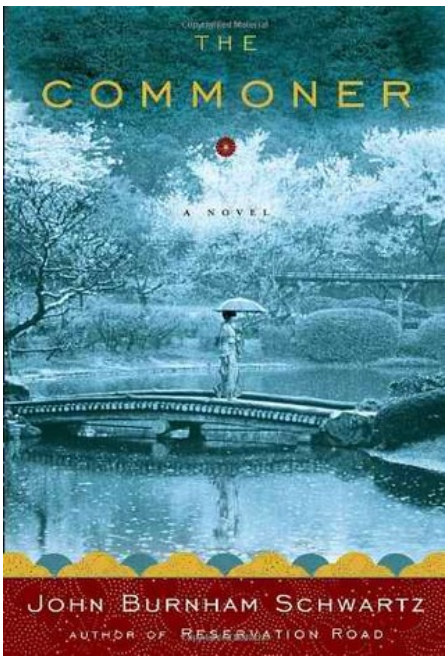

The Commoner

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It is 1959 when Haruko, a young woman of good family, marries the Crown Prince of Japan, the heir to the Chrysanthemum Throne. She is the first non-aristocratic woman to enter the longest-running, almost hermetically sealed, and mysterious monarchy in the world. Met with cruelty and suspicion by the Empress and her minions, Haruko is controlled at every turn. The only interest the court has in her is her ability to produce an heir. After finally giving birth to a son, Haruko suffers a nervous breakdown and loses her voice. However, determined not to be crushed by the imperial bureaucrats, she perseveres. Thirty years later, now Empress herself, she plays a crucial role in persuading another young woman's rising star in the foreign ministry to accept the marriage proposal of her son, the Crown Prince. The consequences are tragic and dramatic.

Told in the voice of Haruko, meticulously researched and superbly imagined, *The Commoner* is the mesmerizing, moving, and surprising story of a brutally rarified and controlled existence at once hidden and exposed, and of a complex relationship between two isolated women who, despite being visible to all, are truly understood only by each other. With the unerring skill of a master storyteller, John Burnham Schwartz has written his finest novel yet.

The Commoner Details

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From Reader Review The Commoner for online ebook

Mary Soderstrom says

Royal Babies: The Commoner While We're Waiting for Kate to Give Birth
There's been a lot about the impending birth of the new third in line to the British throne: the Duchess of Cambridge, the former Kate Middleton was due to give birth July 13, but didn't. Probably a good thing because the British press reports that Prince William was out playing polo on Saturday.

But as the royal watchers wait with bated breath, I've been thinking about an American novel about a royal couple who have a very difficult time producing an heir. The book is The Commoner by John Burnham Schwartz and the throne in question is the Chrysanthemum Throne of Japan. It's not a novel I would have picked to read, but it was on the list for a book group I began leading last year: the previous leader had chosen it.

Not that it was hard going. Told from the point of view of a young woman of good but not noble family who falls in love with the Japanese crown prince, the novel is arresting and well-paced. Schwartz seems to have done his homework assiduously:a little rummaging around on the Net reveals just how closely the story follows what happened to the current Empress Michiko.

Schwartz gives us a great deal about Japanese royal politics as well as the Emperor's changing role since the end of World War II. But the heart of the story is struggle of the narrator to find a place in the court and--most importantly--to conceive an heir. When she does and the baby is in effect taken away from her to be raised by courtiers, I imagine many readers will shed a tear or two.

The novel has a certain fairy tale quality--after all, the commoner is seen from afar by the Crown Prince who persues her and wisks her away to a life in a castle. But the real unbelievable episode comes at the end. That is when the narrator helps her daugher-in-law, another commoner, escape the oppression of royalty. Not very likely that would happen, it seems to me.

I haven't been able to find out if the book has been translated into Japanese, but I doubt it has. Imagine what hackles would rise among the British Royal Family's friends if a Japanese writer wrote a novel about Princess Diana and her unhappy life.

Or about Kate Middleton, who seems to be doing much better than her husband's mother did.

Mary says

The beginning where we see her as a young girl was slow moving but necessary to understand her struggles as a princess and then as the empress. This book got me intrigued about the real royal family of Japan. It's amazing that this was all in the 20th century.

Sara says

I found this book slow and deliberate and repetitive. I was intrigued by the premise: a first person narrative by the Empress of Japan who was, in her youth after WWII, the first commoner ever to marry into the Imperial family. Unfortunately, this excellent idea for a fascinating plot in a rare and exclusive setting tiptoes along, dwelling on uninteresting details and never really allowing the reader to experience any of the character's emotions through her stilted re-telling.

This is the first book I've read by John Burnham Schwartz, so I can't say I'm a great judge of his style, but I can't imagine why an author would fictionalize such an interesting story and fail to do anything even remotely creative with it.

Readers who don't mind slow-paced stories may be more drawn in than I was.

Charles Matthews says

They lived happily ever after, all those Disney princesses swept off to the castle by their golden coaches and flying carpets. But real-world princesses are not always so happy. One word: Diana.

The ill-fated princess of Wales was probably on John Burnham Schwartz's mind as he wrote his terrific new novel, "The Commoner," but uppermost on it were two other princesses: the one who became the current empress of Japan, the former Michiko Shoda, and her daughter-in-law, the current crown princess, who was born Masako Owada. In the novel, which is transparently based on their lives, the former is named Haruko Endo, the latter Keiko Mori.

Like the real Empress Michiko, Haruko is the daughter of a wealthy businessman. An intelligent, pretty, athletic young woman, educated at Sacred Heart University, she is invited to play tennis with the crown prince. People are shocked when she doesn't let him win. They are more shocked when he falls in love with her and proposes marriage. Haruko has misgivings: She would have to leave her friends and family behind forever. She would give up any hope of independence. She would be forced into a regimented, ritualistic life at a time when Japanese women – the marriage takes place in 1959 – are beginning to discover their freedoms.

But she accepts his proposal, and becomes the first commoner to marry into the imperial line. Her one and only task is to produce an heir, which she does. She loves the boy, Yasuhito, but as Mrs. Oshima, her chief lady-in-waiting (and spy for the empress), icily reminds her, "He may be yours, but he does not belong to you." And as the full knowledge of the hopeless emptiness of her life bears down on her, Haruko sinks into a clinical depression that robs her of speech.

Haruko recovers, only to see her own story recapitulated when Yasuhito grows up and falls in love with Keiko, a brilliantly accomplished woman with a promising career as a diplomat. Keiko has known more of the world than Haruko was privileged to know, and she turns down Yasuhito's proposal. But Haruko herself persuades Keiko to accept – and then endures the pain of guilt when Keiko's fate proves even more crushing than her own. For Keiko is unable to produce an heir. And she, too, falls into depression and withdraws from public view.

The secrets of the Japanese royal family are fiercely guarded, and Mr. Schwartz has based his novel on what little has leaked out from the imperial palace: that the Empress Michiko did in fact go mute for a while when she was crown princess, and that Crown Princess Masako has disappeared from sight after giving birth to a

girl – reportedly conceived in vitro. But this is no tawdry, tattling roman à clef. It’s a subtle, finely wrought fiction that evokes Jane Austen.

The novel’s milieu, like that of Austen’s novels, is an island of custom and ritual in the middle of a world in change; after all, Austen’s country houses and their decorum-conscious residents existed in the eye of a hurricane: the Napoleonic wars. It’s the young – attracted to change, subjected to tradition – who must wager a choice between the burden of the past and the temptation of the future.

Some of the characters in “The Commoner” would have been at home in the Jane Austen world. The vaguely ineffective Emperor, modeled on the impotent postwar Hirohito, evokes the passive-aggressive fathers in her novels, such as Mr. Bennet and Mr. Woodhouse. Even some of the dialogue in “The Commoner” could have come, with only minor changes, from an Austen novel, such as this exchange between Haruko and the Empress:

“ ‘That must of course be right,’ I said. ‘But it’s rather confusing how nearly every time one picks up a newspaper of late one finds oneself reading the opinion that Japan has entered the age of progress and technology and must not, cannot, turn back. I wonder what one is to make of such statements.’

“ ‘You should consider reading less,’ my mother-in-law said.”

Mr. Schwartz has followed up his highly praised novel “Reservation Road” with a tour de force; the creation of a wholly convincing Japanese heroine by a male American writer reflects the triumph of imagination over experience. But it’s more than that, for the stories of Haruko and Keiko embody an essential and perdurable tragedy: the stifling of a human being’s potential.

They don’t live happily ever after. Maybe they never did.

Suzanne says

John Burnham Schwartz tends to write with a degree of formality, which works well in this story of a Japanese woman from a good family who becomes the first commoner to marry into Japan's royal family.

The bare bones of the story will strike those who live in Japan as familiar - the crown prince and his bride (in this story, Haruko) meet on a tennis court in Karuizawa. Under the constant scrutiny of the court, Haruko becomes so stressed that she loses her voice for several months. Finally, she concieves an heir - her one and only job - who she fights to raise herself. When he grows up, he wants to marry a commoner himself - Keiko, who gives in under duress and then falls prey to the same pressures.

Once or twice I felt that Haruko was a bit too Western, but overall, nicely done.

Linda says

While generally an interesting story, I did not enjoy this as much as other fiction about the Japanese and Chinese Imperial courts. It seemed about 2/3 of the way through the author lost steam and then rushed

through the rest of the Princess' life. If the book had ended on page 285 after a particularly lovely paragraph that sums up then entire point of the book, it would have been more enjoyable for me. 2.5-3 stars.

Yulia says

why only three stars?

1) i shouldn't have to wait 150 pages to finally care about a book. the book hardly held my attention while haruko was still a commoner. i did feel life from her friend miko and miko's brother kenji, but their presence was too limited to make it plausible that haruko had led a full, free life before entering the royal family. if anything, she seemed rather boring and free of ambition, the je ne sais quoi that others would call dynamism or a spark.

2) i wanted to know why she turned down the other men who had proposed to her. it would have been good to meet some of these disappointed suitors? was it because she could tell they were only interested in her family? how did her parents react to her wanting to be in love with her future husband? or was she (and her mother) expecting someone of greater prominence to ask her?

3) similarly, i don't quite buy that she was in love with the crown prince. there was too many barriers around him for her to know who he really was. wasn't it his elusiveness that interested her most? they were strangers when they married and he never came across as anything but a weak-willed man who always did as he was told and no more.

4) the nemeses of haruko's early court life, the original empress and mrs. oshima, were rather one-dimensional and oshima's eventual diminution of power over haruko was only mentioned in passing. there should have been a more definitive scene when haruko knew she was no longer under oshima's thumb, or where she no longer let herself care. as it is, the senescence that ultimately leads to their powerlessness isn't portrayed in any detail, so it's rather anti-climactic.

5) the book is sprinkled with similes that are not ones i could believe a japanese native would use. i forget these examples, but they stick out rather sorely whenever i came upon them. any reference to this book's being the next "memoirs of a geisha" greatly overrate this book's ability to make the reader forget this was written by a born-and-bred american.

6) i couldn't understand how she'd come to be at peace after her bout of silence with her decision to remain a royal prisoner. shouldn't haruko have been happy for her daughter to be cast out of the family for marrying a commoner? why were there no scenes of visits from the daughter to show if haruko envied her daughter or left she could no longer connect with her?

7) i found it a hokey stretch for miko to suddenly come back into the picture near the end and come to the rescue.

Connie says

The Crown Prince of Japan married Haruko, the first commoner to become part of the Japanese Imperial family in 1959. Haruko entered a world of ceremony and tradition, isolated from the rest of the world. The Empress, her husband's mother, treated her with contempt and complained about her constantly. From the day she married the Prince, her duty was to bring a son into the world as an heir to the throne, and her beloved Yasu was born. It was a lonely life for Haruko with no friends and no privacy, and she crumbled from the pressure.

When Yasu falls in love with a beautiful, intelligent commoner, Haruko is instrumental in persuading Keiko to marry her son. Haruko tries to shelter the newlywed from the type of abuse she received, but the younger woman descended into a deep depression.

Although this is a work of fiction, the history, traditions, ceremonies, and members of the Japanese Imperial family inspired the author to write this story. Haruko was a character that the reader could sympathize with. She married a man she loved, but entered a lonely world where her thoughts, opinions, and feelings were ignored. Told from Haruko's point of view, the book gave a glimpse into the happy life of a Japanese girl growing up as the daughter of a businessman, and later as part of the Imperial family.

Judy Shirley says

A very well researched interesting book about the life of a commoner married to the Crown Prince of Japan. What a difficult life, living totally inside the palace grounds, surrounded at all times by court supervisors, unable to make any decision on your own. Excellent writing, easy to read.

Jerramy says

My royal novel of choice is usually something about the British royal family – so “The Commoner” was a quite a refreshingly regal change for me. And that said - I loved every graceful, delicate word of it. The author’s light touch and poignant tone captures the grace and humility of the Japanese imperial culture until you are immersed within the painful intricacies of palace life. Based on Japan’s real-life royal family, the book takes you on the journey of two generations of Japanese Crown Princesses (both commoners) and the challenges these brave women face as their royal duty takes over every aspect their lives -- and forces them to question (and to remember) who they were before they became royal. I was often surprised that the author is male as his descriptions of female emotions were strikingly accurate and I was moved to tears several times. If you’re tired of reading about Princess Diana and Henry the VIII – but still crave royal material, this book is for you!

Elaine says

OK. so being a Princess in Japan is akin to a life in prison. I got it! the first time. The second time. The nth time. Surely, even in the Japanese royal household, there is more to write about than the Commoner's tears, and even her depression. We learn nothing about this woman, except that she wields a wicked tennis racquet.

She loves her Mommy and Daddy.

We know the Prince, breaking with all tradition, wants to marry her, but we never know why. In the long history of the Japanese Empire, never before has a Commoner been chosen to be the the future Empress. In fact, as Schwartz tells us, in 1945, when the Japanese lost the war (that's WWII, kiddies), he had to renounce the fact that he was a god, and was proclaimed to be human. What effect did this have on him, his wife, or his son? How did the Commoner feel about such a momentous renunciation. Millions of Japanese men willingly died for their god, the Emperor. The citizenry really believed he was a god, not a person. Surely, some examination of this shift, this radical shift, should have been included in the story, even if only through the eyes of the Commoner Princess.

It would have been interesting to see other things through her eyes. We know nothing about her husband, not even why she loved him. We don't know why, nor do we know why he fell in love with her, and what kind of machinations he had to go through to get his elders to consent to his wishes. That must have been quite a to-do. We do learn that his hair went gray--after Schwarz skipped ahead a few decades, about which we know nothing except that the Princess did her boring duties.

How did she view the ubiquitous servants? She certainly wasn't raised in a home with servants. Certainly, she must have had some trenchant observations about them and the Royals' dependence on them. We do know that the Empress had at least one spy among the Commoner's menage, but we're never privy to what the spy said, the Empress's response, or any consequences of the spying. Or, what about some Upstairs/Downstairs glimpses. How did the servants feel about the Royal Household. We know one chauffeur liked the Commoner, but that's the extent of what we know.

We never even learn what Yusa (if that's his name), the Commoner's royal son, felt or acted when his beloved Commoner abandoned him. Given all the attention that Schwarz gave to his infancy and his mother's joy in him, this is more than odd. Did the author just forget to tie up this rather important loose end? If so, why didn't an editor remind him to do so.

This novel is populated with stereotypic cardboard characters. The older Empress is a copy of Snow White's stepmother. Nobody else has any thoughts--beyond the fact that the palace is a prison. Nobody has feelings. Time just passes. Whole gobs of time are skipped over. Apparently, starting a new chapter is all you need for continuity. The intervening decades don't matter.

Mr. Scwartz clearly researched Japan at the end of the War, and also, I presume, something of the life of Royalty there, but, on the whole, this was a disappointing read although the writing itself is good.

Sumi says

I really wished I could have liked this better than I did but the author only made me feel as if I were seeing a thin veneer of the characters. In actual life there was tons of drama going on with the imperial marriages and I didn't feel any of it in the writing. A lack of real knowledge about the inner workings of the imperial household probably was the reason for some of it.

For me, though, the ending was where it all fell apart. It was too improbable and made me briefly flirt with the idea of giving this book only two stars.

Sunhawk says

Elegant storytelling. Especially in the first chapters (when the authorial voice is new) there's an almost haiku-like poetic feel to the sentences at times ...wholly in tune with the story. This is thinly veiled history, and therefore intriguing, as it fleshes out suspicions hidden behind the imperial walls. Again, that favorite topic, the struggles of women to assert equality in social constructs that make that struggle a blood sport. Hurrah for the heroine: she survives, and is currently the Empress.

Sherry says

I was mesmerized by The Commoner. I felt the visceral claustrophobic isolation that must be reality for the exalted (and scrutinized) Empress of Japan who started out being a regular girl. Schwartz did a fine job of making the reader experience the deprivation and sadness that opulence and privilege and duty demanded of his subject. It’s not necessarily good to be the queen.

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mwbham says

This spare, formal book was a fictional account not too unlike the real Empress Michiko and her daughter-in-law Crown Princess Masako. Both are commoners who married into Japan's Chrysanthemum Throne.

Schwartz, an American man, has Haruko, a Japanese woman, narrate her story of growing up in Tokyo during WWII, marrying the prince, and the difficulties she experiences isolated in the emotionally barren Imperial Court. I enjoyed the detail of the ritualized life of the royal family. The first 100 or so pages were a bit slow, but I became engaged in the story after that.

I found it difficult to believe that, as Empress, Haruko could not help her bright, suffering daughter-in-law. Can the Empress and Emperor really not control the Court? Is it really an entity so full of ritual and history it can't be changed even by the royal family who are so affected by it? Or, was it just that the Empress as a woman had no power? I would think the story was too far fetched if we didn't know that the current Empress and Crown Princess are suffering from "attitude adjustment" problems.

Michelle says

I really wavered between a 3 and a 4 on this book. There were a handful of times as I was reading, when the author used a completely unlikely or unbelievable excuse to explain away why Haruko knew or felt something she ought not have. For example, during a tennis match with the Crown Prince, Haruko describes her tennis partner, an American teenager, as someone who likely came from the American Middle West. Schwartz half-attempts to explain how Haruko might know this, which makes the gaffe even worse - he knew she shouldn't know this, yet he put it in anyway. It was times like that, when Schwartz's voice broke through the narritive while still pretending to be Haruko's, that instantly sucked me out of the story. It is a shame, because those few instances of sloppy writing really marred an otherwise engaging narrative.

The author also glosses over so much of the story - we're told that the Crown Prince became interested in Haruko because she dared to beat him at a game of tennis, and because she spoke her mind. Yet, after the marriage, she is no longer free to be Haruko. Could he still love her if she changed so much? Wouldn't this affect their relationship? It is impossible to tell from the book, as the story of their love is completely flat before and after the wedding.

I also have to agree with a previous reviewer who found that the book didn't capture her attention as well for the first 150 pages or so. The ending was also unbelievable - it felt like he didn't know how to wrap it up, and wanted to give it a happy ending, so cranked out one last chapter. That said, I did have a hard time putting the book down for the second half of the book, so I went with 4 stars, despite my reservations.

Kaye says

Listened to this on "audio" and quite enjoyed it. More than loosely based on truth this novel gave insights in the burden of being a "royal." After reading it I wanted to research a bit more about this "commoner" and her husband who were the first to break with Japanese royal traditions.

Corine says

I loved this slow, uneventful, richly layered novel. The self-restrain of the protagonists who are trapped into a gilded, lonely life they did not choose but yet devote themselves to out of a sense of responsibility and honor is hard to watch. There is never a false note and I felt transported into that world. It sure made me rethink my childhood dream of becoming a princess when I grew up!

Carma says

I probably would have given this 3 1/2 stars if I could. I did enjoy the book. It was an interesting topic and had beautiful language and occassional moments of true feeling, however, I feel like the author was at times trying to hard to be profound- the kind that really just passed me by but then I wonder if it is just me- did I miss something- am I just not smart enough to get it? So maybe for someone else it would be 5 stars who knows. As an example, here is a quote from the book: "And morning would come- the sun, or its simulacrum, would enter our window, and in that light I would stand before my mirror and see myself." I dare say that the word simulacrum was used improperly here. As I write this now, I could probably tease something nice and profound out of it if I wanted to, just like I did in my high school and college literary criticism courses, but really... I just can't stomach that kind of cowardly vagueness. I feel like people write like that hoping that they will fool others into thinking they are so profound- the emperor's new clothes thing. And yet I must admit that others may not see it that way because it is all subjective.
Anyway, the interesting thing of this book is the contrast of the traditions and customs of the Ancient Japanese Emperial court with the bright, intellectual women from modern society who are brought in to this world because those very atributes attracted the princes who wished to marry them, but then were expected to bow down to the inexplicible excentricities of this ancient world. I found my own personal connection to the story in the parallel I see with modern day motherhood. Women are brought up to be more and more independent and educated than ever before. As a result, motherhood has become an increasingly difficult

endeavor. In my own personal experience, I have found it very difficult to walk the line between giving my children everything they need- being the best mother I can for them, and not loosing myself in the process. Especially while the children are young, my philosophical and academic nature serves no purpose and when I have tried to live in that world and the world of motherhood at the same time, I have felt that I failed in both. In this story, these women who become emperial princesses are bound by honor and duty to fill the roll of princess as dictated by tradition- their main purpose being to have a male son, then after that, to be a pretty face that shows up at various functions and delivers talking points- but never expresses herself. Her mind and personality are of no value. This is not exactly what motherhood is, but at times, one's responsibility as a mother does require sacrifice. The difference between the two situations is that as a mother, I know that my sacrifice is for a good, understandable purpose, whereas for these women, the purpose was to uphold tradition that was quickly becoming obsolete and without meaning.

Suzanne says

In *The Commoner*, John Burnham Schwartz takes a real life story about the Crown Prince of Japan marrying a commoner and turns it into a novel. The heroine, Haruko, catches the eye of Japan's most eligible bachelor, promptly beats him at tennis (twice) and succumbs to the attraction of both the man and the fairy tale.

"At every turn, sometimes subtly and sometimes crudely, the same lesson was driven home: the world would greet me with abject deference not because I deserved or wished it but because of my station, which in all things would stand above me, and indeed would outlast me."

As Haruko discovers, she is asked to become someone she is not. The person she is inside, is no longer important – only the image she is asked to project has worth. She finds the world her husband lives in is restrictive and her home becomes much more like a prison than a palace.

The author seems to place the characters at a respectful distance from the reader. This seems in keeping with the culture of Japan and the persons represented. At times, however, I questioned the seemingly Western attitudes of Haruko and her father. After reading *Japanland*, I was surprised at how un-modern Japan still is with regards to a woman's place. I found it hard to believe that in 1959, a Japanese girl would expect and be given the freedoms that Haruko did.
