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You are seduced completely."
—*The Washington Post Book World*

MEMOIRS OF A
GEISHA

A NOVEL BY **ARTHUR GOLDEN**

NOW A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE



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*For my wife, Trudy,
and my children, Hays and Tess*

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

One evening in the spring of 1936, when I was a boy of fourteen, my father took me to a dance performance in Kyoto. I remember only two things about it. The first is that he and I were the only Westerners in the audience; we had come from our home in the Netherlands only a few weeks earlier, so I had not yet adjusted to the cultural isolation and still felt it acutely. The second is how pleased I was, after months of intensive study of the Japanese language, to find that I could now understand fragments of the conversations I overheard. As for the young Japanese women dancing on the stage before me, I remember nothing of them except a vague impression of brightly colored kimono. I certainly had no way of knowing that in a time and place as far away as New York City nearly fifty years in the future, one among them would become my good friend and would dictate her extraordinary memoirs to me.

As a historian, I have always regarded memoirs as source material. A memoir provides a record not so much of the memoirist as of the memoirist's world. It must differ from biography in that a memoirist can never achieve the perspective that a biographer possesses as a matter of course. Autobiography, if there really is such a thing, is like asking a rabbit to tell us what he looks like hopping through the grasses of the field. How would he know? If we want to hear about the field, on the other hand, no one is in a better circumstance to tell us—so long as we keep in mind that we are missing all those things the rabbit was in no position to observe.

I say this with the certainty of an academician who has based a career on such distinctions. And yet I must confess that the

memoirs of my dear friend Nitta Sayuri have impelled me to rethink my views. Yes, she does elucidate for us the very secret world in which she lived—the rabbit’s view of the field, if you will. There may well be no better record of the strange life of a geisha than the one Sayuri offers. But she leaves behind as well a record of herself that is far more complete, more accurate, and more compelling than the lengthy chapter examining her life in the book *Glittering Jewels of Japan*, or in the various magazine articles about her that have appeared over the years. It seems that at least in the case of this one unusual subject, no one knew the memoirist as well as the memoirist herself.

That Sayuri should have risen to prominence was largely a matter of chance. Other women have led similar lives. The renowned Kato Yuki—a geisha who captured the heart of George Morgan, nephew of J. Pierpont, and became his bride-in-exile during the first decade of this century—may have lived a life even more unusual in some ways than Sayuri’s. But only Sayuri has documented her own saga so completely. For a long while I believed that her choice to do so was a fortuitous accident. If she had remained in Japan, her life would have been too full for her to consider compiling her memoirs. However, in 1956 circumstances in her life led Sayuri to emigrate to the United States. For her remaining forty years, she was a resident of New York City’s Waldorf Towers, where she created for herself an elegant Japanese-style suite on the thirty-second floor. Even then her life continued at its frenetic pace. Her suite saw more than its share of Japanese artists, intellectuals, business figures—even cabinet ministers and a gangster or two. I did not meet her until an acquaintance introduced us in 1985. As a scholar of Japan, I had encountered Sayuri’s name, though I knew almost nothing about her. Our friendship grew, and she confided in

me more and more. One day I asked if she would ever permit her story to be told.

“Well, Jakob-san, I might, if it’s you who records it,” she told me.

So it was that we began our task. Sayuri was clear that she wanted to dictate her memoirs rather than write them herself, because, as she explained, she was so accustomed to talking face-to-face that she would hardly know how to proceed with no one in the room to listen. I agreed, and the manuscript was dictated to me over the course of eighteen months. I was never more aware of Sayuri’s Kyoto dialect—in which geisha themselves are called *geiko*, and kimono are sometimes known as *obebe*—than when I began to wonder how I would render its nuances in translation. But from the very start I felt myself lost in her world. On all but a few occasions we met in the evening; because of long habit, this was the time when Sayuri’s mind was most alive. Usually she preferred to work in her suite at the Waldorf Towers, but from time to time we met in a private room at a Japanese restaurant on Park Avenue, where she was well known. Our sessions generally lasted two or three hours. Although we tape-recorded each session, her secretary was present to transcribe her dictation as well, which she did very faithfully. But Sayuri never spoke to the tape recorder or to the secretary; she spoke always to me. When she had doubts about where to proceed, I was the one who steered her. I regarded myself as the foundation upon which the enterprise was based and felt that her story would never have been told had I not gained her trust. Now I’ve come to see that the truth may be otherwise. Sayuri chose me as her amanuensis, to be sure, but she may have been waiting all along for the right candidate to present himself.

Which brings us to the central question: Why did Sayuri want her story told? Geisha may not take any formal vow of silence, but their existence is predicated on the singularly Japanese conviction that what goes on during the morning in the office and what goes on during the evening behind closed doors bear no relationship to one another, and must always remain compartmentalized and separate. Geisha simply do not talk for the record about their experiences. Like prostitutes, their lower-class counterparts, geisha are often in the unusual position of knowing whether this or that public figure really does put his pants on one leg at a time like everyone else. Probably it is to their credit that these butterflies of the night regard their roles as a kind of public trust, but in any case, the geisha who violates that trust puts herself in an untenable position. Sayuri's circumstances in telling her story were unusual, in that no one in Japan had power over her any longer. Her ties with her native country had already been severed. This may tell us, at least in part, why she no longer felt constrained to silence, but it does not tell us why she chose to talk. I was afraid to raise the question with her; what if, in examining her own scruples on the subject, she should change her mind? Even when the manuscript was complete, I felt reluctant to ask. Only after she had received her advance from the publisher did I feel it safe to query her: Why had she wanted to document her life?

“What else do I have to do with my time these days?” she replied.

As to whether or not her motives were really as simple as this, I leave the reader to decide.

Though she was eager to have her biography recorded, Sayuri did insist upon several conditions. She wanted the manuscript published only after her death and the deaths of several men who