

# Los Angeles Times

## CRANES AT DUSK

by Hisako Matsubara, translated by Leila Vennewitz  
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**H**ere is a simple story of a child's love, an elementary philosophy; a chronicle so personal that it transcends the particular and encompasses universal experience.

The search is for truth, love, answers. Such questions could hardly exist in a more chaotic milieu than the last days of World War II, in Kyoto, waiting for a bomb to drop or for the emperor to say that the time has come to die with honor, and there are horrible death whispers coming out of Hiroshima.

Instead of a powerful leader or even a questioning young adult as the central character, the story is told through the eyes of a 10-year-old girl.

Saya is the daughter of the Guji, a high Shinto priest, a man of rare intellect and sensitivity. In a contrast that is almost too black and white, her mother is a narrow-minded, self-centered traditionalist whose chief delights are *ikebana* and the proper conduct of the tea ceremony.

But the emperor does not call the Japanese people to an

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honorable death as Saya's neighborhood expected. Instead, Japan surrenders, the Americans arrive, and old values as well as old traditions are thrown into chaos.

The neighbors, silk weavers and other artisans, force their ideas into conformity with the new reality: A daughter may go to work for the Americans without bringing shame to her family; a son's death in the war is a personal tragedy in defeat instead of an honor in victory; the time-honored Shinto religion may be less essential than they had believed.

Saya, with the flexibility of a bright child, is eager to learn the English language and even to embrace the religion of the conquerors, trusting the loving content of the Christian message as the truth of winners. She's especially charmed when she notices that American brothers don't routinely kick their sisters in the shins when they disobey.

While the larger issues beyond the home occupy Saya's appetite for learning, she is increasingly drawn into her mother's unhappy stranglehold on all that should have been. Her mother's insatiable needs provide a semblance of love as well as an endless stream of responsibilities for the child.

Her father, on the other hand, gives Saya hope and happiness, challenges her with spiritual questions as her intellect develops, and is by far the superior guide for her budding maturity. But he doesn't have that overwhelming need of her so compelling to the tender child.

The facts of Hisako Matsubara's third novel correlate with the author's childhood in several instances. She grew up in a Shinto shrine in Kyoto where her father was the high priest, and she attended a Christian school.

Hunger, shoes that are too thin to keep out the cold, basic value changes as power shifts from East to West—all are captured beautifully in the strong but simple prose. Death is the question in the end, and it is left unanswered.