



Japanland: A Year in Search of Wa

Karin Muller

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During a year spent in Japan on a personal quest to deepen her appreciation for such Eastern ideals as commitment and devotion, documentary filmmaker Karin Muller discovered just how maddeningly complicated it is being Japanese. In this book Muller invites the reader along for a uniquely American odyssey into the ancient heart of modern Japan. Broad in scope and deftly observed by an author with a rich visual sense of people and place, Japanland is as beguiling as this colorful country of contradictions.

Japanland: A Year in Search of Wa Details

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Carmen says

Karin muller decides to continue her vagabond ways with a one year trip to Japan. She makes documentaries. But what she really learns as she investigates the Japanese culture is more about herself.

julie says

Most first-hand accounts of being a foreigner in Japan are annoying. One is beaten over the head with first impressions, the futile attempt to describe in minute detail what was seen, heard, smelled, felt. There's also the soul searching ending with profound realizations. If you've ever been to Japan or traveled to a foreign country yourself it's almost certainly contrary to your experience and entirely nauseating.

Karin Muller's memoir is none of these offensive things. Her writing style is quick - it's hard to even fathom the different experiences she describes in under three hundred pages. Even one of them would be a rare experience for even the most seasoned tourist. She doesn't beat you over the head with her profound realizations and even if she's not describing MY Japan I'm content with her assessments and not rolling my eyes.

If anything, I find Muller's book inspirational - assured that if she could survive in Japan for a year I can, too, anywhere.

Kevin J. Rogers says

Humorous, insightful, entertaining, at times even poignant, this companion volume to Karin Muller's multi-part PBS documentary of the same name was a fascinating read. At the beginning of the story Ms. Muller makes a decision to leave her stale and unfulfilling life in Washington D.C. for a year in Japan, ostensibly to study judo (she's a black belt) and film a documentary about the experience, but really to find "wa"--a state of focus and harmony that she found in her judo instructors' "almost ethereal calm and inner strength". ("Wa" literally translates as "circle" or "ring".) Her judo contacts in the United States find her a host family, the Tanakas, in Fugisawa, about an hour from downtown Tokyo. Genji is a sixth-degree black belt and a highly successful businessman; his wife, Yukiko, is the model of the perfect Japanese wife; their daughter, Junko, is rapidly approaching an age where marriage is literally mandatory, lest she lose both her job and her place in the social order. For six months Ms. Muller enjoys the hospitality of the Tanakas--with mixed results--and in so doing finds part of the essence of Japan. To find the rest, she leaves their prosperous home (under difficult circumstances) and settles into a run-down apartment on a crowded alley in Osaka maintained by a gay American expatriate who, like many of the "gaijin", earns his living by teaching English. Capitalizing on her new-found freedom from the strict social restraints of the Tanaka home, Ms. Muller sets out on a variety of adventures throughout the Japanese countryside, making friends, exploring, and occasionally pressing herself to the very limits of her physical endurance, all the while searching for the elusive Wa. She tracks down an obscure mountain cult, attends a variety of local festivals, and finally sets

out on a 700-mile pilgrimage to some 88 Buddhist temples in honor of Kobo Daishi, the patron saint of Japan, in a final, desperate quest for that "elusive inner peace . . . (t)his pilgrimage is my last hope." That she finds it in a completely unexpected place and in a completely accidental manner is a fitting and appropriate ending to this joyous and absorbing tale. I highly recommend this book, and the documentary film as well.

Nancy says

My friend Sara, also on goodreads, lent me this one, and even the preface had me laughing. The author, Karin Muller, is bravely daring a year in Japan, seeking to understand what makes Japan so interesting yet so foreign. She seeks "wa", a type of focus or harmony. Is it possible for a foreigner to learn this? Muller is using herself as the test subject, and already having a rough time subjugating her own desire for independence and her own sense of self in order to please Yukiko-san, her host-mother--an exacting and imperious Japanese lady of the house. Although I just started this one, it does not seem it will be possible to please Yukiko-san, nor will it really be possible to become Japanese unless the author is willing and able to shed a great deal of her own character. Does that seem likely or desirable? Nah.

Amelia Laughlan says

An interesting recount of a writer and documentarian's year in Japan. While there were scenes and conversations captured in this memoir that I found insightful, I also found that this book was written from a very America-centric perspective. Which was surprising, coming from someone as well-travelled as Muller. Her cultural analysis of Japan often takes the 'us vs them' approach, which I find populist and boring. Muller's witty and imaginative recounts were enough to keep me reading, but I can't imagine ever going back to her writing if I was looking to read something about Japan.

Muller's frequent complaints of getting up early and feeling hungry constantly irked me. Convenience stores are so common in Japan and the quality and nutrition of the meals you can buy there is amazing. I don't know how she managed to miss them.

Emily says

My sister gave this book to me and recommended that I read it, but I'm not quite sure why, other than the fact that I'm living in Japan. It wasn't published all that long ago (6 years), but from the Japanese people that I know here, her accounts of people's attitudes towards unmarried, single women is outdated.

It was an okay read that had some information about Japan that I didn't know and was interesting (Geisha culture, festivals) but it's a book I could take or leave.

Julia says

Japanland is a fierce, funny account of a filmmaker's desire to experience the harmony, or "wa," she believes is found in traditional Japanese culture. Muller lives in Japan for one year, staying with a modern host family

in suburban Tokyo for five months and in a variety of other locations for the rest of her time in the country. She wrangles with the transportation system, learns about the ancient arts of swordmaking and pottery, encounters "New Human Beings," tries to be a geisha for a day, fails in her attempts to plant a garden and, most hilariously, stays in a monastery before going on a particularly ill-fated Buddhist pilgrimage.

It's not a typical travelogue. Japanland reads more like a cross between the candid diary of Lucy Ricardo and the wry social commentary of Cornelia Otis Skinner. I found the narrative hysterically funny, yet touching. Muller is the exact opposite of introspective: trying to cope on a daily basis leaves her no time for philosophizing and she cheerfully admits to her shortcomings, just as I believe I would in her situation. Having just finished reading Claire Dederer's yoga memoir "Poser" I couldn't help making comparisons, and sorry, Dederer comes up short again.

Yumiko Hansen says

I enjoyed Muller's witty observations and self-deprecating humour. She never stood by as an observer, she was always leaping, head first, right in to learn and help-sometimes to her own charging or detriment. I'd happily recommend it to anyone who has a thirst for knowledge or curiosity about Japan.

Lisa says

Karin Muller has a very nice voice. I liked her. I thought she told her story well. There were chapters and storylines I liked better than others, and some I wasn't too moved by. I liked hearing about her living accommodations and her relationships with the various people she got to know. The last 30 or so pages of the book were kind of a snooze for me. I wasn't too into hearing about her last minute pilgrimage to bring her year to a really amazing zen-like head. I more enjoyed hearing about her attempts to film the last train leaving Shinjuku and then staying at the men's capsule hotel. At the end, she kind of goes for that classic college thesis wrap-up, like, oh everyone meant so much to me and are with me and each one was so great and meaningful. Well, I have to say, I would have been happier to hear her say something like, Yukiko, sorry I would occasionally chat with your husband, who INVITED me to stay here, and by doing so I sometimes got in the way of your vegetable chopping, but Japanese customs-shumstoms, COME ON. There is a decent way to treat people and then there is absurdity. Throwing your vegetable garden onto the lawn and keeping it there so when your mother comes to visit she can see the train wreck that you created and be ashamed and disappointed? No babe, that is not Japanese customs and politeness and whatever. That is just out-of-control bitchiness. I was so relieved when you got out of there!

Andrea says

A travel memoir about a 30-something documentary filmmaker from DC who picks up and moves to Japan for one year. Muller's storytelling is effortless to read--I'd tell myself I would stop at the next page and before I realized I was already into the next chapter. The book cover boasts that her experiences are "...*hilarious, puzzling, sexy, frustrating, elegant...*" and I agree. She offers great suggestions about places to see and

provides readers with many examples (sometimes stereotypical, sometimes quirky) of Japanese culture. A fun read.

Suzanne says

"Our differences are obvious from the very first day. Yukiko is very traditional. I am not. She is quite sure, for example, that all these newfangled cooking devices, like microwaves, break down food. I've done nothing to disabuse her of this notion because there is only one microwave in the house, and it is now conveniently located on my kitchen counter."

This is a story of about the author, Karin Muller's, attempt to ingratiate herself into the world of Japan. Not the touristy, superficial world - but the real, get to know the people, Japan. Muller does a marvelous job in this witty and well-written account of her year in the land of Nippon.

"Her ceaseless vigilance is making an impression. For the first time in my life I feel guilty about putting the toilet paper roll on backward. Until now, I never even knew that toilet paper had a front and back. I resent feeling guilty, so I refuse - on principle - to turn it facing forward. Then I worry that Yukiko will see it, so I use it up as quickly as I can and hope the next one will end up the right way around."

What I really loved about this book, is that I learned so much. I always prided myself on my knowledge of the world, and like Karin, I approached this journey (although mine was the written kind) certain that I had a good foundation on which to set out. She quickly came to discover how little she really knew, and how much her own cultural values stood in her way of living a Japanese way of life.

Muller is brave, optimistic and doesn't give up. I really enjoyed traveling across Japan with her!

Crystal says

A captivating travel memoir about a year the author, a judo practitioner, spends in Japan with a strict host family and a camera for her travel videography. I really appreciated how much she dug into her surroundings to learn more about homeless people in Japan, sumo, Buddhist pilgrimages, a "mountain cult", and she even interviews with a geisha. She is down-to-earth and quite intelligent and outspoken, and I finished the book with a much more realistic view of Japan.

Bibliotropic says

(Reread in 2018, and was disappointed to find that the whole "fish out of water" element of the book got old really quickly. Author seemed repeatedly baffled that people didn't appreciate her questions about their way of life, or insisting that things are much better done her way...)

I have what some might call a ~~minor~~ major obsession with Japan. As such, it didn't take much convincing for me to buy this book, which is an account of the author spending a year in Japan in search of harmony and balance for her life.

What this is not, I should say, is a travel guide to Japan. It contains a lot of fantastic insights into the culture, both mainstream and more esoteric, but if you plan to read this book thinking that it will make your trip to Tokyo easier, you'll be disappointed.

On the other hand, if you have an interest in what Japanese culture is like for both an insider and an outsider, then I definitely recommend this book. From her stay with a host family to her Buddhist pilgrimage, Karin Muller weaves a wonderful story with skill, honesty, and respect. She's not ashamed to reveal her own ignorance of some situations, nor is she ashamed to point out when other people are just plain baffling, at least by Western sensibilities.

I have read this book more than once now, and it's one of the few books that I can safely say I take more away from it each time I read it. It's an engrossing book, with plenty to amuse those who know nothing about Japanese culture and those who know quite a bit.

By the end of the book, whether the author feels they've achieved a sense of inner peace and harmony is almost irrelevant. She's learned a great deal, experienced more than most people ever dream of, and she's taken away a little piece of another place to keep inside herself. In a sense, her pilgrimage toward the end of her time in Japan was only a fraction of the pilgrimage she embarked upon, and it left an impression that even the reader can feel as they share the journey from beginning to end.

Becca says

yikes! This story (non-Japanese woman goes to Japan to learn about the culture and language by immersing herself in it) was all too familiar: the oppressive weight of being a barbarian gaijin in Japan, the terror of the everyday "yuubaba-san"-- the older woman who rules every detail of your life with a brutal iron fist ("there was a stain on your cutting board! You caused me to lose face!")

And also the lovely things about Japan-- the real unstinting generosity you find with strangers, the baths, the food, the attention to detail, the minute-by-minute training in good manners and sensitivity to others' feelings.

For a film equivalent, see "Fear and Trembling."

?? says

Couldn't finish it. Found it repetitive and with no plot. The only thing I got was that if you suffer from insomnia running and practicing Martial arts really helps.
