

The Secret History of the Lord of Musashi & Arrowroot

Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, Anthony H. Chambers (Translator)

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From a Japanese master of romantic and sexual obsession come two novels that treat traditional themes with sly wit and startling psychological sophistication. In **The Secret History of the Lord of Musashi**, Junichir Tanizaki reimagines the exploits of a legendary samurai as a sadomasochistic dance between the hero and the wife of his enemy. **Arrowroot**, though set in the twentieth century, views an adult orphan's search for his mother's past through the translucent *shoji* screen of ancient literature and myth.

Both works are replete with shocking juxtapositions. Severed heads become objects of erotic fixation. Foxes take on human shape. An aristocratic lady loves and pities the man she is conspiring to destroy. This supple translation reveals the full scope of Tanizaki's gift: his confident storytelling, luminous detail, and astonishingly vital female characters.

The Secret History of the Lord of Musashi & Arrowroot Details


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From Reader Review The Secret History of the Lord of Musashi & Arrowroot for online ebook

GiuseppeB says

Questi giapponesi!

Nel XVI secolo, tempo di samurai e feudatari c'è un giovane guerriero.

Una testa mozzata, priva di naso, tra le mani di una bellissima fanciulla che la pulisce dal sangue e la acconcia per l'esposizione come trofeo di guerra: questa immagine si fissa nella giovane mente del protagonista e diventa la sua ossessione erotica di tutta la vita.

Potremo mai capire gli abissi dell'animo umano?

Monica says

Una extraña experiencia en la niñez del persona genera una fijación en un rostro mutilado y la venganza. Al igual que el segundo relato, Tanizaki narra la búsqueda de la madre.

Ben Winch says

My second big discovery in Japanese writing (after the short stories of Masuji Ibuse) was *The Secret History of the Lord of Musashi*, a lesser-known novel by this well-known author. If you've read much Tanizaki then you won't be surprised to hear there's a psycho-sexual element here, but nowhere else (that I'm aware of) does he take it quite so far as this. A samurai warlord with a fetish for 'woman heads' (severed heads with the noses cut off) and a complicated psychology that makes this fetish possible, the Lord of Musashi is as despicable and outrageous a character as any you'll find in French surrealism, and Tanizaki's way of telling his tale (essayistic, with fictional historical sources, footnotes, etc) gives it a delicious deadpan hilarity. From memory it kind of peters out near the end, but along the way it visits places previously uncharted in literature. In my early twenties I had an incurable craving for novels like this - Bataille's *The Story of the Eye*, Reage's *The Story of O.*, Gombrowicz's *Pornografia* - black humorous explorations of the dark side of sexuality. Most people who talk about Tanizaki seem to recommend *Naomi*, but to me that was a fairly flat and straightforward piece of social realism that may have been culturally significant but didn't break new ground artistically. *The Key* and *Diary of a Mad Old Man* were better, but neither seemed to fully exploit its possibilities, despite a promisingly twisted premise in each. I remember an early, very Poe-esque short story about a tattoo, but aside from that *The Lord of Musashi* is the only work by Tanizaki to really make an impression on me. For some reason, I sense that this is a one-off, and maybe it's all the better for it. A lost classic.

David says

This was definitely interesting reading after "The Makioka Sisters." "Arrowroot" seems more technically interesting to me, but I enjoyed "The Secret History of the Lord of Musashi" much more. I just got into it more and felt like "Arrowroot" was always about to get started, right up until the end, though it had some

beautiful moments. I enjoyed both, though. I'm just saying I preferred one over the other.

Isa-janis says

Antes ya me gustaba Tanizaki, pero con esta obra ha quedado claro el gran maestro de la literatura japonesa que es. Mezclando una historia de samurais con el toque perverso que caracteriza todas sus historias, con un tono de crónica histórica, logra que quieras leer más y más. Una preciosidad de novela.

khordofon says

A Vida Secreta do Senhor de Musashi é minha coisa favorita do Tanizaki

já Kuzu é um saco

peço perdão pelo vacilo

Fos says

4.5

Niedan says

tags: japanese nobility

Jo Alcock says

Translator Anthony H. Chambers in his Introduction to *The Secret History of the Lord of Musashi* writes: Indeed, Tanizaki's fiction is far less autobiographical than that of most Japanese novelists. He preferred to use his imagination. "I have acquired a bad habit recently," he wrote in 1926.

I cannot bring myself to write or read anything that takes real facts for its material, or that is even realistic. This is one reason I make no attempt to read the works of contemporary authors that appear in the magazines every month. I'll scan the first five or six lines, say to myself, "Aha! he's writing about himself," and lose all desire to go on reading. When I read historical novels, nonsense tales, even realistic novels of fifty years ago, or contemporary Western novels far removed from Japanese society, I can enjoy them as so many imaginary worlds.

I was going to say that this story will appeal most to scholars, scholars of ancient Chinese or Japanese

historical writings in particular, but like the imaginary scholarly writings of Jorge Borges, the amusement transcends that narrow realm. It may be more accurate to say that Tanizaki's *style* will most appeal to them. Yes, the story itself can stand very well on its own.

A taste of the style:

The glaring eyes, for example, the tight lips, the angry nose, and the set of the shoulders would inspire the same awe in a viewer as the picture of a bloodthirsty tiger; and yet, seen in a different frame of mind, Terukatsu looks like a man suffering from rheumatism and struggling to endure the excruciating pain in his joints. The European breastplate and the helmet, with its sweeping horns and Taishakuten crest, are open to suspicion as well.

As I said, the story itself will appeal beyond the scholarly realm per se, to perverts everywhere or again, to be more specific, to *would-be* perverts. Real perverts, I fear, will be too busy actually doing perverted things to read about them, especially in a translation of an unofficial history allegedly written by a nun who, in her past, may have seen service among the Lord of Musashi's household staff. The famous Lord Musashi, however, cannot escape the classification, for to have an unnatural and sexually-related obsession with severed heads counts as perversion pretty much everywhere, I feel.

Perhaps because I'm somewhat predisposed toward adding a scholarly guise to my own fiction writing, I especially enjoyed Tanizaki's tale.

Jo

Nguyễn Trang says

Tanizaki là ki?u nhà v?n k th? t? t? ???c. T? t? phát g?m ngay

ALZOGHAIBI IBRAHIM says

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Mel says

"The Secret History of the Lord of Musashi" by Junichiro Tanizaki
The Secret History of the Lord of Musashi by Junichiro Tanizaki (1935, 138 pages-trans. by Anthony Chambers) is simply an amazing work of art. Written nearly 75 years ago, it is my first preWWII Japanese novel, it feels like it could have been written last week or in the 18th century by someone with a very strange sense of humor and amazing talent. I simply loved this work. It is darkly hilarious. An acute psychological insight is shown throughout. The book opens with a very deeply nuanced interpretation of a portrait of the

samurai lord who is the central character in the book. I do not think Henry James or Gustav Flaubert could have produced anything better. *The Secret History of the Lord of Musashi* is written as if were a biography done by a traditional Confucian historian who is writing a tale of heroic days gone by to inspire readers to good deeds. Tanizaki is considered the first Japanese author to give complete portrayals of female characters in a literary work.

Tanizaki felt that the values of traditional Confucian writings had hampered the development of Japanese literature. Characters were not whole persons but stereo types and any narrative prose about the past tended to be simply hymns to the greatness of old leaders. Confucian teaching regarded fiction as the product of an effete and decadent mentality and would be horrified by anything that suggested an imperfection in the character of a samurai lord. *The Secret History of the Lord of Musashi* is a parody of this tradition. It centers on how a great samurai developed a strange sexual fetish and how this fetish came to be the secret ruling passion of his life.

The narrative is set in the 16th century. Our hero, for that is who he is, is a royal hostage in a castle under siege by an opposing warlord. (It was the practice in 16th century Japan, just as it had long been in Europe and China, to place royal children in the hands of potential enemies as a kind of peace keeping device.) Our hero is 12 years old and very excited by the battle outside the castle. He begs his attendant, a low ranking samurai to let him join the fighting. His request is denied. He then asks an older servant woman to help him slip out of the castle. She knows if he gets killed her life will be lost so she says ok I will let you see something you will find interesting. She takes him to a room where the women of the castle are "dressing heads". In samurai battles it was customary to cut off the head of an opposing samurai you killed and bring it back as a trophy to present to your over lord. Of course a bloody head would make a poor show so a ritualized procedure for cleaning up heads developed over time.

I cannot take you to the battlefield, but if you want to see some heads I can arrange it for you...She explained in a whisper that almost every night five or six of the women had been selected to attend to the enemy heads taken in battle. They would check the heads against a list, label them and wash off the blood stains...The women would dress the hair, touch up the dye on the teeth and even apply some light cosmetics to make the head presentable...Dressing heads, as it was called, was considered women's work, and their being a shortage of women in the castle, some of the hostages had been ordered to help.

Our 12 year old hero begins to feel his first sexual stirrings.

The heads themselves do not make a strong impression on him. It is the contrast between the heads and the women working on them that somehow excites new feelings in him. He fixates on the hands of the women as they dress the heads.

This seemed to enhance the strange beauty of their hands, especially as he saw them braiding the hair of the heads. He was fascinated by the tender care and love they seemed to give to the heads. He begins to have fantasies.

His fantasy, therefore--the pleasure he would feel if he were a head placed before the girl--was illogical. It was the fantasy itself that gave him pleasure. He indulged in the fantasy that he could become a head without losing consciousness. He tried to imagine that one of the heads brought to the women was his own. When the girl tapped a head with the ridge of her comb, he imagined that he himself was being tapped, and this brought his pleasure to the summit: his brain grew numb and his body trembled. Among the many different heads, he would concentrate on the ugliest...and say to himself, "That is me". This gave him far greater pleasure than identifying with the head of a splendid young warrior. In short, he envied the pitiable, repulsive

heads more than the beautiful ones.

Then he notices one of the heads is without a nose. It was the custom on the battleground at that time to cut off the nose from any head of a samurai you killed if you did not have time to cut the head off in the heat of battle. After the battle was over, you could then use the nose (which the killer kept) as proof the head of the fallen warrior was your trophy. To have your nose removed and then never to have to reunite with the head was a great shame to the warrior and might cause a disgrace in the afterlife. Heads without a nose are called "women's heads".

In a series of bizarre events, one night our 12 year old hero sneaks into the enemy camp. He enters the tent of the opposing general and he kills him with a stab through the throat. As he was trying to cut off his head he is interrupted by two of the general's pages. He kills both of the pages, he knows he must run for his life so he cuts off the nose of the general and takes it back to the castle with him. The general has been "denosed". If word of this gets out it will be a great humiliation for the entire clan and a horrible shame on his family. The attacking army declares that their general is ill and leaves the battlefield. Our hero wants to tell everyone what he has done but he knows if he does no one will believe him.

We next meet our hero maybe six or seven years in the future. He has already developed into a fearful warrior, terrifying even to those he leads. He is a second son so he has no hope of inheriting clan leadership as long as his older but weak in character brother lives. His father is worried as he does not want our hero to become clan leader as he knows he will bring on horrible wars just for the joy of battle. Now things start to get a bit stranger. The narrative is done in a completely straightforward fashion as if this is all part of an inspiring tale of heroism. His older brother is married to the 14 year old daughter of the man whose nose he took when he was twelve. She is, of course, a great, delicate beauty.

A man who has masochistic sexual appetites, as did the Lord of Musashi, is apt to construct fantasies in which his female partner conforms to his own perverse specifications.

Exciting and mysterious events put out her right in front of the castle where his brother and his wife live. He notices one of the stones in the wall is loose. He notices there is no moss on that section of the castle wall. He removes the stone, it is much thinner than all the other stones. It leads into a very long upper sloping tunnel. Our hero

squeezed through the opening, just as one does in the Buddhist purification rite known as "passing through the womb"...At this point, I hope to be forgiven for raising a rather indelicate subject, the design of toilets used by aristocratic ladies of the time...ladies born into a daimyo family never allowed anyone to see their excretory matter, nor did they ever see it themselves. Such delicacy was accomplished by digging under the toilet a deep shaft which was filled for eternity when the lady died...In other words, Tereutasu found himself deep in the earth directly below Lady Kikyo's toilet.

I do not want to give away much more of the plot as a lot of the fun of this novel is in the crazy event that takes place. The plot is devilishly clever, hilarious and just flat out wonderfully told. The hero of this Confucian panegyric can obtain sexual gratification only if he can somehow imagine that the woman he is with is dressing his head. He even goes so far as to build in Lady Kikyo's bed chamber a hole in the floor with a platform under it so a man can stand on it with only his head sticking out of the floor. The servant doing this is then advised if he does anything that makes him seem living, Lady Kikyo will cut off his nose. Various melodramas of a sadomasochistic nature played out, with Lady Kikyo the willing partner. In time our hero's relationship with her ends, how this happens is a great story also. On the surface, the rest of our hero's life was one of great glory. Great warlords prostrated themselves at his feet. Under it all known only to

his women and his servants, the ruling passion of his life was having intimate contact with women in circumstances that would allow him to imagine the woman is ritualistically dressing his severed head. It is suggested by the narrator, that terrible things happened behind closed doors in pursuit of our hero's needs.

The Secret History of the Lord of Musashi is a weird and wonderful work. It is a bit of a wicked book and it for sure mocks Confucian traditions as well as Buddhist rituals. The image of a great samurai leader crawling up a toilet has to be seen as subverting history as taught in Japanese schools. The female lead in the story is wonderfully realized as a whole person, not a character in a stock history written to instruct elite school boys. I am trying to imagine an English or American writer of the 1930s who might have produced a story like this but so far I cannot. I was so happy when I found out Vintage Press has eight other works by Tanizaki in print. I should also note that this work is beautifully written. Of course I do not know if it is well translated or not but there are none of the "false notes" that readers have found in the work of other translators.

Arrowroot

Arrowroot by Junichiro Tanizaki (1931, trans. by Anthony Chambers is kindly included by Vintage Press in the same book as The Secret History of the Lord of Musashi. (This is a decision of Vintage unrelated to the works or the intentions of the author but it does add a lot of value to the book and I appreciate it.)

Arrowroot is now the oldest Japanese work I have posted on, published for the first time 78 years ago. It is about the search of a man whose parents died when he was quite young for his maternal roots. The story is set in Japan in 1910 in Tokyo and Osaka. The narrator is deeply involved in The Reading Life. He sees the world through the classic dramas and epics of 15th to 17th century Japan. Everything is somehow formulized through that prism for him. When he sees something or meets someone he is reminded of a play he has seen or a poem he has read and then launches into an internal monologue linking one literary work to another then another. We learn of a number of the great works of classical Japanese literature.

The narrator is an extremely cultured man who can only marginally relate to those below his level. When he does relate to them, he sees them as minor characters in a Kabuki play. The narrator was orphaned and raised by relatives starting at a young age. He decides one day to seek out his maternal roots in Osaka. When he goes back he finds out that at about age 13 his mother was sold by her parents to a business he can identify only as being in the "pleasure quarters" of Osaka. This might mean she was sold to a tea house as a kitchen worker or was to be trained as a Geisha but most likely it means she became a prostitute at age 13. Somehow through a great stroke of good luck his mother married a wealthy man. She died only a few years after having her son, our narrator. He finds out his family were makers of fine paper, from arrowroot. He sees a girl in her late teens making paper and he tells her family he wants to marry her. She reminds him of a selfless heroine in one of his dramas.

To me the fun of this work is that it shows a man living completely The Reading Life in a literature in which I have no home but I can totally relate to the narrator nevertheless. You feel his love for reading and you know it is the most important thing in his life. Like other characters whose Reading Life I have posted on, he is both shielded from the world by his reading and allowed to experience the world more deeply by it.

There is a good bit of information about Japanese religion in this story (40 pages). We are treated to a wonderful series of fox images while being given an education in the role of the fox in Japanese culture. The treatment of the religious beliefs of the common people of Osaka (I think Osaka was seen as more true to

classical Japanese ideals than Tokyo in this narrative) also seems an oblique commentary on the sterility of Confucian dictates. Magic permeates throughout the world of the story. The extreme antirealism of classical drama in which the narrator is absorbed allows him not just to reinterpret events as a No Play but see them that way in the first place.

Arrowroot a wonderful story about a lover of The Reading Life. What our narrator reads maybe alien to most of us but he is a brother in the life. Yesterday I bought three more novels by Tanizaki.

He lived 1886 to 1965. He published his first work in 1910 and at once was considered a major literary figure. He even worked briefly in the silent films of the era as a dramatist. He was exempt from military service in WWII due to his age. At his death he was considered the greatest living Japanese writer.

Junichiro Tanizaki had a very interesting life history. I will talk a bit about it when I post on his long short story "Arrowroot", which is included as a companion piece by Vintage in the same book as The Secret History of the Lord of Musashi.

Vilis says

Pirmais gabals bija ?oti forša v?sturiski sadistiska fant?zija, tiesa, bez nobeiguma, savuk?rt "Arrowroot" man tik ?oti pietr?ka konteksta zin?šanu, ka viss vienk?rši aizlidoja p?ri galvai.

LA Ayers says

The first novel was just...weird. The second was boring.

Nick Jones says

Two works written in the early 1930s by Junichiro Tanizaki. The Secret History of the Lord of Musashi is probably best described as a novella, Arrowroot a short story. I have read two of Tanizaki's earlier works, both worked within a realist aesthetic: rounded characters existed within a detailed and believable world, the story telling of recognizable events. Something different is happening in these two works. The Secret History of the Lord Musashi tells of a Sixteenth Century Japanese lord who is sexual aroused by the image of a woman smiling at a decapitated head that has had its nose sliced off. Although these are circumstances that maybe occurred more often in Sixteenth Century Japan than today, having seen such an event in his childhood, the Lord tries to recreate it later in his life. The story, however, is told as though it were a history, the narrator drawing on two (fictional) historical documents. (I presumed the Lord Musashi was a historical figure, but if he is he eludes Google.) The story is therefore told with a cool objectivity that contrasts with the sensationalism of its subject matter, the narrator often noting the uncertainties of history: there is a certain literary paradox in that although the narrative is presented as though it is a non-fiction construction of

historical sources, it doesn't claim to be the 'truth' in the way a piece of realist fiction does: we are given a space that allows us to ponder the feasibility or 'truth value' of the story. Tanizaki had previously translated Stendhal's *The Abbess of Castro* into Japanese: this is not a work I know but apparently the narrator of that story basis his narrative on two manuscripts. This was obviously Tanizaki's inspiration for his method. But it reminds me more of later writers such as Borges...a Japanese Borges reimagining a story by Bunuel. *Arrowroot* is a sort of travelogue, the narrator, a writer, telling of a journey he took with a friend. But this is a journey that constantly points to other narratives: a story of Medieval Japan that the narrator is planning to use in a historical novel, the story told by a manuscript kept by a local farmer, the story of the companion's family...and there are other references to plays and other narratives within the journey. The result is an intriguing mix of journey as narrative, narrative as journey, but I found it less satisfactory than *The Secret History*, lacking a central focus of purpose.
