



Inheritance from Mother

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Award-winning novelist Minae Mizumura demystifies the notion of the selfless Japanese mother and the adult daughter honor-bound to care for her.

Mitsuki Katsura, a Japanese woman in her mid-fifties, is a French-language instructor at a private university in Tokyo. Her husband, whom she met in Paris, is a professor at another private university. He is having an affair with a much younger woman.

In addition to her husband's infidelity, Mitsuki must deal with her ailing eighty-something mother, a demanding, self-absorbed woman who is far from the image of the patient, self-sacrificing Japanese matriarch. Mitsuki finds herself dreaming of the day when her mother will finally pass on. While doing everything she can to ensure her mother's happiness, she grows weary of the responsibilities of a doting daughter and worries she is sacrificing her chance to find fulfillment in her middle age.

Inheritance from Mother not only offers insight into a complex and paradoxical culture, but is also a profound work about mothers and daughters, marriage, old age, and the resilience of women.

Inheritance from Mother Details

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From Reader Review Inheritance from Mother for online ebook

Jessica says

Superb "They hoped that the angelic garment and simple flowers might have a purifying effect on their mother, who seemed almost to have been burdened her whole life by frustrated passions from past lives. When she set off on her journey to the next world, they hoped that she might go to a place as pure and peaceful as possible, be it nirvana, heaven, or paradise. Or, if she were to be reincarnated into human form, they hoped to lessen her burden in the life to come and so reduce her suffering and the suffering of those around her."

Heather says

This is my favorite book from the summer. Despite the bummer of a subject—woman in her mid-fifties caring for her dying mother while realizing her long marriage is over—I finished the book feeling nothing but comfort and connection. I've realized that my favorite novels tend to be those that weave generations of a family into a particular place as well as into the story—I think because it feels less contrived and I'm able to more deeply enter its world and the lives of the characters. This book does that, and so did Mizumura's last (two-volume!) novel, *A TRUE NOVEL*, which I also loved. Unlike a lot of American fiction, *INHERITANCE FROM MOTHER* never feels pretentious, clever, or ironic; and it doesn't read as though Mizumura wrote it for a particular market. I never knew how hungry I was for books like this until I found her. For that matter, I didn't know anyone was writing books like this! The fact that the novel is set in Japan and translated from Japanese makes it that much more beautiful and alive. Mizumura's intimate but restrained prose allows for the mundane pace of real life, which is something else I love about her writing and may result from the fact that *INHERITANCE FROM MOTHER* was originally published as a serial novel in a Japanese newspaper. What a wonderful book. (And now I'm re-reading *Madame Bovary* because it was mentioned so often in *INHERITANCE*.)

Jim Angstadt says

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Mitsuki is mid-fifties and the primary care-giver for her mother. Mitsuki's thirty year marriage started to crumble long ago. Older sister Natsuki, married to a wealthy, thoughtful man, is a trusted confidant, but does not share any of the daily concerns of Mitsuki.

There is very little plot or dialog. Most of the narrative is the introspection of Mitsuki, and her feelings toward and about her mother, sister, and husband. This presents a very appealing character study of all four.

In the first half of the novel, Mitsuki is primarily concerned with her mother's declining health, and then death. Naturally this takes its toll on Mitsuki's emotional and physical well-being. The second half deals with the separation, and eventual divorce, of Mitsuki's marriage. This causes even more stress on Mitsuki.

Although this is set in Japan, and some of the stress of daily life is uniquely Japanese, the overall narrative could easily apply anywhere. The feelings, concerns, stresses, and behavior seem uniquely human, not geographic. One can easily identify with Mitsuki.

Trish says

Mother's Day is celebrated in the United States this past weekend, and in some ways, this novel could be viewed as a kind of delicious dream fantasy for just that kind of mature, thoughtful, caring women who have been around the block a few times. It introduces us to the intimate and internal lives of Japanese wives and mothers, some of whom were thought to suffer in silence as part of their cultural mystique. The main character is not a mother; Mitsuki is a wife, and the daughter who cares for her aging mother. Her sister Natsuki was beautiful, talented, and made a fortuitous marriage to a wealthy man. There had never been any hint Natsuki would take care of the things that needed doing.

Throughout *Part One* we experience the calculus a family member must make when an aging relative suddenly becomes unable to care for themselves as independent adults. What makes this particularly interesting to those who haven't gone through it before is the barrage of decisions that blast apart any privacy a person might reasonably expect, even in a family, and how this affects individuals experiencing the trauma and those trying to help out.

If Mitsuki sounds a little resistant to the demands placed on her when talking to herself at times, she is already the poster child for trying to make dying a positive experience for everyone involved, despite the impersonal nature of hospital care and the uncertainties involved in geriatric health. Complicating the picture of her mother's illness and death is the fact Mitsuki newly discovers her husband has a somewhat serious dalliance with a younger woman. Bad timing for the husband.

Part Two is in some ways the respite after the storm, and in others a legitimate Part 2 of decision-making and planning for big changes. Mitsuki engages our every sense as she describes her visit, during winter, to a neglected lakeside hotel posing as a fake Swiss villa. She remembers the place from her childhood. Several other people show up at the same time, for an extended ten-day respite before Christmas. When a local psychic, "the sort who bleaches their hair blond and rides a Harley Davidson," predicts one of the long-stay hotel guests is there to commit suicide in the lake, the attention of hoteliers and guests are riveted.

Mitsuki is there to sort out her options concerning a husband who serially strays, her feelings regarding the difficult time with her mother, and how she can still have a life that is interesting and fulfilling, despite its losses. This part of the novel has many characteristics of the successful mystery novel: a lonely heroine, a villa in decline, an overly solicitous staff, the proximity and possibility of death, a bunch of similarly stranded folks including at least one handsome eligible bachelor. Laced through it all are the experiences, constraints, and history of both westernized easterners and traditional Japanese, endlessly intriguing people with whom we share a bond and yet admire for their exoticism and differentness.

The clarity with which Mitsuki addresses her issues, her deliberate decision-making, her bare honesty to herself about motives and options, her interest in pursuing meaningful engagement is inspiring both to the recently bereaved and to those who have faced these issues, successfully or not. If there is a best-girlfriend reveal to the storyline, it is not unwelcome. While Natsuki sounded wistful and maybe even envious about everything working out for Mitsuki before it actually does, we readers reserve our celebration, knowing the

odds of the pieces coming together with no errors.

Minae Mizumura studied literature in the United States, at Yale. She wrote this novel in Japanese, and after an earlier novel described in an interview with *Bookslut* writer Corinna Cliff how the Japanese language became even more beautiful and desirable to her after studying English.

"Nevertheless, now that I have had more experience with both languages, I'm more sensitive to the uniqueness of Japanese. Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the language for me is how its writing uses three kinds of signs: Chinese characters -- which mostly function as ideograms -- and two sets of phonograms. The resulting text contains an embarrassment of riches impossible to replicate in other languages. I'll try to explain it. Let's say you are reading a page describing a flower garden. Names of flowers jump out at you. They are rendered in complex Chinese characters that can't help standing out as they are embedded in phonograms much simpler in form. And since flower names in ideograms usually have poetic connotations, looking at the page, it really seems as if you are looking at a garden filled with clusters of fragrant and beautiful flowers."

Mizumura's experience with English (and French!) culture and language make this a hugely successful crossover novel featuring European, American, and Asian influences in a rich feast. Gustav Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* becomes practically an incantation, it receives mention so often. Readers are advised to revisit that work to see how it is used in this case to add an extra layer of depth.

Kasa Cotugno says

Originally published as a "newspaper novel" over a 2-year period, this engrossing novel consists of 66 short chapters, creating its strength and paradoxically, its weakness. Its strength in that the length made possible the depth of the examination of a 50ish woman dealing with two of life's greatest challenges at the same time. The inherent weakness lies in the fact that due to its original form, there was quite a bit of repetition that would not have been present in a conventionally published novel. Although there are many characters, focus is primarily on Mitsuki, who, along with her more affluent but less stable sister, is caring for her egotistical dragon of a mother whose increasing dementia is causing her to make more difficult demands, but is never satisfied ("Her mother would never be happier no matter how much she tried to do for her, and this realization produced in her sense of futility that added to her exhaustion."). Her entire life she had been second fiddle to her more beautiful older sister, but now found herself shouldering most of the burden of caring for their mother. In addition, she discovers her husband, on sabbatical in Viet Nam, has another, younger woman in his life, and her sense of worth, fragile to begin with, is eroding at an alarming rate.

Although the mother's death is dealt with in the first chapter, the rest of Part I lays out the backstory of these three women, their complex history, and, most notably, the cultural mores of Japan family life in the post-WWII era. In the second half, Mitsuki uses some of her inheritance to spend several weeks in a mountain inn, taking stock of her future as dictated by her past, and as inspired by her emerging independence. I loved this book, all nearly 500 pages, despite the repetitions.

June Scott says

The paradox at the heart of this novel, in which a middle-aged woman is caught between her love for her

mother and her feelings of being stifled by the burden of her care, was a compelling one to me. Overall it was a rich portrait of aging, familial ties, regret and acceptance -- even if its rhythm, particularly in the second half, was slow at times.

Antigone says

Do you have more happiness than you know how to handle? Has delight become a real problem for you? Do you wake with a smile, whistle while you work, travel your miles with a bounce in your step? Are you so filled with merriment that the sheer exhilaration of your good humor threatens to derail every serious conversation you manage to enter into? Is every task a wonder? Every mood an enchantment? Is your rejoicing heart on the constant verge of burst? Are you now, or have you ever been, desperate for the means to take the edge off your joy?

Well then, please, allow me to introduce you to Minae Mizumura.

Ms. Mizumura is a Japanese novelist of renown. Her talent is prodigious. Her voice is clear, concise and evocative. The attention she pays to her craft is profound. She knows, precisely, how to hit a reader's sweet spot...and she uses this knowledge to take you down.

Inheritance from Mother introduces us to Mitsuki Katsura, a middle-aged woman of Tokyo whose life has been a long string of poor choices and missed opportunities. Resentment writhes within her. She is bitter of the sister who was preferred, the mother who was selfish, the husband with his irksome proclivity to hunt for a better bed. Yet with all the rancor she feels, all the misery she knows, her actions remain those of the dutiful sibling, daughter and wife. Repressing. Refraining. Remembering. Perhaps when this mother dies - this broken mother in a hospital bed with her tubes and her gurgling and her fearful eyes - perhaps when she dies and the money divides, relief will descend. Something must end, yes? Something.

Looking to put the brakes on your bliss? This will do it.

Kelsi H says

Please read all of my reviews at <http://ultraviolentlit.blogspot.ca>!

Set in Japan, *Inheritance from Mother* is the story of two sisters and their aging mother Noriko, as she declines in health and ends up in the hospital. Noriko is in her eighties, and she is vain, self-absorbed and manipulative. Although her cognitive function is declining, she is still able to control her daughters and have them satisfy her every whim.

Older sister Mitsuki is in her mid-fifties, with a successful career teaching French at a private Tokyo university. Although she is doing well at work, her marriage is failing – she has just discovered that her husband is having an affair with a much younger woman. Mitsuki sacrifices her own chance at happiness to fulfill all of her mother's wishes, and yet she secretly dreams of the day that her mother will finally pass

away. She carries the full weight of responsibility for Noriko, as her beautiful sister Natsuki has never been expected to help out.

The novel opens after Noriko's death, as the sisters discuss their financial inheritance from their mother. Then the story moves backwards to when Noriko first ends up in the hospital, and the many calculations that must be made to put her in a suitable nursing home. Although money is a constant concern, there is another inheritance that Mitsuki receives – the learned behaviour of her mother and the constricting bonds of womanhood. Especially in Japan, where the feminine mystique is the image of honoured mother and dutiful daughter, Mitsuki struggles to put herself and her happiness first. This theme transcends Japanese culture, as the role of women globally is that of caretaker to everyone else.

The characters are somewhat cold and disconnected, but it's hard not to feel empathy for them – even vain Noriko, who is struggling to accept the fact that she is aging and unable to continue with her life as she knew it. She hopes for a dignified death, even in the sterile and dehumanizing hospital setting. Meanwhile, Mitsuki is clear and honest with herself about her choices, despite her chronic fatigue and possible depression. When she does finally receive her inheritance, it isn't about the money – it's about gaining some breathing room from her life, and making time for herself.

This novel was originally serialized and published in short chapters, which likely accounts for its repetition and length. Although it is probably too long for a deathbed family drama, it also contains countless themes about motherhood and, more importantly, womanhood, that are explored thoroughly and intriguingly. Told in spare prose, the novel is touching but never melodramatic, as Mitsuki grows into her own woman beyond the shadow of her mother.

I received this book from Other Press and NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.

Laurie says

The Katsura sisters have long had an embattled relationship with their mother. Noriko Katsura, is an egotistical and selfish woman with a taste for the finer things in life, and little, if any, feelings for people. The sisters dream of the day when their mother will finally die, and her demands on them will stop.

This sounds horrible, especially in a society where children are expected to love, revere, and care selflessly for their parents. But for Mitsuki, the daughter on whom the majority of the burden falls on, it's a chance to finally live her own life. As a child, she was neglected in favor of Natsuki, her more beautiful and talented sister. As an adult, her life is pretty much run by her husband, a fellow college instructor who wants a luxury condo- and is having (another) affair with a younger woman. What would Mitsuki do if she could make decisions without having to consider either of these people?

The first half of the book revolves around Noriko's final hospitalization and death, and fills us in on the history of the Katsura family. The second half is what Mitsuki does after her mother's death as she figures out what she really wants out of life. It's fascinating reading the history of her family and how it was shaped by Japanese culture, as that culture itself changes through modernization and influences from the West. While told in third person, Mitsuki is the main focus of the tale. Mother/daughter relationships, marriage, aging, and sister relationships are all treated here with sensitivity and depth.

Jill says

“Today, Mother died. From then on she waited for the day when she might say those words out loud for real.” Those first three words are mentioned repeatedly in *Inheritance From Mother* and they suggest the opening of Camus’ *The Stranger*. The question is: is the connection deliberate?

The answer is almost certainly “yes.” Camus believed that individual lives and human existence have no rational meaning or order; rather, individuals attempt to find that order where none exists. Indeed, that is the case here. Mitsuki, the daughter of an imperious and demanding mother named Noriko, is forced to cater to her as she ages. The author writes, “Japanese women lived longer every year, lingering like specters...anyone caring for an aging parent could plainly see that growing old was an assault not just on body and mind but on all five senses. Was that all that awaited one at life’s end?”

The “inheritance” of the title is both pragmatic and emotional. Mitsuki’s husband is cheating on her with a younger woman and she is gradually realizing that there may never have been any love between them. Mitsuki needs her mother’s inheritance. Yet, in a sense, her entire life has been an unwelcome inheritance; Noriko creates a feeling of unworthiness in Mitsuki, particularly when comparing her to her more attractive and talented older sister Natsuki.

There are a lot of themes here, perhaps too many, as the novel unfolds and then circles back, begrudgingly surrendering details from the past, teasing out the significance of incidents from the present. Divided into two halves, the first half focuses on the resentful and dutiful daughter waiting in limbo, performing her responsibilities. As the adult daughter of a 90+ year old mother, the “long goodbye” – complete with medical personnel who are determined to deprive Noriko of the dignity of a “good death” – is astoundingly accurate, even uncomfortably so. The second half – Mitsuki embraces the true meaning of her inheritance – is sometimes too carefully plotted but provides relief from the grimness.

There’s so much “meat” here – the symbiosis of mother and daughter, the harness of cultural and social class, the mores of Japanese life, and the legacy of literature (*The Stranger*, *Madame Bovary* and a lesser-known book (for Americans) entitled *The Golden Demon* are all evoked. *Inheritance From Mother* is, ultimately, an extraordinarily impressive book that could benefit from a second reading to truly get all its tendrils. I can’t say I loved it but I certainly admired it greatly.

Bernie says

Admit it. In spite of the popular saying, we DO judge books by their covers (and people too). This is where you are going to miss out on one of the best books ever. Because this cover, although pretty, seems very old-fashioned, almost dowdy. And the writing inside definitely is NOT. It is funny, it is insightful, it is thoughtful. It is very very modern.

“Inheritance from mother” is not only a wonderful commentary on our aging parents and their caregivers (a universal and growing concern due to greater longevity), but our relationships with our parents and siblings. If you have a parent, you should read this (lol). If you have siblings, you will relate to how caring for older

parents rarely falls equitably across all siblings' shoulders.

What I found absolutely delightful, especially as it came as a surprise, was how funny it was! There were so many wonderful phrases and sentences which remind me of the best of Chekhov's observations of the human condition and its idiosyncracies. I am absolutely thrilled to have discovered this author, and translator. So many books are poorly translated, which irritate me like a pebble in my shoe; a thing that cannot be ignored. I find it hard to keep going; not so with this charming book.

There are tons of memoirs and novels about tough parent/child relations (almost all told from the child's perspective). What gave this novel greater wisdom was its sympathy in going back to both the mother and grandmother's generation, and imagining the hardships and circumstances which shaped both women's characters. So much of these (other) books are one-sided, 'woe is me', all the injustices put upon 'the child'. This one had great pathos and sympathy for each generation of mothers and why they might have behaved, or parented, as they did.

I enjoyed every minute of the "Inheritance" and savored its brilliance and simplicity. I felt like I was reading a modern version of "The Makioka Sisters", or watching a superb Ozu film, with its dignity and observations on familial relations.

Check this book out - and enjoy.

G Jara says

Me hizo pico.

Cherise Wolas says

Set in contemporary Japan, the book follows Mitsuki, a French-language translator, as she primarily, and her sister, caretake for their mother, who refuses to die. Both sisters want their mother to die. In part because of how their mother was, always chasing her own dreams, and who left their father alone in a nursing home to die, too busy with an affair she was having to do right by him. At the heart is the Japanese obligatory care-taking of parents which culminates in guilt and resentments. Mitsuki was the less-loved younger daughter, but has become the understanding daughter, always there for her mother, which is its own contradiction. In the midst of her despondence of caring for her ailing mother, Mitsuki's own marriage is failing, her husband is having another affair. In one of the most poignant scenes in the book, we learn that when Mitsuki was newly married, she was singing to her new husband and he walked away. There is delving into the mother's history (illegitimate and the daughter of a geisha), into Japanese literature, etc. The novel is a bit overlong, and a bit baggy, but it's an interesting birds-eye view into a different culture.

SundayAtDusk says

After finishing this novel, I asked myself if I would have enjoyed it as much if the main character had been an American, and the story took place in the United States. Definitely not, I thought. In fact, I would have never even read it if it was an American story. Who wants to read a 464 page book about a depressed,

chronically fatigued middle-aged woman, who is dealing with a difficult, slowly dying mother; a cheating husband; sad memories of her father's final years; flashbacks to her childhood where her sister was the pampered daughter; and worries about her financial future if she gets a divorce?

Certainly there are readers who do want to read about such a protagonist, but I'm not one of them. What makes this story so interesting, as well as enchanting at times, is it's a Japanese story. While there are some similarities, of course, between a Japanese woman and an American woman going through all that trauma, there are many, many differences. A middle-aged woman in Japan, life in Japan, the history of Japan, the landscape of Japan . . . it's a whole different world for the most part. Other than all the details of the elder mother's slow death, the story never ceased to intrigue me, and 464 pages didn't seem that long at all.

(Note: I received a free copy of this book from Amazon Vine.)

Janice says

4+ stars, though not quite a 5.

So much in this dense story, about mothers and daughters, about sisters, marriage, creating a new life and new reality with aging.
