



Toru: Wayfarer Returns

Stephanie R. Sorensen

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Revolutionary young samurai take on the West in this alternate history steampunk techno-fantasy set in 1850's samurai-era Japan.

In Japan of 1852, the peace imposed by the Tokugawa Shoguns has lasted 250 years. Peace has turned to stagnation, however, as the commoners grow impoverished and their lords restless. Swords rust. Martial values decay. Foreign barbarians circle the island nation's closed borders like vultures, growing ever more demanding.

Toru, a shipwrecked young fisherman rescued by American traders and taken to America, defies the Shogun's ban on returning to Japan, determined to save his homeland from foreign invasion. Can he rouse his countrymen in time? Or will the cruel Shogun carry out his vow to execute all who set foot in Japan after traveling abroad? Armed only with his will, a few books, dirigible plans and dangerous ideas, Toru must transform the Emperor's realm before the Black Ships come.

Toru: Wayfarer Returns is the first book in the *Sakura Steam Series*, an alternate history of the tumultuous period from the opening of Japan in 1853 to the Meiji Restoration in 1868. This volume covers the year prior to the American Commodore Perry's arrival in Japan and follows the hero and his young allies as they lead Japan through a massively compressed industrial revolution, dramatically altering that pivotal moment in history.

While Toru and his dirigibles are fictional, the story unfolds against the backdrop of the 'real' Japan of that period, with historical figures and their political environment woven into the tale, staying true to their motivations and agendas even as the alternate history warps their actions, history and a few laws of physics. Underpinning the adventure plot is a young man's yearning for his father's approval and an honorable place in his world.

Readers who enjoy steampunk alternate histories more typically set in Victorian England or the American Wild West may enjoy this steampunk story made fresh by the Japanese samurai setting, as well as readers who enjoy historical fiction set in Japan.

Awards and Recognition for "Toru: Wayfarer Returns" :

- Finalist, Fantasy category, 2016 Next Generation Indie Book Awards
- Bronze Medal Award, Multicultural Fiction category, 2016 eLit Book Awards
- Awesome Indies Approved
- Indie B.R.A.G Medallion Award
- Shortlisted (winners TBD), Science Fiction and Speculative Fiction, 2016 Cygnus Awards

Toru: Wayfarer Returns Details

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Author : Stephanie R. Sorensen

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From Reader Review Toru: Wayfarer Returns for online ebook

Melinda Brasher says

I loved the 19th-century Japanese setting of this book. I also liked the general premise and the characters.

My problem came with the believability of it all. In order to protect isolationist Japan from more technologically advanced powers like America, Toru and his allies basically conduct an industrial revolution. This is cool. But they do it all within a year, starting with limited resources. I just couldn't swallow it. Masuyo, Toru, and Jiro have clever minds, but little scientific or mechanical education. The speed at which they figure out—from books written in other languages—how to design all this technology is unrealistic. As is the rate of success with the actual creation and production of things like country-wide railroad lines, steam engines, telegraph systems, machines that sound like the precursors to computers, mini submarines, and airships. Maybe, maybe, with unlimited resources, this could be possible (though my own experience with the current building of railroad lines and the making of road repairs suggests otherwise). However, the lords who start the revolution are minor lords without great wealth. They call workers from all over (which they have to pay) and need plenty of raw materials (which they have to buy). So where's all the money coming from? As part of the revolution, they also build factories to produce goods to sell abroad, but just because you can produce goods doesn't mean you can sell them, and the profit margin would have to be astronomical to fund the sort of development in the book. I liked all the innovations, and seeing how it could all develop, but I wished it had taken longer so I could believe it and really immerse myself in the world.

I also had a hard time believing that they could hide all this work from the Shogun, who supposedly keeps such an iron rule that there is absolute peace. For many, many pages I wondered about this. Then the issue is addressed, but too late to prevent me from disconnecting with the reality of the story.

The occasional anachronistic words, phrases, and concepts also broke immediacy for me, as did the quotes at the beginning of each chapter. Quotes from people like George R. R. Martin and Bob Dylan. The story takes place in the 1800s. Perhaps this is normal for steampunk, a genre I'm not very familiar with.

Because of the unbelievability, I would give this novel more of a 3.5 rating, but steampunk fans might accept these issues more easily, thus the 4.

The sheer amount of narration gives the novel a sort of "told" feel, but for the most part I still enjoyed the writing. The minor typos and other errors don't detract much.

I liked the characters and wanted them to succeed. Their interactions were good. The complicated politics of Toru's relationship with his father proved powerful to the end. I loved the relationship between clever, headstrong Masuyo and her father. Lady Tomatsu surprised me.

I enjoyed learning things about the culture and politics of 1850s Japan, as well as the progression of an imagined (and fast-forwarded) industrial revolution. And I really liked the whole struggle with having to defy the country's leader in order to save the country. Lots of room for conflict and nobility.

I would try more by Stephanie R. Sorensen.

I received a free copy in exchange for an honest review.

Yzabel Ginsberg says

[I received a copy of this book through NetGalley.]

More an alternate history novel than a truly steampunk one, "Tôru: Wayfarer Returns" deals with late feudal Japan faced with the potential intruding of American civilisation—more specifically, the last years of the Tokugawa bakumatsu, and the arrival of Commander Perry and his "black ships". The idea: what if, instead of feeling inferior to this technology, Japan at the time had had an industrial revolution of its own, and had been able to withstand such demonstration of power?

Enters Tôru, a young fisherman who, after being shipwrecked, was saved by Americans, and spent two years in their country before coming back to Japan with books, blueprints, and lots, lots of ideas about how to revolutionise his country for the day Westerners come to impose their trade and culture on it. Things aren't meant to be easy for him, first and foremost because bringing western books and machinery to these lands, and sneaking in at night, are deemed traitorous acts, punishable by death. When Lord Aya catches wind of this, his first reaction is to get the traitor executed. Except that ideas are contagious, and Tôru's more than others.

This first volume in the "Sakura Steam" series shows how a handful of daimyôs and commoners manage to find common ground to dig the foundations of Japan's industrialisation: first in secrecy, then by ensuring the support of some of the most powerful coastal lords, to make sure that when the Shôgun hears about this (and he will), they'll have grounds to argue their case, machines to show off, and engineers to explain how said machines will allow their country to stand strong and proud. These rebels definitely go against the stream in many ways, by also allowing commoners and women to take part in engineering trains and dirigibles. And even though some characters are (understandably, considering their upbringing) against this, they do try and see how this could change the world, and acknowledge that such "unexpected people" will do good and have a place in this new order. Not to mention that Jiro the blacksmith, or Masuyo the noble lady, are pleasant characters to see evolve, and I liked when they had parts to play; even some of the more unpleasant characters, like Lady Tômatsu, had their redeeming features.

However, while this is all very exciting, I could never really shake my suspension of disbelief, because everything happened both much too fast and sometimes too slowly as well:

- The "rebels" should logically have been discovered sooner.
- And, more importantly, building railroad tracks, engines, a fleet of dirigibles, a telegraph network, etc, in secrecy, with the (limited) means of a handful of daimyôs, in less than one year, seemed too far-fetched to be believable. Granted, they had blueprints and all; on the other hand, all those engineers had to learn from scratch, only from those blueprints not even in Japanese, translated and explained only by Tôru who isn't even an engineer, and... Well. Really, really hard to believe. Had it been done in a few years rather than a few months, I probably would have been, paradoxically, more excited about it.
- At times the narrative devolves into explanations about the political views during the Bakumatsu, the fixed place of samurai vs. commoners—which is interesting, but was dumped in between scenes. It would have been more welcome if better intertwined with the dialogue and action, which in turn would also have left more room to the characters to fully interact, giving us a better feel for them.
- It would've been more interesting IMHO to see a different "industrialisation", and not a mere "westernisation" of Japan. Something that would've mixed traditional/feudal ways with modern weaponry, instead of having basically one or the other.

- Minor pet peeve: Tôru's secret, which he takes great pains to hide, but is much too obvious to the reader, almost from the beginning.

Conclusion: I wish it had been more "believable" in terms of alternate history, and had provided a different path than the expected one.

Dave says

An alternate-history steampunk story set in 19th Century Japan? What could possibly go wrong?

(cue the music)

Toru: Wayfarer Returns is the story of a young (although unspecified) fisherman who comes to shore in Japan, after returning from a great trip to America, where he has apparently been able to absorb **LITERALLY ALL THE KNOWLEDGE EVER**. He brings some revolutionary ideas, which will threaten the power of the Shogun, so of course he has to be executed. Over the course of the novel, he manages to convince a group of Daimyos that in order to defend Japan from the Americans, they need to build planes, trains and underwaternobiles. No, wait, that happens in the first few chapters... but more about that later.

Toru reunites with old friends, gets himself appointed as some sort of resident-genius-who-must-be-obeyed-now-and-executed-later, and manages to drag an unwilling Japanese society kicking and screaming into the 19th Century.

My issues with this book are sadly legion, and most of all it was really really disappointing to me. I had such high expectations based on the description, and the general aesthetic. There were some good aspects, but overall it was just disappointing.

On the good side there are really detailed descriptions and depictions of Japanese culture, and the interactions between the characters felt really natural. Although I'm not that knowledgeable in Japanese politics and culture, I did feel transported into a different kind of society that felt very real. The potential-love-interest is an interesting character, although she is quite the archetypal rebellious princess. The other main cast of characters felt quite interesting as well.

And now for the bad...

The main character - Toru - however was a bit of a Mary-Sue. Toru - and thereby the author - takes great pains at disguising his true identity throughout the novel. As mentioned earlier, he returns from a trip to America where he managed to gather all of the information he could possibly need to know conveniently for the purposes of the novel.

The pacing - Oh My Freaking God, the pacing. In the space of a few chapters, Toru manages to drag a completely unprepared society into the industrial age, build railway lines, trains, and hot air balloons galore. The author's descriptions of this process felt like the MMORPG approach to creating weapons and armour, which involves standing at an empty anvil whacking it with a giant hammer until a magic steam train appears. At one stage later on, the characters complain that they only have a handful of dirigibles, within a few short pages they now had roughly 5 times that number. Hashtag 19th Century Problems, right?

I love Steampunk stories - I think they're an interesting way of reminiscing about how the world evolved, to where we are today. What I also understand about steampunk stories is that they generally promote the idea, or importance of the 'engineer' or the 'inventor' if you will, and this novel did very little if any of that. There is no moment of great invention or discovery - Toru basically steals the plans / knowledge to do these things - then the author does a big handwave, and the necessary items magically appear.

I've saved this for last, but it was the final straw that broke the camel's back, although it may seem petty. At the start of each new chapter, the author has put a quote, or an excerpt from some work which has (some) relevance to the following chapter. This novel is set in the 1850s, according to the blurb. SO WHY IN THE NAME OF ALL THINGS UNHOLY WOULD YOU PUT QUOTES FROM PEOPLE LIKE...

- John F Kennedy
- Bob Dylan
- A modern manga author
- Other completely anachronistic people.

Yes there are quotes from the likes of William Shakespeare, and other people who were alive at the time this novel is set, but... it just completely broke the fourth wall and threw me out of the world the author had been building for me.

I received a review copy from NetGalley.
Review originally published at Book of Bogan

Valerie says

Fascinating

Very interesting book with characters who suck you into the story and keep you there. I did not want to put the book down but had to. Hopefully the next book will be as good as this one with its fascinating world & characters.

Amie's Book Reviews says

Firstly, I feel compelled to talk about the absolutely stunning cover of this book. It is gorgeous, and obviously I am not the only one who thinks so. The cover won a gold star award from the Book Designer website.

There will probably be some debate as to exactly what genre this book belongs. Is it Alternate Historical Fiction? Is it Steampunk? Is it somehow both? Or neither? My answer to those questions is that it is all of the above. With the addition of dirigibles, it clearly enters the realm of Steampunk, but since it is set in an actual period of our world's history, this takes it away from the Steampunk genre and instead into the realm of alternate historical fiction. All in all, the genre does not really matter. It is the story that matters and the story is superb.

The action begins on the very first page of this book, as does the reader's love affair with the character of

T?ru.

Anyone who knows anything at all about historic Japan knows that it is a history filled with culture and customs that can be difficult for even the most seasoned writer to navigate. The fact that this is author Stephanie R. Sorensen's first published novel and that she has done such a tremendous job of bringing the Victorian Japanese era to life while still preserving the dignity and love of Emperor and Country to life is nothing short of brilliant.

Purists may disagree, but I loved this book. The way the author chose to use actual historic facts, policies and people as the basis for creating a new and radically different history is awe-inspiring.

This is a book that needs to be read. There are many ideas in it's pages that reflect some modern day dilemmas. T?ru not only wants to protect Japan from being overthrown by the Americans, he loves his homeland deeply and wants to improve the lives of it's people.

T?ru not only brought new technologies to Japan, but he also brought new ideas, and not just about industrial and Militaria change, he wanted to see societal change as well.

For a culture that had not changed in centuries, it was difficult to accept the new technologies, but it was even more difficult to accept that change to their way of life was also necessary for Japan to thrive as a nation.

"You need the lowly as well as the great made strong and educated and committed to strengthening our country."

These words may have been quoted from this work of fiction, but that does not make them any less true. Maybe it is time that the leaders of both the United States and Canada listened to T?ru - The Wayfarer. I'm 100% sure that there are lessons in this book that relate to us all.

This is the first book in the "Sakura Steam Series". I am now following author Stephanie R. Sorensen on Goodreads and Amazon as well as on her website because I will be eagerly awaiting the next book in the series.

I am eager to find out what happens next, not only with the Japanese country as a whole, but also what happens in the lives of T?ru, Masuyo, Jiro, Lords Aya and T?matsu, Lord Abe and even the Shogun and the distant Emperor. Whatever happens, I am convinced that it will be entertaining and extremely well written.

I rate this book as 5 out of 5 stars. ??????????

* I received a free copy of this book from the author in exchange for an honest review. Receiving this book for free did not influence my rating in any way.

See the full review as well as many other book reviews on my blog at <http://AmiesBookReviews.wordpress.com>

Awesome Indies Reviewers says

Assessment 1 - 5/5 Stars

In Ecclesiastes 1:9 it is written that there is nothing new under the sun. That is a mostly true statement, and the meaning is evident to anyone who has noticed that most mediums of artistic expression (notably cinema) have struggled to come up with fresh ideas in the modern era. For every new or semi-new concept, there are a hundred carbon copies of existing work. For every A New Hope there is a Star Wars: Episode VII. For every debut album there are a hundred reunion tours. For every successful film franchise, there is a television adaptation. There really is nothing new under the sun.

Now that I have truly brought the mood down, let me try to bring it back up again by saying that Toru is one of those novel, original stories set in a fantastic land that for once doesn't seem like a charcoal etching of another realm. Toru is a steampunk story set in the far east. Disciplined samurai ride into battle aboard bustling locomotives and the paths of sword and steam cross brilliantly. About halfway through this novel, I had to stop and look to see if this kind've thing had been done before. To my surprise, it has, and if you're interested in samurai steampunk stories, there are one or two others out there, though I would be very surprised (and pleasantly) if they carried the depth and attention to detail of this one.

If there is anything to nitpick about the story, it might be the capabilities of the main character of Toru. In many ways, this book is a coming of age tale, or a bildungsroman if you squint, but there is little room for growth for this character. Toru can do it all, knows just about all there is to know, displays few (if any) character flaws and is basically an infallible force in the world. It would be interesting to see Toru grow and change more than what we're given, but much like Star Wars or the bible, we are dealing with very powerful, legendary characters and there is clearly more story to tell beyond this first entry so this is forgivable. Also, as I mentioned, this a nitpicky thing and one that doesn't distract from an otherwise remarkably well-written and well-edited read, nor does it warrant the subtraction of even half of a star. This is easily a 5 star novel that I think most readers will find approachable and satisfying.

Assessment 2 - 4.5/5 Stars (Rounded up to 5 Stars for posting purposes)

Toru: Wayfarer Volume I is an ambitious tale of a steampunk feudal-era Japan with interesting, well-developed characters. The cover of the book is a masterpiece, and while the content of the novel isn't exactly structurally perfect, anyone who picks up this title because of the amazing cover art won't be disappointed. Action, love, loss, industry and growth - both personal and societal - are captured brilliantly in the first volume of this story.

Before I gush too much, I'm obligated to say that this book isn't without some small pacing issues. This is a story where beautifully crafted sentences cascade over one another in pages and pages of description and exposition. This is fine for the most part, until you get to the parts where the author seems to "summarize" major events in order to advance the story. One of the only few letdowns of this book come while patiently enjoying pages of description, really getting the universe into your head, only to have a character suddenly be done with a task you were waiting to learn about. Want to hear with the same great detail with which you read the realm described the building of a fantastically-conceived prototypical technology or its maiden run? That's unfortunate, because those moments might be a bit too short for some readers after such vivid exposition.

With that said, those moments were the only hiccups I could detect in an otherwise truly fantastic story. This

is a tale I could entertain seeing at the cinema, and the author provides intense, yet relatable imagery to guide your conception of the world. I can safely admit that I would likely recommend this book to nearly anyone. The author's attention to detail, the environs she paints and the story she tells are all magnificent, and a lot of emerging indie authors, particularly ones who write fantasy and science fiction, could likely learn a lot from reading this book. While it isn't perfect, this is one of the few indie books I've read in a long time that I can say is truly worth the read, even if it seemingly might fall outside your general scope of taste. 4.5/5 stars.

Acanthea Grimscythe | The Ghastly Grimoire says

In Toru: Wayfarer Returns, we as readers are once again exposed to way too much exposition and a nearly suffocating amount of passive voice. Normally, use of passive voice doesn't really bother me. In most books, I am unable to identify said voice because it doesn't disrupt the flow. Unfortunately the passive voice saturates this book so thoroughly that I am unable to make it past 15%. In fact, I can barely remember which parts of what I read were relevant to the current action of the book.

I gave this book several attempts, but each page felt like the written equivalent of trying to force-feed myself Miracle Whip. For that, I must unfortunately drop this novel. I would like to thank NetGalley and the publisher for providing me with the opportunity to read this book free of charge in exchange for an honest review.

John Milton says

One of the best alternative history novels I have read in a long time.

Koeur says

<https://koeur.wordpress.com/2016/07/1...>

Publisher: Palantir Press

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Genre: Steampunk

Rating: 2.6/5

Publishers Description: While Sorensen's heroes and their steampunk dirigibles are fictional, she builds her rollicking adventure and culturally rich tale against the backdrop of the "real" historical Japan of that period, weaving historical figures into her story, staying true to their motivations and agendas even while warping their actions, history and a few laws of physics. Underpinning the adventure plot is a young man's yearning for his father's approval and an honorable place in the world. A tender love story, a rowdy collection of allies and emerging steampunk technology complete the mix as T?ru fights to transform Japan's conservative

society at the end of the Tokugawa sakoku isolation period.

Review: Amazeballs cover art!

This garnered quite a few high reviews from the private sector as well as the paid kind (Kirkus etc.). While billed as epic in scope I found this a bit contrived in terms of believability and read more like an alternative history novel rather than Steampunk.

The main character, Toru, is just too good to be true and never really develops into a character that you can either loathe or root for. He just...is. I liked the idea of the female character, Masuyo, as being strong coupled with intellectual prowess. Yet she read as one-dimensional and always carried around her mien like a paragon of virtue. Of course they are drawn to each other but can never be as she is highborn (Princess) and he is a fisherman with a secret, which usually translates to him being a Prince or some shjt.

The idea that feudal Japan can become industrialized within the span of a year to meet the Western threat is just fooking ridiculous. Dirigibles, submarines and trains are created with a herculean effort yet the details were lacking in this sudden creation of a new Japan. While Masuyo and Toru grind on your nerves for their extra speshulness, you are forced to swallow an alternative history that derives its existence from implausible and impossible acts.

Tony Breeden says

One of the things I really enjoy about steampunk fiction is how it explores alternate history. In the first novel of the Sakura Steam series, Sorensen gives us a look at how different things might've been for Japan if the American Commodore Perry had met with a Japan with the technological might to resist him.

This is a character-driven story. Toru is the story's protagonist, a visionary who has returned to Japan after two years in the US. With the help of some minor nobles, a foreword-thinking young woman named Masuyo, and a jovial blacksmith named Jiro, Toru begins convincing a nation to adopt new ways and technologies in order to defend itself against the impending arrival of Perry. This is a book about transformation. Interestingly, the characters change because the changes are necessary for the survival of Japan not because they do not respect Japan's present culture.

Not that the path is entirely lined with peach blossoms, mind you. The Tokugawa Shogunate has condemned Toru to death for violating the strict laws that enforce Japan's isolation. You find yourself holding your breath as Toru and his comrades race to build enough zeppelins, guns and steam engines to defend Japan from the Americans before the Shogun puts a stop to it. The build-up of the novel is well worth it. I found myself very much reminded of the spirit and bravery of the American Revolution, especially when it was juxtaposed against the grace and quiet dignity of Japan. While this is certainly steampunk alternative history, you definitely get a grasp of and respect for Japanese culture at the time.

The book is well-edited and flows well. Though I'm used to books with a lot more action, at no point did I feel the need to skim - which is to say that Sorensen kept me intrigued throughout. She violates the whole "show, don't tell" periodically, but I think this is excusable given that her story is fairly ambitious in terms of the span of history it covers.

I happily recommend Toru: The Wayfarer and will anxiously await the next installment.

You can find out more about Stephanie Sorensen and the Sakura Steam series at:
<http://stephaniersorensen.com/>

-Tony Breeden
From the Bookwyrm's Lair

Disclosure of Material Connection: I received this book free from the author for review. I was not required to write a positive review. The opinions I have expressed are my own. I am disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255 : "Guides Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising."

Benjamin Kirkegaard says

What to say about Toru?

Toru is a young man who was born illegitimately, lost at sea, rescued by americans, and then finds himself back in Japan (the country of his birth).

We start our journey into the life of Toru as he is coming home to Japan, and what a journey it is. Toru finds himself in the midst of conflict, with the constant companion of his imminent death. His overriding concern is the protection of his country, and he has come back to Japan to share his discoveries about the American people and their technologies.

Toru is a persuasive individual who manages to convince anyone he comes in contact with the risk the Americans pose is real. He plans to use the technologies, that he managed to come across while in America, to convince the Americans that Japan is a strong country and capable of defending itself. He sees a future with Japan and America having a mutually beneficial trade agreement.

Toru is a journey back to a Japan that wants to keep its culture the way it has always been, but, as technology advances, finds itself thrust into the midst of an industrial age. This journey is heartbreaking, yet exciting, as one age transitions into another while trying to minimize the destruction that comes with it.

A.J. Culey says

Toru: Wayfarer Returns by Stephanie R. Sorensen is in some ways hard to categorize. It's this amazing reimagining of 19th century Japan and the events leading up to the end of its 250 years of isolationism. It's also an industrial steampunk revolution on crack, occurring at an unimaginable rate (over the course of perhaps a year), but is so richly detailed and slowly evolved over the course of the novel that the reader sometimes forgets to be skeptical at the breakneck pace of the industrialization of an entire nation. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of this work, however, are the cultural references as it provides a delightful look

into 19th century Japan. The setting is so superbly detailed, the reader is exposed to a fully realized world and ultimately gains intricate knowledge of Japan's history and culture through the reading.

As a bonus, we are treated to the slow build of a sweet, though extremely subtle, romance. It's a minor thread, almost subdued in its presentation, very much in keeping with the ambience of the novel itself, but ultimately adds to the richness of the story being told.

The only jarring note for me came from the quotes at the beginning of each chapter as they often pulled me from the reading. Though they certainly fit well in terms of theme, the majority of the quotes were from western, 20th and 21st century sources (Bob Dylan, Cormac McCarthy, George R.R. Martin and JFK, to name a few). Given the setting of the novel, it was jarring to occasionally read quotes from sources who certainly would not have existed in either that time frame or location. For me, I would have preferred quotes from 19th century and earlier Japanese sources, as I think they would not have pulled me so dramatically from the reading.

Overall, though at times a bit long-winded in exposition, *Toru: Wayfarer Returns* was a fascinating, even compelling, read. It was a slow, absorbing build, one that ultimately led to a very satisfying end.

* I received a free copy of this book in exchange for an honest review *

Sue says

Bailed at 35%

Marie-Jo Fortis says

Set in Japan in the 1850's and announcing the opening of the country to the world, this is a novel with a "futuristic" edge, that is a steampunk novel. For the ones not familiar with the genre, steampunk is a branch of sci-fi, a historical cyberpunk. Technology is important, but in its 19th century context. Hence the "steam" prefix, which evokes the machinery of the Victorian era. If inventions get slightly anachronistic here, it's not in their historical context but in their geographical context. While the U.S. and Europe are going full bloom in their industrial revolution, Japan is still set in its medieval ways.

With her steampunk approach, Sorenson will remedy to that and change the course of history. At least in this book.

Just as in a cyberpunk novel, machinery, far from being left in the background, is quite the character. Consisting mostly of trains and dirigibles ("dirijibis") here, it could have taken over the entire novel. But Sorensen shows her ability and sense of balance by placing vibrant and youthful characters to enliven this epopee of the machine.

Toru, a young man of mysterious origin for everyone in the novel—but not for the reader, is responsible for this modernization. Rescued from waters by Americans, he spends several years in their country and learns their way. Like Moses, he returns to the promised land, Japan, only to meet adversity when he proposes changes through technological progress.

But changes are inevitable. This clash between modernity and tradition, between the machine and the samourai, comes here in a clear, charming prose, and not without humor. Of course, given this historical context, this relentless enthusiasm in technology, symbolized here by not only T?ru, but free-spirited femme-de-tête Masuyo, as well as blacksmith-engineer-scientist Jiro; this enthusiasm makes sense. The bulk of the enthusiasm, however, comes from the author herself, from the love she obviously has for Japanese culture; and the way she communicates it is, frankly, intoxicating.

Problems are few but need mentioning. The language at times deviates into too familiar American expressions, something that may make the reader jump a bit and feel she's not in Japan anymore. The pace, while pleasant in its evocation of the full development of modern machinery, could have used a bit more tension now and then in order to hold more drama. The villains are never complete villains. They're either incapacitated, dying, of feeble disposition for opposition, or somehow forgiven for some justifiable treason. Why?

Well, perhaps to make room for Commodore Perry, a historical figure like many characters in this novel, and quite a bastard. His politics and invasion tactics are quite evocative of what preceded Hiroshima. I suppose, after reading her note, that the author set it up that way on purpose. Perry is a total, smart, successful villain, but I would have liked more time with him and his opposing forces.

There is something fresh and honest about T?ru. The good American, i.e. the rescuer of the beginning, can also be the American brute. In the end, that's what Sorensen does best: suggest the duality of the American nature and well as the duality of the Japanese culture.

All in all, an entertaining and vivacious tale.

Sophia says

What a splendid experience I got reading this blend of Japanese historical and steampunk set in the latter years of the Shogun era. This slow developing story added the surprise of a mysterious hero who is much more than he seems and a sweet and lightly hinted at romance. I enjoyed delving into the history and culture of historical Japan even as the clock is ticking on this medieval land working through a fast industrial revolution all to keep the foreigners from invading their peaceful shores with their forceful desires to dominate trade in the orient.

The story opens with lone Toru returning to his homeland after spending two eventful and educational years in America. Toru knows he is risking his very life to return because under Shogun law, no one who has left Japan's shores may ever return. The Shogun is the military leader under Japan's emperor and he fears that anyone who leaves and returns will bring in dangerous new ideas and change.

Toru does indeed return with dangerous new ideas- the Americans and British are circling and growing impatient with Japan's severe isolationism when trade and wealth is to be had. He loves his homeland and doesn't want to see it fall before the capitalism of the west like what happened with China. Toru risks all to bring back plans and ideas to bring Japan forward into the modern age of steam trains, telegraphs, submersibles, air ships, guns, and more.

Toru is taken into custody by a minor nobleman who has the intention of following the law and taking Toru's

head, but his hand is stayed by his curious daughter and his own secret desire to see the young fisherman live. Lady Masuyo finds the fisherman, his journal and gadgets, and his secrets fascinating because simple, poor fisherman Toru is not. Lord Aya hears out Toru and then takes him to another nobleman to discuss the situation.

Toru's quest becomes the quest of others and even he is amazed as his dream takes flight. Masuyo shows herself a master inventor and innovator, his childhood friend goes from blacksmith to builder to leader as great steam locomotives, dirigibles, and war machines are produced, and the lords supporting Toru do the work of engaging more to the cause.

Meanwhile, the mighty lord of the south showers approval and support on Toru causing the others to look at him askance with wonder and suspicion even as the ominous silence from the east where the Shogun watches does not reassure him in the least. For Japan to survive the threat of invasion, he must find a way to unite the rebel lords and the Shogun even if it means his very life.

This book gets off to a slow start and delves deep rather than skimming along at a rapid pace. Tradition, culture, characters, setting, and plot are richly developed. Relationships are made and deepened though the focus is always the survival of their country. I enjoyed the authors varied and colorful cast of characters from the fiery, fierce lady who will not be shunted to the side when she has the skills needed and the drive to fight alongside the men, to the humble blacksmith who proclaims himself the captain of the fleet, to the traditional, but open-minded lords who place their trusts, their wealth, and their own lives in Toru. Toru, himself, is an engaging character and it was neat to see him go from enigma to something much more as his secrets are revealed.

I was not familiar with the Shogun era, but I do love what I know of the Japanese culture so it was a pleasure to read a story that felt authentic even with the deviation from regular history. The inclusion of the steampunk aspect fit very well with this historical time period. There wasn't much in the form of small gadgetry so much as the large tools, transportation, and weapons. I look forward to more from this series both the history, culture, and steampunk inventions.

There is a light romance playing out in the background between Lady Masuyo and Toru. It's rather understated because of the furious need to prepare for invasion and because of the class differences of that culture. Toru has no hope of a lady of her noble lines and she doesn't think it is possible for her to be with a commoner no matter how uncommon he is. They also bump heads over her need to be in on the action and his desire to keep her safe. I thought they were a great pair.

All in all, this was a nice start to a new series by a new to me author. I would recommend it for those who love to immerse themselves in Asian history, but like an engaging adventure to go with it.

I received this book from Net Galley in exchange for an honest review.
