

# The New York Times

By RHODA KOENIG

## SAMURAI

By Hisako Matsubara.  
Translated from the German by  
Ruth Hein.  
218 pp. New York:  
Times Books, \$9.95.

When Tomiko, the heroine of "Samurai," meets her future husband, we are treated to this

disconcerting sentence: "This is Nagayuki," her father introduced him, "and Mrs. Ogasawara, his former mother."

Nagayuki is a *yoshi*, a boy adopted by a family with no son to carry on their name and marry their daughter. He renounces his impoverished mother and swears obedience to his new father, Hayato. This turns out to be a mistake. When his daughter and adopted son have been married for three years, Hayato sends Nagayuki to America "to bring greatness to the name of Hayato" (the time is about 1910). Though Nagayuki has offers from several corporations, Hayato refuses to let him have anything to do with trade ("He was proud of the fact . . . that his hands had never directly touched money"). With the certainty that comes from perfect ignorance, he predicts a brilliant future for Nagayuki: "When he walks out in the streets of San Francisco . . . all the people will step aside respectfully and bow their heads to his beauty," he rhapsodizes. After Nagayuki's departure for America, Tomiko, who has remained in Japan to look after their baby, begins to discover

more about herself and her family, but not enough to save her from her father's intrigues.

Miss Matsubara tells her story in calm, spare sentences that are like her characters, graceful and dignified. She effectively conveys Tomiko's mounting desperation as her husband's one-year absence stretches into two and three and six, and her father spends the money Nagayuki sends for her passage on Noh ceremonies and fancy kimonos. (He also has a rather trying tendency to say things like "The I-captured spirit gradually sinks into the boundlessness of larger being.") The characters are vivid and believable, but rather two-dimensional: having sketched them once, Miss Matsubara leaves them in the same attitude — this one is arrogant, that one brutal, another timid but kind. Like Tomiko, she is too polite for her own good; one wishes for some quirky or stirring prose to enliven this quiet tale of watching and waiting.

A few clinkers aside ("so totally," "life-style"), Ruth Hein's translation is faithful to the spirit of this gentle, wistful novel. ■