



The Teahouse Fire

Ellis Avery

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"Like attending seasons of elegant tea parties—each one resplendent with character and drama. Delicious."—Maxine Hong Kingston

The story of two women whose lives intersect in late-nineteenth-century Japan, *The Teahouse Fire* is also a portrait of one of the most fascinating places and times in all of history—Japan as it opens its doors to the West. It was a period when wearing a different color kimono could make a political statement, when women stopped blackening their teeth to profess an allegiance to Western ideas, and when Japan's most mysterious rite—the tea ceremony—became not just a sacramental meal, but a ritual battlefield.

We see it all through the eyes of Aurelia, an American orphan adopted by the Shin family, proprietors of a tea ceremony school, after their daughter, Yukako, finds her hiding on their grounds. Aurelia becomes Yukako's closest companion, and they, the Shin family, and all of Japan face a time of great challenges and uncertainty. Told in an enchanting and unforgettable voice, *The Teahouse Fire* is a lively, provocative, and lushly detailed historical novel of epic scope and compulsive readability.

The Teahouse Fire Details

Date : Published December 28th 2006 by Riverhead Hardcover (first published January 1st 2000)

ISBN : 9781594489303

Author : Ellis Avery

Format : Hardcover 391 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, Cultural, Japan, Lgbt, Asia

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Tocotin says

Oh, I have no luck with my reads recently. This one is a strangely unpleasant book, whose sycophantic nature is symbolized by the main character's life story.

The character, a French/American girl named Aurelie, wants the readers to believe that she's had a miserable childhood. Born in 1857, she's never known her father, and her mother was taken in by her priest brother (Aurelie's uncle), and placed in a New York school run by nuns, as a servant. The mother despises the nuns and laughs at her brother's airs and graces. Then the uncle gets assigned to a mission in Kyoto and takes nine-year-old Aurelie with him, having made her learn Japanese from books (it's 1866, mind). Meanwhile the mother dies of tuberculosis, and when Aurelie lands in Japan, she is unpleasantly surprised by the priests' contempt for Japan, and then by her uncle's clearly pedophilic tendencies. Ah, how nasty!

But wait, it's not going to be that bad, is it? After all, it's Japan, the land of dreams. So Aurelie goes to the nearby shrine and prays for another life. Of course she gets it. That very night a fire destroys the mission and Aurelie runs away, only to be taken in by a gentle and rich family whose members have been teaching tea ceremony for generations. She becomes their servant and gets to wear nice kimonos and to work around the teahouse in the garden, observe the lessons and so forth, as the family is convinced that she is really Japanese, only a bit soft in the head (she can speak Japanese a bit, because of the books, and because she had a great communication with a Japanese cook on the ship on the way to Japan). Aw, how sweet!

Everything goes smoothly to the moment when the Meiji Restoration happens. Old traditions (good) are violated, new ways (bad) gain an upper hand, tea ceremony is out of fashion (sniff sniff), crass and ugly foreigners start to interfere and destroy the local culture... the people in the neighborhood start to whisper that Urako (Aurelie) is really one of them foreign devils, and therefore unclean... Ah, how horrible!

Now, I can get over the relative implausibility of the premise; it's pretty well done, and much stranger things happen to people, and this is a novel. What I can't get over, though, is the fact that the book idolizes Japanese culture and vilifies everything else, at the expense of psychological and historical truth, and even to the point of doing harm to the very Japanese culture which it seeks to eulogize - because it describes it as vicious and dishonest.

The Japanese are supposed to be refined and sophisticated, but come off as two-faced, as well as mean, brutal and simply stupid. (A father beating his daughter's face so as to draw blood, and then announcing that she is to be introduced to her fiancé in a few hours is an example.) They smile into the face of a guest/foreigner/stranger and badmouth them and ridicule them as soon as they turn their backs. The foreigners are of course stupid, mean and ugly, there is no doubt about it, they can't understand Japan, nor can they learn the language - oh, of course except the heroine Urako aka Aurelie. She is quite intelligent, pretty actually, and she doesn't consider herself a foreigner, how could she? Foreigners are abominable. Especially, y'know, women. Maybe the author, who is fascinated by Japan and the Japanese tea ceremony which she teaches, regrets the unfortunate fact that she's not Japanese herself. This is understandable. But the overwhelming attitude of the book is that everything non-Japanese is inferior and disgusting, if not outright hateful.

To be honest, I've had enough of historical books which describe Japanese culture as being invaded and violated by Western civilization, because it more often than not distorts the picture. This book by trying to be

more Catholic than the pope and more Japanese than the Japanese themselves, shows the Meiji Restoration as an oppressive, damaging power, something akin to the Maoist Cultural Revolution, and misses the mark completely. It ignores the spirit of the times: the surge of enthusiasm, the enormous passion for education, the fascination by all things Western, the pride felt by the Japanese people when they saw how fast their country was being modernized and how it gained recognition and respect in the eyes of other nations. True, there was a reaction against the new ways circa 1887-1895, when people briefly tried to return to old fashions and rejected all things foreign, but in "The Teahouse Fire" (which covers almost 40 years) everyone is, all the time, firmly against the Restoration, the modernization, and foreigners. Not one word is spoken in favor of the reforms. There is nothing but disapproval for the new. The book just exploits The Big Fat Fetish Of The Traditional Japanese Culture, without offering a real insight.

Which would be forgivable if the plot had a bit more momentum, and characters some depth, but no - the pace was slow, the story not very interesting after the initial oomph, and nearly all the characters one-dimensional. And I would like the lesbian subplots and overtones more, if the heroine wasn't so unsympathetic, hypocritical and boring.

As to the details, I guess they were accurate when it came to the tea ceremony, and there were many incidents thrown in which show high quality research on the author's part (balls in the Rokumeikan Palace, the public outrage at the drowning of the Japanese crew when the foreigners were rescued), but there were also things like people wearing black in mourning (not done at the time), sushi as a delicacy (it was just fast food), fish as everyday food (it was rare), or a wife of a rickshaw puller as a main force in the neighborhood and the heroine's nemesis (rickshaw pullers were extremely poor and would not live near the Shin residence, and their family would be even less likely to be able to afford the same bathhouse as the servants). The last one in particular was forced, as if the author decided that she couldn't do without a villain, but it goes to show that the interactions between different social classes were a bit off.

Also, "The Pillow Book" by Sei Shonagon is not a novel, it's more like a collection of essays, and the heroine kept referring to Sei Shonagon simply as "Shonagon", which is annoying, because it makes it sound like a name. It isn't. It's a government post belonging probably to her close relative, and while it might have been her nickname, now she is referred to as "Sei" or "Sei Shonagon" in Japanese.

Oh well. These things would be less jarring if the story itself wasn't so false and pompous.

Kristen says

Okay, so I am having a really hard time with this book. It's very well written, and you can tell that the author really put a lot of effort into researching this book. The detail is amazing!

However, the story is not drawing me in and I am find it boring over all. Which is a shame, because I thought it had a lot of potential to be a great read.

There seems to be more fact than story, and that would ordinarily be fine, except for the fact that I picked it up to read fiction and fall in love with a story.

The characters aren't engrossing and I can barely keep track of who is who because the writing is kind of confusing. I think I might end up putting this one down, but maybe I'll go back to it later.

I give it 2 stars because it is well written and the author did so much research and because the story sounds interesting. It's just too bad I couldn't get through it. Oh well, I guess it happens.

Kristy Billuni says

Here's a funny story about this book: it is long, and I am a slow reader. I had checked it out of the library, and when the due date approached, renewed it online. I do this a lot, but with this book, it happened three times.

And that's how I learned that after three checkouts, the library requires you to return a book to let other people have a chance. I thought of defying this rule and refusing to return it, but in the end, I am a good library citizen. So I returned the book unfinished.

"Let me buy you a copy," my wife pleaded after tolerating my obsessive chatter about how I'd placed a hold, could check it out again in two weeks, how the library had only one copy, how I couldn't wait to read the ending, and on and on.

Usually, I encourage gifts and book buying, but something had come over me. Determined to get the book back from the library and finish it, I refused to let my wife buy a copy for me. I blame the main character's austere life. How can I go out and spend money on books when she has no possessions at all?

Let me reiterate here that *The Teahouse Fire* is not a slow read. On the contrary, this is the kind of book you can taste and smell while you read: the matcha, the exquisite cookies, the fire, the incense, the water. Such precise and sensual descriptions and such a humble narrator made the whole thing so easy for me to love, I found myself lingering over it.

In fact, I fell in love with the central character. Avery pairs her quiet disposition with a rich and engaging interior life, so that I felt privileged by the up-close point-of-view, like she had become my secret best friend. And the ending, when I did finally get to read it, was deeply satisfying. I can't wait to read *The Last Nude*, and for the record, I went ahead and purchased it.

Ann says

I thoroughly enjoyed this book and find the complaints about it silly. Yes it is long and detailed. But that was the beauty of it. Until the 1850's, Japan was a closed society and few foreigners were allowed to enter. When Aurelia is found by the Shin family, they can't even identify her and don't know how to classify her. So they make her a maid and sometimes treat her as a member of the family.

Many years ago, I went to an exhibit of Yokohama wood-block prints from that era. Foreigners were drawn with big noses and strange outfits, snow was painted green and animals were often unidentifiable.

I thought Ellis Avery did an amazing job telling the story from multiple points of view as the family tried to deal with a changing world. In about 100 years, Japan changed from a rigid, insular nation to one of the most progressive in the world. It is a story that needs to be told and I think Avery did an admirable job of it.

Robin says

What an amazingly beautiful book. I spent many a night with eyes burning and asking me to shut them, but I just could not put this book down. I read it over a few days this cold winter wrapped in my favorite quilt, sipping my favorite tea transported to Japan and the lovely world of temae. A wonderful addition and awesome treat to this read was visiting a lovely, serene tea house in Oakland and learning about the ceremony from none other than Yoshi of Yoshi's Restaurant and Jazz Club.

Favorite quotes: "She was most my mother at the edges of the day..."p.2

"...she had uncoiled the lonely weight of her brother's loss into a rope that two could hold." p. 51

"...his temae quiet as spilt water spreading on a wood floor...How beautiful, to see something done simply and well." p.101

"...I felt while performing temae something of the solemnity and grace that I felt watching it. I felt the austere precision of the choreography, and my voluptuous surrender to it. I felt the desire to give something precious, this bowl of tea." p. 127

"The box was full of books....They smelled, oh God, like books." p.193

"I wish I could remember the last thing he said to me." p.240

"In Chado, the Japanese Rite of Tea, you are invited to spend time with ONE flower, ONE painting. To touch and taste from ONE piece of sculpture, to sample a FEW delicacies, to watch the balletic movement of ONE trained artist. You are free to converse, or you are free to contemplate in silence. Is this not a restful and salutary activity?" p. 273

"Reading Shonogon, the squalid narrowness of my days with needle and wiping-rag expanded into gossamer nights in Baishan. A clay cup. A rush mat. I savored those hours, reading alone in the exquisite two-mat house, the lamplight flaring on the basket-woven ceiling, the room as given over to beauty as Shonagon's lines." p. 383

"I read to...slip into a cooler, petaled world. " p. 393

Wan Ni says

Elegantly crafted, *The Teahouse Fire* is a fiction set in late 19th century Japan. The protagonist Aurelia, a French young girl who lived in New York, was brought to Japan by her uncle. Following the death of her mother and the escape from her abusive uncle, she finds herself taking refuge with a family who specialises in Japanese tea ceremonies, temae. She grows up as a servant in the household, and learns the art of tea from her mistress, Yukako. Yet at the turn of the century when foreign influences inundated Japan, she was yet again placed in a helpless position as she was ostracised by the Japanese as an unclean gaijin. Throughout the

book we see her struggling to learn and to be accepted.

I didn't know that this book can be classified as lesbian fiction when I first picked it up. To me it was more Orient and Historical, like *Memoirs of the Geisha* and *Shogun*. I was a little pleasantly surprised when I got to the part of the story where Aurelia discovers her love for a girl named Inko. Frankly, I was confused at first and did a second take to make sure I read it right; I didn't expect it from the book synopsis. Her love, throughout the book, is bittersweet. I shall not give out spoilers here, but the book had a good ending. I really liked the ending; it's light, sweet and positive. Nothing too spectacular; it's simply down-to-earth like watching a sunset.

Lara (Bookishsolace) says

I personally love historical fiction set in foreign countries since I am acquiring so many new things about the culture and in particular the period it is set in. Hence, I was incredibly excited to read this novel. After a very promising and heart-breaking beginning, I sadly got a lost in all the multi-faceted details of the Japanese tea ceremony as it is a rather slow-moving novel. However, I fell in love with the subtle dialogue and the in-depth insight into Japan I never really had as a European.

"When I was nine, in the city now called Kyoto, I changed my fate. I walked into the shrine through the red arch and struck the bell. I bowed twice. I clapped twice. I whispered to the foreign goddess and bowed again. And then I heard the shouts and the fire. What I asked for? Any life but this one."

And thus, begins the story of Aurelie, a French girl living in a convent in New York with her mother and her uncle. After her mother's unexpected passing, she accompanies her missionary uncle on a mission to Japan. What follows is a story full of intrigue and scandal and a country completely devoted to tradition contrasted with their fascination for modernisation. Moreover, it is also a story of the difficulties of growing up and her becoming aware of her own sexuality and attraction to other women. I especially loved how the author is so well studied and interwove her knowledge of the shifting hierarchy of Japan's society and the general big changes happening in 19th century Japan.

While being jam-packed with facts about Japan, the novel doesn't fail to deliver lots of emotions, and especially Aurelia's and Yukako's (the tea maker's daughter) relationship had me tear up several times. Sometimes, I found myself bored by the lack of action in the book, however, I am glad I kept reading; the ending just delivered on so many levels. If you are currently experiencing serious Fernweh, I highly recommend you "The Teahouse Fire" which takes you on a very emotional trip to 19th century Japan where lots and lots of tea is being served.

Heather says

I rarely don't finish a book. I really, really tried with this one, too. I gave it about 200 pages before I finally just had to give up. It was just so boring. I think the author really, really wanted to write a story about the Japanese tea ceremony and just had to throw together some story to wrap around it. The premise sounded interesting, but this book absolutely does not deliver. I wanted to like this book, I really did, but after all that I read, I found that I really just didn't care at all about the characters or what happened to them. Just not worth it.

Sandra says

A lushly written story. Reading reviews of people saying this book was "about Japanese tea ceremony" makes me scratch my head in wonder at what they must miss on a daily basis. The changing tea ceremony - a truly unique art form - is symbolic of the westernization of Japan as it approached the turn of the 19th century. An ancient and civilized society losing ground against the encroaching west is the larger story. The smaller stories are all beautifully drawn, the tale of the little Parisienne who finds herself swept off to Japan and then alone once there is poignant as she becomes both a sort of family member and a servant to that family...the sexual stories of love and lust and incest...the financial fortunes and economics...the decline of the Japanese shogun class...all of it is quite fascinating. That said, there was one portion about 2/3 of the way in that seemed to get in the way and drag on, I kept waiting to get back to the tale. The rest was not a fast-paced read, nor was it intended to be, but worth the time for the beauty of the writing and the depth and accuracy of the history.

Elizabeth says

This novel -- about Japanese tea ceremony -- was full of promise as a light, quick plane read, but man, did it not deliver. Two weeks later I was still mired in it. I think it needed a good editor to trim it down by about 100 pages. It was way too long and covered, in my opinion, way too much time. I'd definitely give it an "A" for research and historical details, but the grades go down when it comes to plot, character development and plausibility.

nimrodiel says

Nine year old Aurelia Corneille has had a hard life. She is the daughter of an unmarried Frenchwoman who immigrated to America to be close to her brother, a catholic priest in New York city, after she has been disowned by her mother for shaming her family. She has grown up living on the charity of the nuns in the convent at the church her uncle Charles ministers at.

When her uncle is given a posting to go to Japan as a missionary in 1866 he plans on taking Aurelia and her mother with him to help as servants. Given Aurelia's gift for languages (she speaks English and French) he hopes she will learn the tricky Japanese tongue quicker than the brothers of the mission party and help communicate with the "heathen Japanese" when her mother is unable to go with due to failing health, Aurelia and her uncle engage on their journey across the world.

In 1866, Japan was still closed to foreigners. The missionaries are smuggled into Miyako the old Imperial Capital of Japan (now known as Kyoto). Unhappy with her new life with her uncle, Aurelia flees a fire in the building she and her uncle are living in. She runs far into the unknown city. Fatigued, she stumbles into one of the small tea houses owned by the Shin family as a part of their tea ceremony school. She is discovered by Yukako, the Shin family's daughter, and is adopted into the family as servant to Yukako.

The Teahouse Fire follows Aurelia as she becomes "Miss Urako". The book takes place during the fall of the samurai culture and the opening of Japan to outsiders. Urako, servant to the household that she is, becomes a

"little sister" to Yukako her closest companion. She sees the struggle Yukako goes through as a female in a male dominated world. The book chronicles the tumultuous changes that Japan goes through as it enters a period of enlightenment and progress. The story spans twenty-five years of Aurelia's life in Japan after her fate has been changed by tragedy.

I loved the first lines of this book:

"When I was nine, in the city now called Kyoto, I changed my fate. I walked into the shrine through the red arch and struck the bell. I bowed Twice. I clapped twice. I whispered to the foriegn goddess and bowed again. And then I heard the shouts and the fire. Wha had I asked for? Any life but this one. "

with that I was pulled into historic Japan, and had a hard time pulling myself out to take care of classwork. I found the book engaging and interesting as the changes to Japan are shown through the eyes of someone living them. Aurelia struggles with not being completely Japanese through most of her life, to find herself known as a foreigner and pushed away from her home in Japan due to rising nationalism brought about because of the influx of foreign influences to the country.

Peter says

A lush and surprising look inside the world of a Japanese tea house at a time when the West was inching it's way into Japan, *The Teahouse Fire* is rich in historical notes but burns brightly with a story that will keep you engaged. As the main character begins to unravel the mysteries of the Japanese language around her, so too she begins to see into a world that very few outsiders ever experience.

The difficult part for some may be keeping track of all of the Japanese names and their own stories surrounding the central plot lines. There is a healthy dose of historical context laid down throughout the book that in many cases is the key to understanding the action at hand. Naturally, the tea ceremony holds a central place and theme, but kimono choice and usage, the caste layers at hand in Kyoto, and abundant references to the subtle intricacies of the Japanese language color the world of *The Teahouse Fire* with seasonal abundance.

If you are the kind of reader that enjoys slowly winding a rich story around you like a warm blanket on a cool evening, *The Teahouse Fire* is exactly your bowl of tea. If, on the other hand, you are the kind who prefers a fast-paced light read, perhaps a bowl of *bubuzuke* is in order.

Leya says

What I can say after such a blurb? Well, let's see...It's wonderful novel, the story is beautiful and compelling, the history is interesting and thought provoking, and I have incredible desire to learn more about a culture and nation that never really interested me much before. It's not my first time reading a novel set in Japan, I read *Memoirs of a Geisha*, but this book really brings the culture to light in my opinion. It makes me want to learn more and to experience the tea ceremonies.

I loved experiencing Aurelia/Urako's growth and discoveries. I felt that her confusion and her need to be

accepted as more than a servant to be utterly understandable and painful as well. I'm glad I had tissues handy while I was reading this book, I used them often.

Although the story was wonderful with all the little twists and turns, I find that the true star was the setting. Japan in the midst of Westernization was a time confusion and of radical ideas, and the author brought out those emotions beautifully.

Manik Sukoco says

I totally agree with Maxine Hong Kingston. "Delicious" is the only way to describe this book. The writing is elegant, the main character's voice is so believable (even though she is in an unbelievable situation), and the attention to detail regarding language, clothing, and food is stunning.

Memoirs of a Geisha and Tales of Murasaki, of course, are the pearls of this genre, but The Teahouse Fire offers a wonderful look at lives centered around the tea ceremony. The life is seen from a variety of perspectives, including the devastation to traditional Japanese families caused by the Meiji Restoration. The author's knowledge of her subject is impressive, her writing just superb, and the character development is mouth watering. If you enjoy reading a "Western" writer's attempt to introduce a foreign culture so strange to Americans and other Westerners, this is an enjoyable read.

Jhosy says

So...This books is extremely tiring. The author puts so many details at things that couldn't matter. Really, this just expanded the numbers of pages, because if the reader don't have knowledge of the Japanese culture is just confusing.

Anyway...Almost in the end the book was okay...Although I don't like of unrequited love
