

A samurai's inflexibility: power or poison?



By Carroll Ann Brooks
NEWS WORLD STAFF

SAMURAI" is a totally engrossing first novel by a Japanese short story writer Hisako Matsubara. Lyrical, visual and ironic, "Samurai" recounts the story of the decline of an aristocratic family, caught up in the conflict between traditional values and emerging modern values.

Hayato father, an elegant old man, steeped in samurai traditions, sings Noh songs, arranges flowers, performs the tea ceremony. And despite having lost nearly all of his material wealth, Hayato maintains an unshakeable sense of dignity.

Because he has no heir, Hayato father adopts Nagayuki, a boy from an upper class family, as his yoshi—adopted son who is expected to marry Hayato's daughter Tomiko.

Nagayuki feels a deep need to please his adoptive father, works hard, and graduates at the top of his class and receives a number of job offers from large corporations which will send him to America. Hayato tells Nagayuki that he must go to America on his own, make his fortune, and return dressed in brocade.

Says Hayato, "It used to be that a samurai was strong alone. When a samurai directed his steps through alien soil, all dangers were held in check. The proud consciousness of inflexibility lent him power and assurance. It was his will that made a samurai invincible."

The stage is set: the many levels of conflicts—tradition versus new; age versus youth; will versus flexibility—all move inexorably towards their poignant conclusion. "Samurai" is well-constructed and very well-written, seamless in its creation of vivid, visual scenes which arouse readers' emotions.

Author Hisako Matsubara explained in a recent interview that this topic is close to her own heart because the character of Nagayuki is patterned on her grandfather. On his return from sixty years in America, the old man remained silent about his experiences. "He just smiled very beautifully and said nothing."

To solve the riddle of his suffering,



Hisako Matsubara

Matsubara began research which took her to California where Nagayuki and masses of other Japanese immigrants worked as migrant fruit pickers. Matsubara explained that because it was mainly a Japanese story, she did not switch the focus from Japan to America. "I wanted to consider the Japanese side and the reflections of the Japanese immigrants' problems in Japan."

As her research and sense of the characters coalesced in her mind, she began to write. "I was sitting on the beach in southern California, watching the sea and the sunset when all of a sudden these beautiful scenes began coming to mind: scenes of the obon ships carrying away the souls of the dead.

"Of course these were memories from my childhood in Japan. But as I stood on the beach where Nagayuki might have stood, I

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