
FICTION

SAMURAI, by Hisako Matsubara, translated from the German by Ruth Hein (Times Books; \$9.95). A bitter chronicle set in provincial Japan around the turn of this century. The head of an esteemed samurai family adopts a boy (Nagayuki), names him his heir, marries him to his daughter (Tomiko), puts him through college, and sends him off to America in true samurai style: unburdened by his wife (Tomiko, now pregnant, remains with her parents) and equipped with nothing but his fine kimonos and his illustrious family name. In the months, and then the years, that follow, Tomiko writes cheerful letters to her husband, never mentioning the fact that the family has been bankrupted and then evicted because of her father's wasteful ways, and that she supports her parents and her young daughter in cramped quarters by sewing night and day. It is only after years of doubt and longing that Tomiko learns that Nagayuki has been a migrant worker up and down the West Coast, and that her concealment of her own harsh fate has led him to suspect her of indifference and infidelity. The author, an ordained Shinto priestess who lives in Germany, is most persuasive in suggesting that the apparent serenity of traditional Japanese culture was a cruel deception—that the aesthetic celebrated in the art of bonsai was also guilty of stunting this marriage.

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