



Women of the Pleasure Quarters: The Secret History of the Geisha

Lesley Downer

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Ever since Westerners arrived in Japan, they have been intrigued by Japanese womanhood and, above all, by geisha. This fascination has spawned a wealth of extraordinary fictional creations, from Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* to Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*. But as denizens of a world defined by silence and mystery, real geisha are notoriously difficult to meet and even to find. As a result, their history has long been cloaked in secrecy.

Lesley Downer, an award-winning writer, Japanese scholar, and consummate storyteller, gained more access to this world than almost any other Westerner, and spent several months living in it. In *Women of the Pleasure Quarters*, she weaves together intimate portraits of modern geisha with the romantic legends and colorful historical tales that shape their fascinating past. Contrary to popular opinion, geisha are not prostitutes but, literally, "arts people." Accomplished singers, dancers, and musicians, they are, above all, masters of the art of conversation, soothing the worries and stroking the egos of wealthy businessmen who can afford their attentions. Looking into such traditions as *mizuage*, the ritual deflowering that was once a rite of passage for all geisha, and providing colorful descriptions of their dress, training, and homes, Downer transforms their reality into a captivating narrative, and reveals an enthralling world unlike any other.

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