



Japanese Tales

Royall Tyler (Translator)

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Here are two hundred and twenty dazzling tales from medieval Japan, tales that welcome us into a fabulous, faraway world populated by saints and scoundrels, ghosts and magical healers, and a vast assortment of deities and demons. Stories of miracles, visions of hell, jokes, fables, and legends, these tales reflect the Japanese worldview during a classic period in Japanese civilization. Masterfully edited and translated by the acclaimed translator of *The Tale of Genji*, these stories ably balance the lyrical and the dramatic, the ribald and the profound, offering a window into a long-vanished though perennially fascinating culture.

Japanese Tales Details

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From Reader Review Japanese Tales for online ebook

Ben says

Tyler is one of the premiere translators of Japanese into English. His book of Japanese No dramas (1992) and his translation of Genji (2003) are ground-breaking works, deftly blending great scholarship and learning with lucid yet faithful translations. His book of No plays opened my eyes to the beauty of Japanese art, literature and culture 11 years ago, and though I find the late Seidensticker's 1970s translation of Genji more readable and beautiful, I can still recognise Tyler's translation for its great scholarly merits.

This anthology collects a wide range of Japanese tales from a period roughly spanning from about the C8 to the C16. You will find many of the tales in this collection scattered about in different versions in other collections, for example in Mitford's Tales of Old Japan from the end of the C19, and collections of Akutagawa's (English translations available) work. However, the versions in this book may be the most faithful you will find in English. Sometimes the more freely translated versions (Mitford) or the more freely re-told versions (Akutagawa) have more literary merit, but I'm inclined to believe that the versions in this book are the real thing. On the whole, the stories are often not as evocative or as beautiful as their freer counterparts, or of other similar tales based on old Japanese tales (the most evocative and beautiful probably being Lafcadio Hearn's stories, published at the beginning of the C20, though Hearn never mastered Japanese and his tales are dubious in their faithfulness to their varying sources). Tyler's introduction is, as you would expect, scholarly and illuminating.

The stories in this book demonstrate the enormous range of Japanese literature from the period. There are some genuinely scary ones about ghosts and demons. The Lotus Sutra, the all-pervading text in Japanese Buddhism, crops up again and again. There are lots of animal tales too - foxes (kitsune), badgers (tanuki), snakes (hebi).

Most memorable, though, are the tale of desire and carnal activity. In one story a monk falls asleep and has a dream that a beautiful girl comes along and performs fellatio on him. He wakes up with his trousers undone and a dead snake in front of him with its mouth open and a white liquid dribbling out! In another story a monk fondles the body of a beautiful statue of Kannon every day when the other monks aren't looking. One night he dreams that the statue comes to him as a real woman, even more beautiful than she is as a statue. She tells him to meet her. He wakes up and meets her at the appointed place and time and she is there, waiting. He throws temple life in and becomes a farmer, marrying her, and becomes prosperous. She tells him that he must never be unfaithful to her. He assures her he won't. One day, however, on a business trip, he sleeps with a prostitute. When he gets home his wife immediately makes it clear to him that she knows. She tells him she has been saving something up for him. She brings him two buckets of white gloopy liquid. This turns out to be all that he has ejaculated into her (his "heavenly wife") since they married. The man is very upset, but the story ends with him becoming more and more prosperous. He doesn't consider what happens to him to be that odd. And what's the moral, if any, of this story?

Some of the stories, with their disappearing women, and ghosts (or demons) that appear to be women, remind me very much of modern Japanese literature, especially the work of Haruki Murakami. Murakami may be known as one of the most 'Western' of Japanese writers, but reading these old tales you can see where a lot of his ideas are inherited from.

Eadweard says

Things I've learned from reading chinese and japanese folk stories:

- Never trust a beautiful young widow, it's probably a fox spirit.
- Never go inside dilapidated places, they're probably haunted.
- Never spend the night in dilapidated places.
- That animal you saved / rescued is probably a god.
- Always pay attention to any messages or orders you receive from beings in your dreams.
- Always chant the Heart Sutra
- A dragon lives in the nearest lake

Blow Pop says

Ok so for those who know me well, you all know that I LOVE folklore, cultural tales, and tales of religions. By all means that should mean that I would moderately like this book. I didn't. This is the first book in a while I've actually rage quit and did not finish. I got 26 pages in. But from doing further research I can't continue with this book.

I definitely DO want to read more of Japanese culture and their folklore and tales and such. But from talking to Japanese people and from seeing American/English idioms that wouldn't have been used in Japan I couldn't bring myself to finish this. Which sucks as it's the only book my library has so I will continue to scour the internet for decent books translated into English.

I knew going in that the tales wouldn't be like German fairytales (like most fairytales in Western culture are from) so I didn't expect that (and from what I read I didn't get that) but the collection isn't put together well. The intro was boring as shit and I had to force myself to keep reading it to finish it. It's a very dry read (which I know, a lot of history and culture books tend to be dry but they're mostly palatable at least which this wasn't). The tales range from very short to 2 pages long (and by very short I mean a paragraph or two) and they kind of run into each other the way they're presented. And that started making my eyes feel like they were glazing over. And from what I hear from Japanese people (friends and people I only know online) most of the stories aren't even in full. They're summarized versions. Which kind of angers me. Not to mention American/English idioms in some of the stories.

Kylie Sparks says

I loved this collection. Definitely read the introduction first--it provides much needed context. These tales are great--many are short, only one to two pages. Some are haunting, others disturbing, some are raunchy, and others romantic, quite a few are funny. You'll find emperors, monks, princesses, foxes and snakes, all kinds of demons, warriors and gods. The scholarship that went into this volume is impressive--there are extensive source notes and the tales are really well organized. As others have noted, you may find more literary/romantic versions of stories elsewhere but probably not more authentic. I thoroughly enjoyed reading this.

Matimate says

Here are two hundred and twenty tales from medieval Japan which are so stunning that this book was re-read several times.

Brendan Coster says

The translation and layout gets a solid 4.5 stars. I personally like a foot note or two, some of these tales are pretty remote...

The content is ~ 3 stars. Much of it is from the "Konjaku", and so they're Buddhist sermons thinly veiled as stories. The rest are pulled from miscellaneous source materials, pieces of anthologies, and letters. And I think I ran into some of the same issues as I had reading the 'Manyoshu' - namely that these works are just floating in time and space, unattached to anything I can readily pull from - and that's after now 15 books of source material, plus essays, the Lotus Sutra, and having taken a class in Japanese History in college.

I'm not taking a class here though, nor do I expect Tyler to have written a text book on pre-tokugawan short fiction or the early buddhist traditions of Japan, but it also doesn't change the fact that these stories can be very hard to access. Even the "Manyoshu" and the "Kokinshu" (which I enjoyed immensely) both offered up poetry which spoke of more timeless themes that tend to transcend space and time, they also offered up a great deal more art and, for me at least, enjoyment.

My intention was to three star it, but it's not fair to the volume that I had just read the "Konjaku" previously, and so much of this volume was repetition (albeit in a superior translation). My last note, then, is that while the layout was interesting and thematic, the "Konjaku" gets spliced up in this volume, and so the stories lose their intended theme (which was india, china, japan, local, etc) and gets shoved into Tyler's own made-up themes (foxes, ying/yang, music, fairy's, foxes II...) - which is probably what made the stories feel like they were just floating out in no time, and place.

Also, Royall's translation for "The Tale of Heike" was phenomenal.... just thought I'd plug that for him....

Carson says

Yeah so I'm reading 7 books at once, what's the problem?

Robert Darnton wrote in the Great Cat Massacre that if you read a joke from another country and another era and you are not laughing, then you know you need to do more research into that culture.

This book of folktales will bring you right up to ancient Japan. The stories in it are bizarre, sad, funny, incongruous, inconclusive, and altogether magnificent. But if you can't laugh at fart jokes, you will not enjoy this book, and you may eventually find that you are in no way equipped to be an anthropologist.

N0rth3y says

An interesting collection of tales - they are well-written and the variety is interesting. I was surprised, though, that among the 200, I only recognized one (the old woman who rescues the sparrow). There are quite a number of common ones (common enough that a half-Japanese girl has heard of them) that are missing here - this is more of a survey than a compendium, despite the comprehensive size of the compilation.

What's interesting about reading this collection is how the story structure feels much the same as any folktale around the world - but then you come to the pivotal moment in the story or the summarizing moral, and the story veers in a completely unexpected direction. Suffice to say, these are not about virginal princesses and valiant princes - there's a whole lot more gray and mischief and moral missteps, and that in a way makes them feel more "modern" than some western folk/fairy tales.

Neko Neha (BiblioNyan) says

“Stories of miracles, visions of hell, jokes, fables, and legends—these tales reflect the Japanese worldview during a classic period in Japanese civilization.”

Japanese Tales is a marvellous compilation of mythology, folklore, and fables depicting the early cultural, political, and social norms for Japan during the 12th through 14th centuries. I read this alongside a history book for premodern Japan, which made my experience with this title that much more enlightening.

Translated by the wonderfully talented Royall Tyler (translator of the complete unabridged *The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu), **all of stories retain an element of cultural integrity that made the reading experience equal parts dense, fascinating, and surreal.** There are approximately 200 hundred stories within the pages and they all vary in length—some are half a page, while others are two or more pages long. They are broken down into sections by subject matter (e.g.: Buddhism, Dragons, Spirits, Music and Dance, etc.). The breakdown made it much easier for me to reference specific parts of history or mythos that interested me the most.

I read this straight cover to cover, which now that I'm finished, I do not recommend doing that. The varying depth of each tale as well as the complexities of how they are expressed provide the reader with an awkward feeling. **There is no consistency in the tales.** I read one story about cheating spouses that was very simple in language expression, yet the one following it would require much more focus to understand due to a shift in tone and etymological usage. The varying degrees of intensity made it difficult for me to stay interested in reading the book for extended periods of time.

An aspect that I positively adored with *Japanese Tales* was the co-relation of mythology and fables, and how it influenced societal structures and social practices during the era. Particular tales of legendary monks shaped how the Japanese felt about monks as a whole in regards to Buddhist practices. Fables about nature and spiritual deities disciplined many ritualistic and shamanic practices that originated with Shinto. Plenty of tales of supernatural vengeance and tragedy provided life lessons and etiquette guidelines for interacting with your spouses or others within a community (a family community, or small

town community), plus much more. These distinct narratives really brought the ancient and early Japanese societies to life around me, which was already heightened due to that history book I read as a companion.

While the reading can feel a bit murky with the fluctuating stories, *Japanese Tales* is an intriguing piece of literature for anyone interested in Japanese mythos and fables. I recommend reading the subjects that most-interest you rather than marathon-reading it as it may burn you out!

4 dragons out of 5.

Dimitris says

I liked it.

Nice fairy tales and stories from Japan!

Mandy says

I liked these stories so much, I wish I had gotten them in a different form. I read this on my library's ebook app so it was a struggle to finish them all in time (I had to rent it out for at least 6 weeks total to finish it in between my other readings) and the quality of the text conversion went significantly down towards the end as well. This would be a really nice collection to get in hardcover and to read small groups of stories at a time. It was so interesting to get a feel from the 200+ stories for Japanese cultural morals and folklore. I read this book in preparation for a trip to Japan I was supposed to take, but it's inspired a lot of interest in more historical lore and myths and legends from other cultures as well.

Eric says

Those looking for novel stories from Japan would do well to pick up this book. All the tales presented come from the era after the unification of Japan and are quite diverse. Moreover, though stories like Urashimataro and The Bamboo Cutter's Daughter (forgive my momentary lapse on the actual name of the story) are present, there are a number of tales here I have not read anywhere else. I'd also highly recommend anyone reading this book to read the introduction, as it provides invaluable information on the historical context of the stories as well as some remarks on the various religions of Japan that play a major role in several of the stories.

Michael says

This is one quirky book. I thought this would be like English folk tales, with the lessons and conclusions neatly laid out at the end, some of these stories end in the middle it seems. That is not to say they are bad and, if you want insight into early Japanese culture you could find less interesting ways to do so. Some are funny some do have lessons and some just show us what was important to a far away culture many centuries ago. You do need to come at this book the right way though, you should have an open mind and realize that Japan does not have the same value system you see in English history books. If you are reading this review you are curious already about Japan and I would say give this book a try, the stories are easy to read and most are only a few paragraphs long.

Nanci says

I couldn't bring myself to finish this collection because all of the tales are thoroughly male-centric -- the few women characters don't even have names! I know it's a sign of the eras in which they were written (many date back to the 700s), but still.... Also, many of the tales are very, very short, so there's literally not much to them (no character development, history, etc.).

I have many shelves full of fairy tale collections, but I won't be keeping this volume.

Maria says

Unfortunately I couldn't go on reading this book! The introduction was alright, but the selection + categorization of stories was poor. Many of them were too short to be engaging, and the few actually interesting stories were squished between several bland ones. Did not like it. Would love to find a better collection that presents a rich narrative...
