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The Lady And The Monk: Four Seasons In Kyoto



Synopsis

When Pico Iyer decided to go to Kyoto and live in a monastery, he did so to learn about Zen Buddhism from the inside, to get to know Kyoto, one of the loveliest old cities in the world, and to find out something about Japanese culture today -- not the world of businessmen and production lines, but the traditional world of changing seasons and the silence of temples, of the images woven through literature, of the lunar Japan that still lives on behind the rising sun of geopolitical power. All this he did. And then he met Sachiko. Vivacious, attractive, thoroughly educated, speaking English enthusiastically if eccentrically, the wife of a Japanese "salaryman" who seldom left the office before 10 P.M., Sachiko was as conversant with tea ceremony and classical Japanese literature as with rock music, Goethe, and Vivaldi. With the lightness of touch that made *Video Night in Kathmandu* so captivating, Pico Iyer fashions from their relationship a marvelously ironic yet heartfelt book that is at once a portrait of cross-cultural infatuation -- and misunderstanding -- and a delightfully fresh way of seeing both the old Japan and the very new.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I bought this book used last summer and filed it away on a bookshelf, and finally picked it up two days ago. Even though these days, I read through most books slowly, I was sucked into Iyer's Kyoto world, and plowed through the book in two very enjoyable sessions. I was baffled to read some of the criticisms readers at gave this book. I found the accusations that Iyer is condescending to be the most perplexing. I've read lots of travel writing, and have found that many travel writers spend most of their time analyzing their chosen destination with a God-like impersonal analysis of the place's foibles that certainly does often come across as arrogant or ignorant. What struck me about

this book was how much Iyer does *not* do this. He certainly spends a lot of time analyzing and trying to figure out both Japan and the people he encounters there, but he is no more critical of others than he is of himself, no more critical of Japan than of his own culture(s). He does not watch from a distance, but participates in what he writes about, from interacting with 'The Lady' to dipping his foot into the waters of a monk's life, and exposes his own floundering. He criticizes not only that which he participates in, but also his own foibles and inability to realize the rigor and discipline of Zen, his own inability to understand Sachiko and give her what she needs and wants. I came away from the book seeing Sachiko *not* as someone who is helpless or hapless, but rather, as someone who, like all of us, struggles between dreams and duties. Yet unlike most of us, Sachiko taps into a well of deep inner strength and vision and breaks through the restrictions of her cultural conditioning to realize her dreams.

Subtitled "Four Seasons in Kyoto", this 1992 book by the British travel writer, Pico Iyer, is more than just a book about a place. Mr. Iyer spent a year in Kyoto to learn about Zen as well as Japan. Along the way he met a very special woman, Sachiko, and learned more about the essence of being Japanese than he ever expected. I was particularly interested in this book because I have a wonderful Japanese daughter-in-law and have been to Japan myself. I remember the few days we spent in Kyoto with fond recollections and smiled at the author's vivid descriptions. I also found myself nodding in agreement at some of the discoveries he made about Sachiko and her way of thinking as I, too, have had my eyes opened in similar ways. Mr. Iyer has the ability to paint a complex portrait in words. I found myself sharing his discoveries, from his experiences in the temples to the very modern music clubs. The center of the book, however, is Sachiko. She's 30 years old, the mother of two children and married to a Japanese businessman who spends 18 or more hours a day at work. She speaks English with difficulty but has read a lot of classic literature and is also an aficionado of a wide variety of pop music icons. In spite of her traditional upbringing, she yearns for a larger life, beyond the confines of her home. Mr. Iyer becomes her friend and they do a lot of sightseeing together. She's free all day and so is he, which makes their friendship easy. Some of the most interesting scenes are when he tries to speak Japanese and she tries to speak English and misunderstandings follow, both because of the language itself and also because of different ways of thinking. I'm a romantic and fully expected their relationship to blossom into an intimate one, but Mr.

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