina lived a life of dreamy lament. It is a wonder if someone of her nature could ever be happy with what the real world could offer. Her brief moments of happiness are gained in dreams and fantasy, or tempting/dreaming the impossible, the forbidden fruit. The real world, despite living a life of relative privilege, was a never ending experience of pain to her. She took seeing the ephemeral (*wabi sabi/mono no aware*) aspects of life to heights of seeing the eternal in the ephemeral the great in the small, which can be beautiful (as with Basho), but Lady Sarashina seems too idealistic and self obsessed which makes it something pitiful in the end. The real world is one of duty and lament: "veni, vidi, vici" would not be her epitaph; more like perpetual nostalgic anguish and shyness. Her regrets seem misguided. Lady Sarashina avoided popular attractions, as opposed to her near contemporary Sei Shonagon, in "The Pillow Book", who endeavored to be the attraction. Some of the scenes are unforgettable and the book is a classic for what it is: the memoirs of a dreamer. The book has one of the most poignant poetic conundrum sort of endings I can recall. The translation failed to capture all of the poems, which is to be expected; but those that were captured are brilliant. The contrast between Sei Shonagon and Lady Sarashina is one of the beauties of these books and poses an interesting psychological comparison.

This charming, brief book really does move at a dream-like pace. There are great leaps in time, with no apparent explanation. Things that should have seemed vitally important, like raising three children, are dismissed in a few scattered lines. Sarashina simply walks out on a once-in-a-lifetime imperial ceremony, but returns again and again to the sight of the moonlight. Sarashina, the pseudonym we have for her, lived and wrote in the first half of the 11th century, in Heian Japan. It is a wonderful quirk of history that this era hosted so many educated, literate women, with cloistered lives that allowed time for introspection. The authors of *The Gossamer Years* and Shonagon's

Pillow Book lived during that same era, and even had family connections to Sarashina. She wrote this memoir near the end of her life, and seemed to use it as a package for presenting her life. Like an elegantly wrapped package, this tantalizes us by hiding the real substance inside. We read a little of her role in the imperial court, but never see into the closed society of the women's quarters. We see a courtier's career interrupted by family duties, but quite make out what those duties were. We learn that her husband was influential enough to be named regional governor, but we never see her part in his court or how that related to her imperial service. Instead, we read a few conversations, travelogues, and poems, the kind that hide more than they reveal. As a child, she had a passion for romantic stories. She used those tales to enter worlds of elegant people and beautiful places. It was only in her thirties that she came back to earth, and realized that she had let too much time go by. She did marry, but was widowed early. She did have a comfortable life as lady in waiting, but never found her way into the court's inner circle. It was almost as if her life were one of those romances, but she had been given only a minor role in it. She wrote this memoir when she was old and alone. It is beautifully literate. Still, I almost wonder whether her mind had started to wander, and wander only where the little girl's romance stories led. //wiredweird

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