



Chronicles of My Life: An American in the Heart of Japan

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Hailed as the 'leading expert on Japanese literature' by the New York Times Book Review, Donald Keene has devoted more than half a century to the study and appreciation of Japanese art and culture. This memoir chronicles his extraordinary life and intellectual pursuits.

Chronicles of My Life: An American in the Heart of Japan Details

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From Reader Review Chronicles of My Life: An American in the Heart of Japan for online ebook

Caroline says

Donald Keene became one of the only American who has been allowed to be a Japanese citizen. He became a Japanese citizen at the age of 90. This is how and why I read about him in the NY times. He is a professor emeritus at Columbia where he taught for over 50 years. Japanese scholar, teacher, writer and translator of Japanese literature. It all begun after he had been an intelligence officer during the WWII. The book is a little disappointment because he doesn't speak a lot about him and about his own feelings and thoughts. It becomes almost a name dropping session and it makes it boring somehow... But I admire the guy and his love for Japan and all his accomplishments there. I have missed all his sketches that are blurry on the kindle!

Masanaka Takashima says

I have come to like Mr Keene through this stunning memoir. Chapters where he meets my literary heroes like Kenich Yoshida and Arthur Waley excited me a lot, but I enjoyed the earlier development of how he met and learned Japanese language, and joined the US Navy as a linguist officer working in war-operations against Japan. There he translated huge amount of various Japanese sources into English. Among them were killed Japanese soldiers' diaries. Japanese soldiers were encouraged to keep a diary while US counterparts were prohibited from doing so --- do you know why? This made me as Japanese feel down and think.

kkurtz says

this is a wonderfully heartfelt & humble memoir from the pre-eminent Japanese Scholar. Keene recounts how he fell into his love for the Japanese culture & language quite by accident, but how those early events would shape the rest of his life. The reader gets a vivid picture of the often solitary life of a working scholar, as well as glimpses into Keene's friendships with leading Japanese writers of the day. Writers like Mishima, Kenzaburo Oë, & Kobo Abe. The book was originally written for serialization in the Japanese newspaper the Daily Yomiuri, that's why the short chapter format, which also makes it quite a breezy read. As a bonus, the book is also illustrated throughout with amazing drawings by Akira Yamaguchi.

Jason Keenan says

What a wonderful journey and what a wonderful life. Donald Keene traces the chains of his long life (he's now in his 90s) that lead from sitting next to a Chinese student in his youth to a life as one of the world's preeminent experts on Japanese literature (and quite the writer on culture and history as well).

His life and his career and his friendships with modern writers like Yukio Mishima, as well as his focus on

the history of Japanese literature, will have you taking copious note for your to-read list. Mine doubled - at least for Japanese fiction.

A fun read and an insightful one - I'm already looking forward to tackling more of Keene's books.

Blake says

Received this book as part of a prize after meeting Mr Keene himself as well. It's really amazing to read about this man's life. Even though he might seem slightly reserved or retiring, it's clear that he didn't let anything hold him back all these years! The people he met, the times he experienced, they're all so fascinating. Definitely inspiring. I wonder who's going to be able to top his achievements in this field in the coming years...

Libby says

This is the autobiography of Donald Keene, a famous scholar of Japanese literature. I found the first 2/3 of the book very interesting, especially the stories of how Keene ended up studying Japanese language and literature. I found the last third of the book kind of boring, though--there is a lot of discussion of whose books he translated and who he visited with. It seemed at the end as if he felt he had to mention everyone who might be still living, or whose families would want to be mentioned (if they were dead). I would recommend the first part of the book to anyone, but the end only to those who are really interested in writers unlikely to be known outside of Japan.

Arvind Radhakrishnan says

This is easily one of the best memoirs I have read. Donald Keene's erudition is truly astounding. I had started exploring Japanese literature seriously after reading his essays and books. So it was a treat to read about his life and experiences as a Japanologist. Through his wise insights he has transmitted to the world the beauty of Japanese literature. Keep teaching us Keene-san!

Jim Coughenour says

Any American reader of Japanese literature owes a debt to Donald Keene, an eminent translator and long-time professor at Columbia. My first encounter with his translations (over 25 years ago) was *Essays in Idleness* by the Tsurezuregusa of Kenk?, a book I still unearth from time to time.

Keene's memoir is, in most respects, a quiet tale of an uneventful life. Other than serving as an interpreter for Japanese prisoners during World War II, the highlight of Keene's life seems to have been traveling to and from Japan for 60 years, meeting friends and authors, translating and writing his books. It's the only memoir I've ever read that makes no mention of the author's erotic life, even obliquely, which gives it a curiously abstract quality. Perhaps Keene is honoring Kenk?'s injunction: "A man should never marry. I am charmed when I hear a man say, 'I am still living alone.'"

The book is beautifully written and beautifully published, including whimsical illustrations by Akira Yamaguchi – and convinced me of the author's abiding love for Japan. What I missed were the particulars of that passion: I would have appreciated more detail about the literature Keene has done so much to champion. Keene would no doubt reply that he's already written that book, several times. In any case, I'm glad to have spent a day with his memories.

Karl Lion says

I've finished reading the book. I love many parts in it which I cannot tell you without citing almost the whole book that are still so alive and vivid in my mind. It thrills me a lot as if I've met in person with Mr. Keene. I've made a plan to read other books of his and of those he mentioned in this one. I especially love the conclusion he made for the book as well as for his life: "I hope that this chronicle, for all its deficiencies, has at least suggested how one human being spent an essentially happy life."

Darryl says

"Chronicles of My Life" is a short autobiography and memoir written by Donald Keene, who is arguably the leading American scholar of Japanese literature, poetry and theater. He is currently Professor Emeritus of Japanese Literature at Columbia University, where he has taught for over 50 years, and he has written several dozen books about Japanese history, culture and literature, including "Modern Japanese Literature", "Twenty Plays of the No Theatre" and "Five Modern Japanese Novelists". His latest book, "So Lovely A Country Will Never Perish: Wartime Diaries of Japanese Writers", was published by Columbia University Press earlier this year.

Keene was born in New York City and initially attended Columbia on a scholarship, receiving a bachelor's degree in 1942. He enlisted in the Navy, where he was trained to be a Japanese translator during World War II. He made his initial trips to China and Japan during the war years, serving both as an interviewer of Japanese prisoners and civilians and a translator of sensitive documents and diaries. Upon his discharge from the Navy he attended Cambridge, then spent several years living in Japan, where he continued his study of Japanese literature while befriending many leading Japanese novelists, including Yukio Mishima, Nobelists Yasunari Kawabata and Kenzaburo Oe, and Kobo Abe. He returned to Cambridge to teach, while spending summers in Japan, and then returned to Columbia, where he received his PhD and taught Japanese literature and culture.

Keene describes his fascinating life and experiences in New York, Cambridge and London, and Tokyo and Kyoto in this compelling and personal account, with great sensitivity and candor. His life is both enriching and most rewarding, but he also portrays himself as a sensitive, often lonely and sometimes depressed man, which endeared this reader to the man and his story. He also describes, in lesser detail, the personal lives of several tragic figures, including Mishima, who committed seppuru in 1970 after being passed over for the 1968 Nobel Prize, and Kawabata, who may have also taken his life in part due to Mishima's death.

Keene also aptly describes his experiences as a foreigner in Japan, a translator of Japanese literature and the difficulties he faced in getting American publishers to accept Japanese literature despite its popularity in the

mid-20th century, and the rewards and frustrations of teaching at Columbia and Cambridge.

"Chronicles of My Life" is a wonderfully written and sensitive memoir, and is highly recommended.

Charlie Canning says

For anyone studying Japanese culture, and especially Japanese literature, the name Donald Keene is a familiar one. In a career dating back to the 1950s, Keene has published more than thirty books of translation, criticism, and history. His latest offering, *Chronicles of My Life: An American in the Heart of Japan* (Columbia, 2008), is an autobiography that was first serialized in *The Daily Yomiuri* newspaper in 2006 as "Chronicles of My Life in the 20th Century."

Keene begins the narrative with his childhood in New York City. He was a sensitive boy who cared more for music and stamp collecting than he did baseball, and except for a trip to Europe in 1931 with his father, he seemed to have had a tough time of it. The family fortunes changed dramatically in the lean years of the 1930s and this, coupled with the death of his sister and the divorce of his parents, made Keene even more studious and withdrawn. In 1938, however, at the age of sixteen, he won an extremely competitive four-year Pulitzer scholarship to Columbia University and things began to look up.

At Columbia, he studied with Mark van Doren. Professor van Doren's teaching style and his emphasis on the importance of the so-called "Great Books" of Western civilization were to have a life-long influence on Keene: "Van Doren had little use for commentaries or specialized literary criticism. Rather, the essential thing, he taught us, was to read the texts, think about them, and discover for ourselves why they ranked as classics. Insofar as I have been a success as a teacher of Japanese literature, it has been because I had a model in Mark van Doren."

The other outstanding teacher that Keene had at Columbia was Tsunoda Ryusaku who taught the history of Japanese thought. When Keene first enrolled in Professor Tsunoda's course in 1941, he was the only one registered. Thinking that the course would not be offered to only one student, Keene had thought to withdraw. But in characteristic Japanese fashion, Tsunoda had said, "One is enough."

Keene was hiking on Staten Island on December 7, 1941 when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. Although a pacifist by nature, Keene would later refer to the timing of the war as a form of "luck": "The outbreak of the Pacific War, just at a time when I had begun to study Japanese, determined my whole life." He was admitted to the U.S. Navy Japanese Language School and studied Japanese intensively for eleven months. Upon graduation in February 1943, he was sent to Pearl Harbor where he worked on the translation of captured Japanese documents. Other wartime assignments included trips to the Aleutians, the Philippines, and Okinawa.

Keene's first visit to Honshu was in December 1945 when he spent a week in Tokyo. The attitude of the people that he met then surprised him: "I could detect no trace of enmity of Japanese for Americans or of Americans for Japanese, and yet it had been scarcely four months since a bitter war ended. How was it possible for people's emotions to change so rapidly? I wondered. But perhaps friendship is the normal feeling between peoples, and war is only an aberration."

It was to be another eight years before Keene would return to Japan. During this period, he continued his studies at Columbia, Harvard, and Cambridge. At Cambridge, Keene met Bertrand Russell, E. M. Forster,

Lionel Trilling, and Arthur Waley, "the great translator who had rendered *The Tale of Genji* into marvelously beautiful English." According to Keene, "Waley was a genius. The word genius is sometimes used in Japan for any foreigner who can read Japanese, but Waley knew not only Japanese and Chinese but also Sanskrit, Mongol, and the principal European languages. Moreover, he knew these languages not as a linguist interested mainly in words and grammar but as a man with an unbounded interest in the literature, history, and religion of every part of the world."

In 1953, Keene returned to Japan and spent two years in Kyoto. He began publishing articles on Japanese literature in Japanese and also compiled the outstanding two-volume *Anthology of Japanese Literature* published by Grove Press in 1955 and 1956. This work brought him into contact with many of the great writers of the day including Mishima Yukio and Tanizaki Junichiro. Later, he would develop friendships with Abe Kobo, Oe Kenzaburo, and Kawabata Yasunari.

Keene returned to New York in 1955 to take up his position teaching Japanese literature and history at Columbia University. Although he wept in the airplane at the thought that he would never be able to return to Japan, he has "managed to spend at least a month in Japan every year since then."

In the intervening years, Keene has been enormously productive with books on fiction, poetry, theater, and history too numerous to mention. Keene's memoir, coming as it does at the end of a long and distinguished career, is yet another worthy title to read.

Bruce says

Professor Keene's memoir is all the more powerful because of his understated style. Anyone who has lived in Japan will get a lot out of this, as will anyone who translates for a living. This is a memoir that actually has a lot to impart to its readers. It inspired me to both continue translating Japanese writers and to try to maintain even closer ties with Japan. His anecdotes about working with and becoming friends with Mishima, Abe, Tanizaki, Oe and others give us a fascinating glimpse of the Japanese literary world in the decades before Murakami burst onto the scene.

Contando Dragones says

Nunca antes había leído una biografía, ni tampoco una autobiografía, como es el caso, pero creo que si la persona es lo suficientemente interesante y tiene suficientes cosas que contar, puede ser una lectura muy interesante.

Nada de fantasía ni relatos maravillosos (en el sentido más imaginativo de la palabra), simplemente hechos realistas que no llegan a ser del todo cotidianos. Como digo, si la persona es interesante, puede ser una gran lectura.

Esto es lo que me ha pasado con este libro. Adoro Japón, su historia, su cultura y su lengua, y este hombre se nota que piensa igual que yo. He leído sobre el tiempo que pasó en Japón, pero en vez de entretenerte en llenar el libro con detalles de historia, fechas y hechos, nos cuenta su visión de lo que vio y aprendió.

Puedes leer el resto de la reseña aquí.

Natalie says

How did I not write a review of this?! Probably because I have too much to say about it, but a lovely memoir. It often shocks me that when I'll be talking to a fellow self-professed student of Japanese and mention Donald Keene, they have no idea who he is! May they wonder no more through these handy dandy memoirs!

Still, this book is just lovely for ... so much. First, a look at Keene's amazing life. I smiled at his recollection of that cabin in the Carolinas where he first started studying Japanese because as a Japanese student, we had to read an essay about that experience in Japanese! But even more than that, his war experiences brought to life an era that my generation is beginning to lose touch with. My heart warmed at his description of Chinese characters as precious stamps in his memory.

And his descriptions of Kyoto as he remembers it...! Oh, I could swoon! I had the good fortune to live there for awhile as a student a couple years ago, and Kyoto is still my favorite place in Japan but his stories... Ryoanji at night, sharing tea with the priest's wife! Cars, still a rarity! What a city it must have been. While I am truly a child of my internet/convenience generation, Keene brought tears to my eyes describing what I've missed.

His anecdotes, also, are not to be missed, for all the amazing people he's associated with in his life, and for his gently humorous, well-measured writing style. And speaking of his writing style, one can't help reading his memoirs without realizing just how thoroughly he has influenced Japanese literature in translation in the West. Sometimes, he'll write here, "I was moved to tears..." or some other phrase that feels not quite Western, but a good reader will know often appears in translation of Japanese literature. It makes me wonder how much Japanese has affected Keene, and then, how much he has affected the study of Japanese in turn.

Truly, a thoroughly enjoyable read.

Tim says

Good quick read. To fully enjoy it, some knowledge of famous Japanese figures (especially from the literary world) may be required. He also talks about opera and theater a bit more than I was expecting, but overall I was satisfied, and I particularly enjoyed the illustrations.
