



**ReadSmartGuide™**

# ***Memoirs of a Geisha***

**Arthur Golden**

**VINTAGE BOOKS**

**1999**

*(originally published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1997)*

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Before your book group meeting, look over this ReadSmartGuide, which offers many ways to learn about *Memoirs of a Geisha* and Arthur Golden and is intended to help your group focus a meaningful, exciting discussion. **Some sections will grab some people more than others.** For example, you may be most interested in what the critics have to say about *Memoirs of a Geisha*, so you will like the *Talk Back to the Critics* section (pages 4-5). Another member of your group may be more interested in reading about the central themes in Golden's novel, so she will like the *Streams of Themes* section (pages 8-9). **See the descriptions below for information on each section of the guide.**

As you read through *Memoirs of a Geisha* and this ReadSmartGuide at home, you may want to make use of the book mark we provide to make brief notes of the issues and events that you find particularly interesting. Recording page numbers may also prove helpful, as you will then be able to locate a certain passage quickly. (Note: all page numbers for *Memoirs of a Geisha* refer to the 1999 trade paperback edition published by Vintage Books.)

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## I. about the author

**Arthur Golden** is a writer from a newspaper family—his cousin, Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, is publisher of *The New York Times*. Although Golden was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, he has spent most of his life on the East coast, where he currently lives with his wife and two children in Brookline, Massachusetts.

*Memoirs of a Geisha* is Golden’s first book, and it grew out of academic training, a passionate interest in Japanese culture, and years of research. Golden received a B.A. in art history from Harvard College and an M.A. in Japanese history from Columbia University. He learned Mandarin Chinese, spent a summer at Beijing University, and then moved to Tokyo, where he worked at an English-language magazine from 1980-82. It was while in Japan that Golden met a man whose mother was a geisha, and since he believed a story about geisha life would make a great novel, he returned to the U.S., earned another M.A. (this time in English from Boston University) and began writing what would later become *Memoirs of a Geisha*.

### straight from the author’s mouth

“I did it in third person twice, and really only went to first person when I realized that I wasn’t going to get the book written that I really wanted to write, unless I made this kind of imaginative leap into the mind of the character.”

—Golden, quoted in “A Talk with Arthur Golden,” [www.cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com) (see *Doorways to Discussion* question 4)

“The difference for me was that I had to do a lot of research to put myself in a position where I could begin to know enough about that imagined other to make that leap.

But the leap, I think, is the same, whatever kind of fiction you’re writing.”

—Golden, quoted in “A Talk with Arthur Golden,” [www.cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com) (see *Doorways to Discussion* question 4)

“As an American man of the 1990s writing about a Japanese woman of the 1930s, I needed to cross three cultural divides—man to woman, American to Japanese, and present to past.”

—Golden, quoted in “A Conversation with Arthur Golden,” [www.randomhouse.com](http://www.randomhouse.com) (see *Doorways to Discussion* question 4)

“But it wouldn’t occur to Sayuri to explain things—that is, it wouldn’t occur to her unless her audience was not Japanese. This is the role of the translator’s preface, to establish that she has come to live in New York and will be telling her story for the benefit of an American audience.” —Golden, quoted in “A Conversation with Arthur Golden,”

[www.randomhouse.com](http://www.randomhouse.com) (see *Doorways to Discussion* question 5)

“Women from that place and time [geishas in the first half of the twentieth century] did generally accept their fates. Acceptance of one’s helpless fate is a fairly common—and widely respected—sentiment in Japan.”

—Golden, quoted in online A&E Book Club discussion, [www.aande.com](http://www.aande.com) (see *Doorways to Discussion* question 21)

## II. all in the family

“What is striking about the novel is Mr. Golden’s creation of an utterly convincing character, a woman who is, at once, a traditional product of Japan’s archaic gender relations and a spirited picaresque heroine, a sort of demure Moll Flanders. . . .Part historical novel, part fairy tale, and part Dickensian romance, *Memoirs of a Geisha* immerses the reader in an exotic world, even as it relates the story of one woman’s coming of age.” —Michiko Kakutani, “A Woman’s Life, Imagined by a Man,” *The New York Times*, 14 Oct. 1997

How do we understand *Memoirs of a Geisha* as part of the larger literary world? While an exploration of Arthur Golden’s *Memoirs of a Geisha* generates questions about fact and fiction, audience, and genre, it is helpful to look first into the tradition of the geisha.

**Geisha—Past and Present.** The word geisha is made of two Japanese characters, one meaning *art* and one meaning *person*. Translated literally, geisha means “beauty person” or “person who lives by the arts.” While they may have predecessors as early as the 11<sup>th</sup> century, modern-day geishas draw on a tradition that became well-established in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the early days of geisha entertainment, courtesans, singers, dancers, samisen players and jesters gathered at theaters and teahouses to perform, and many of the geisha performers were men; however, by the 18<sup>th</sup> century, women dominated the trade.

As early as 1779, authorities in Tokyo gathered to try to standardize the professional conduct of the geisha, in large part to guarantee that geisha would pay taxes on their wages. A registry office was created, and in turn, it designed disciplinary rules and regulations standardizing conduct and dress. During the height of their popularity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, geisha were trendsetters in fashion and taste, and their tea-houses—ruled by matriarchal hierarchies—were cultural centers.

Many geisha were forced to abandon their vocation and to begin work in factories and other industries during the 1940s when geisha entertainment was outlawed. By the late 1970s, the number of geisha in Japan had dwindled to less than 17,000. Today, less than 1,000 women keep the ancient geisha tradition alive, working mostly in Kyoto and Osaka. During the process of Japan's cultural modernization, the prominence of the geisha has decreased. However, in a recent online Barnes & Noble interview, Arthur Golden acknowledges that the surviving geisha are well compensated for their talents. He estimates that “four or five men at a first-class teahouse for the evening entertained by a couple of geisha, including dinner and a couple of drinks, would run probably upward of \$10,000.” The traditions and schools still exist, but, now geisha enter the profession voluntarily after high school (rather than involuntarily as children), and as Golden points out, “at the end of the night they go home to their own apartments, so the life is much less rigorous and much more free than it was.”

**Arthur Golden and Mineko Iwasaki.** After discarding his first two drafts (one for historical and cultural inaccuracies, the other because its use of third person made it “too dry”), Golden began the third draft of his novel immediately after meeting Mineko Iwasaki, who had been a geisha in the 1960s and 1970s. Iwasaki, now retired at 50 and living in New York City, was once one of the most famous geisha of Kyoto's Gion district. Golden conducted several lengthy interviews with Iwasaki, and while he adamantly denies that *Memoirs of a Geisha* is about her particular experience, in several interviews after the novel's publication, he mentions how she inspired him and transformed his vision of the geisha. In his acknowledgments at the end of the novel, Golden writes “To Mineko, thank you for everything.”

However, it would appear that Iwasaki does not share Golden's view of their relationship or of the book that came out of it. According to a May 2000 article in *The Ottawa Citizen*, Mineko Iwasaki is considering a lawsuit because she “is livid over the way Sayuri is portrayed.” In an interview with Britain's *Independent* newspaper, she claimed, “[Golden] says [the book] is all fiction, but people do not read it that way. I feel totally betrayed by him and by the book.” In a March 2000 interview with *U.S. News and World Report*, Iwasaki suggested that Golden “has made a mockery of Japanese culture. . . .For me, personally, this is a libel.” Iwasaki is angry that Golden mentions her by name in the book's acknowledgments because she claims that he promised her anonymity. Most importantly, Iwasaki says that geishas are “more artisans than courtesans” and that Golden has misrepresented the life and craft of geisha. In a March 1999 interview on CNN Sunday Morning, Miles O'Brien asked Golden, “To what extent is this a thinly-veiled biography of the geisha who became your source [Mineko Iwasaki]?” Golden responded to O'Brien's question unequivocally: “This character [Sayuri] is entirely invented, and the woman that I interviewed wouldn't recognize herself, or really anything about herself, in this book, which she hasn't read, because she doesn't read English.” Interestingly, the book was translated into Japanese and released in Japan in November of 1999 and has sold only about 50,000 copies, while in the U.S., it topped the bestseller charts for months, and worldwide, it has sold more than four million copies in 33 languages.

**Fact, Fiction, and the Novel that's a Memoir.** Ever since Plato (speaking to us through Socrates in *The Republic*) suggested that poetry is but a shadow of a shadow and should be banned from his ideal city, we have struggled to define the relationship between art and life. Aristotle (and many others after him) apologized for tragedy, arguing that its cathartic effect made it valuable and even noble. The idea that art is still accurate and true even when it does not perfectly represent the “real” world has carried through into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And yet, we still debate whether or not fiction can make “true” assertions, whether or not it can, on some level, be “truer” than fact.

**Framing Devices.** The literary devices used by Golden in his novel—the translator’s note, the placement of the author bio and photo, the acknowledgements—come out of a playful tradition that traces its origins to 18<sup>th</sup>-century novels (especially epistolary novels, novels made up of fictional letters) that pretended to be edited, translated, or altered in some way along the path from the author’s mind to the printed page. In Golden’s novel, the framing devices work against each other in interesting ways and indicate that perhaps Golden was of two minds on how to handle his book. On one hand, the translator’s note sets up a “real” situation in which the first-person narrative makes sense. On the other hand, before we come to that note, we see Golden’s photograph and read his bio, so we know the translator’s note is fictional. The acknowledgments page reinforces the notion that this is fiction, not memoir, as Golden speaks to us directly as the author, revealing his tricks like the Wizard of Oz coming out from behind his curtain. In several interviews, Golden jokes that he knows his “ruse has worked” when people at book signings ask him how Jakob Haarhus is doing. One reader was apparently so convinced by his devices, she asked if it were his picture on the cover of the book!

**Memoir.** One interesting difference between memoir and autobiography is the fact that memoir is usually concerned with personalities and actions other than those of the writer, whereas autobiography stresses the inner and private life of its subject. This choice of genre, combined with the social and cultural forces surrounding Sayuri, may help to explain her seeming lack of self-reflection.

**Audience.** As Bruce Fleming points out in his article “Skirting the Precipice: Truth and Audience in Literature” (*Antioch Review*, Summer 1998), the distinction between what we adhere to as fact and what we invent as fiction is “not absolute; it can vary from group to group. Indeed, any individual can change his or her degree of knowledge, and thus reaction to a work; something that seemed plausible to us at one reading may seem wrong in another.” He goes on to say that “Audiences are defined by what the author feels necessary to tell them.” This may explain why Golden’s novel has been so popular in the U.S. and not so popular in Japan. It is written for us, the outsiders of the geisha world. Fleming argues, “Anthropology is never written for the home audience, and all literature, in a sense, is anthropology, describing the goings-on of one group for another.” (see *Doorways to Discussion* question 3)

**The Fairy Tale and the Fallen Woman.** In her *New York Times* review of *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Michiko Kakutani suggests that Sayuri is a “picaresque heroine” in the tradition of Moll Flanders—one of Western literature’s many infamous fallen women, who suffer terrible fates for sexual indiscretions. A picaresque hero or heroine is one who realistically recounts his or her adventures as a carefree but engaging (and usually a bit naughty) character who can live by his or her wits alone (think of *Tom Sawyer*). Picaresque novels like Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* are some of the earliest social novels in English and often use satire to point out problems in society at large. The hero or heroine in picaresque novels is usually depicted without the growth and development in character and point of view that we’ve come to expect in most contemporary fiction. Kakutani and several other critics have noted the fairy tale-like quality of Golden’s novel (especially, of course, the ending), which is not surprising when we consider morality tales like *Cinderella*. Like the picaresque hero, fairy tale characters do not usually evolve as the story develops; rather, they function as figures in a symbolic literary landscape. (see *Doorways to Discussion* question 27)

**Bildungsroman, or Coming of Age.** The coming-of-age novel is one of the most popular, and with good reason. A bildungsroman (also called an apprenticeship novel) deals with the development of a young person, usually from adolescence to maturity, and it is frequently autobiographical (think of Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*). The mark of these coming-of-age novels is the moment when the main character recognizes his or her own place in the world.

### III. talk back to the critics

“[Golden] has brilliantly revealed the culture and traditions of an exotic world, closed to most Westerners.” —Wilda Williams, review in *Library Journal*, August 1997. (see *Doorways to Discussion* question 3)

“We learn what the Geisha wore, what the geisha ate, how the geisha insulted each other—all interesting information, but sometimes it’s provided at the expense of the novel’s tone. . . . That the cataloguing of these gestures sometimes turns the prose into a blunt, unattractive instrument is an unfortunate side effect.” —Brian Fannin, “New Look at an Old Profession,” *The Washington Times*, 16 Nov. 1997 (see *Doorways to Discussion* question 3)

“The author’s habit of limiting Sayuri to exclusively Japanese imagery [is disconcerting]. . . . The constant, heavy emphasis on Sayuri’s Japaneseness ultimately serves to render it artificial.” —Gabriel Brownstein, review in *New Leader*, 3 Nov. 1997 (see *Doorways to Discussion* question 3)

“It is amazing that Golden, an American male, has so eloquently portrayed the life of a Japanese geisha. He captures the emotions of his characters perfectly while describing Japanese life. . . . Through the meticulous detail the reader can fully understand the politics, rivalries, and traditions of the Japan geisha society.” —Ann Hastings (former history professor), review on *cnn.com* (see *Doorways to Discussion* questions 4 and 28)

“Rather than contrive a stylized, period voice for Sayuri, Mr. Golden allows her to relate her story in chatty, colloquial terms that enable the reader to identify with her feelings of surprise, puzzlement, and disgust at the rituals she must endure.” —Michiko Kakutani, “A Woman’s Life, Imagined by a Man,” *The New York Times*, 14 Oct. 1997 (see *Doorways to Discussion* question 4)

“Unfortunately, Sayuri’s personality seems so familiar it is almost generic; she is not so much an individual as a faultless arrangement of feminine virtues. So meek and modest that she almost disappears before one’s very eyes, she is admirable but not terribly interesting. . . . Surely if this story is to be the novel that Haarhuis suggests, a story worth telling in the first person, it should be one of appearances and illusions that are borne out or contradicted by the realities of Sayuri’s world.” —John David Morley, “Working Woman,” *The New York Times*, 5 Oct. 1997 (see *Doorways to Discussion* questions 4 and 5)

“As vital and witty as Sayuri is, she—like all the book’s characters—shies away from reflection.”  
—Kate Tuttle, review in *Weekly Wire* online magazine  
(see *Doorways to Discussion* question 5)

“Sayuri herself (no doubt realistically) does not offer a critique of her position, merely an account of it. . . .She is always kind and understanding, occasionally sad, and sometimes desperate, but there is a minimal suggestion of deeper scars from her traumatic childhood, or her difficult life. In a sense, this is in character (a geisha may never show her true self), but in fictional terms, it can be frustrating.” —Lucy Atkins, “The Geisha with Grey Eyes,” *The Sunday Times*, 16 Nov. 1997 (see *Doorways to Discussion* question 5)

“Through poetic, minutely detailed descriptions of the costumes, ornaments, and daily lives of the geisha, Golden subtly challenges our aesthetic assumptions.” —Kate Tuttle, review in *Weekly Wire* online magazine (see *Doorways to Discussion* question 16)

“If Golden had ‘only’ told Sayuri’s life story, *Memoirs of a Geisha* would have been a beautifully detailed but time-locked novel. By creating a subtext with larger themes focusing on the consequences of exploitation, Golden endows the book with powerful resonance for any time or culture.”  
—David Wiegand, “Under the Geisha’s Spell,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 28 Sept. 1997 (see *Doorways to Discussion* question 18)

“Mr. Golden fashions a consistently entertaining plot, filled with Dickensian twists and marred only by his tendency to turn supporting characters into cartoonish heroes and villains. Hatsumomo comes across as a ferocious fairy-tale witch. . . .And the Chairman, too, remains a one-dimensional knight in shining armor.”  
—Michiko Kakutani, “A Woman’s Life, Imagined by a Man,” *The New York Times*, 14 Oct. 1997. (see *Doorways to Discussion* question 27)

“[Golden’s] narrative is imposed on an exotic world rather than organic to it. In fact, it is a Cinderella story: A naive country girl achieves big-city success, and the love of the man she had long worshipped, despite all the evil machinations of her enemies. [Sayuri’s] chaste and wooden infatuation [with the Chairman] seems contrary to everything else in the novel. . . .Everything is reduced to a backdrop for the fairy tale.” —Gabriel Brownstein, review in *The New Leader*, 3 Nov. 1997 (see *Doorways to Discussion* question 27)

## IV. character tree

please note: In Japanese, a person's last name, or family name, comes first, while the first or personal name comes second.

### THE SAKAMOTO FAMILY

**Sakamoto Chiyo**—a little girl from a humble fishing village who grows up to be one of Kyoto's most desirable celebrities. As a geisha, her name becomes Nitta Sayuri.

**Sakamoto Mirou**—Chiyo/Sayuri's father, an aging fisherman with too much wood in his personality. He doesn't seem to have much luck when it comes to raising families.

**Mrs. Sakamoto**—Chiyo/Sayuri's mother, who passes her water personality and her striking gray eyes on to her daughter Chiyo, but who is too ill to care for either of her girls.

**Sakamoto Satsu**—Chiyo/Sayuri's older sister, who has not been quite so fortunate in the looks department. In Kyoto, she is forced to pursue a less glamorous way of pleasing men.

### THE NITTA OKIYA

**Granny**—the matriarch of the Nitta family, Mother and Auntie are her adopted daughters. A geisha herself in her youth, Granny is no longer interested in charming anybody.

**Mother**—the ruling force of the Nitta okiya, a stupendously ugly woman who loves fine clothing and tobacco almost as much as she loves money.

**Auntie**—Mother's older sister, a failed geisha with a crippled hip. Like everyone else in the okiya, Auntie must answer to Granny and Mother's demands, but she turns out to be a good friend to Chiyo.

**Mr. Bekku**—the Nitta okiya's dresser, he is in charge of arranging the geisha's elaborate costume. His job is one of many dependent on the geisha industry.

**Yoko**—the okiya's telephone operator, another employee supported by the geisha system. She is in charge of booking the geisha's engagements.

### THE GEISHA

**Hatsumomo**—one of the most renowned, most beautiful geisha in the district of Gion. Unfortunately, she is also diabolically cruel, and uses her power as the Nitta okiya's breadwinner to make the lives of those around her miserable.

**Mameha**—Hatsumomo's most serious rival. A confident, popular geisha, beloved for her lovely oval face and elegant supremacy in the arts, Mameha transforms the awkward maid Chiyo into the incomparable geisha Sayuri.

**Pumpkin**—another young girl who has come to the Nitta okiya to train as a geisha. She and Chiyo are good friends while both work as maids for the Nitta family, but they become rivals as geisha.

### THE GEISHA'S MEN

**Jakob Haarhuis**—originally from the Netherlands, he is a professor of Japanese History at New York University and the “translator” of Sayuri’s memoirs. He is, of course, a fictional character, since *Memoirs of a Geisha* is a novel, but his introductory “translator’s note” makes it appear that he exists in the world outside the book.

**Tanaka Ichiro**—owner of the Japan Coastal Seafood Company, and, depending on how you look at it, savior or salesman of young girls. As a retired geisha, Sayuri says that the afternoon she met Mr. Tanaka was the best and worst of her life.

**Iwamura Ken (The Chairman)**—head of the Iwamura Electric Company, his kindness to the young girl Chiyo makes him her idol. For Sayuri, he represents the only purpose in her life as a geisha.

**Nobu Toshikazu**—the Chairman’s right hand man, president of the Iwamura Electric company, he is horribly disfigured and harshly critical. But as Sayuri discovers, a generous and loyal heart lurks beneath his repulsive looks and intimidating manner. A lasting relationship with Nobu, however, would destroy any chance she has for a relationship with the Chairman.

**Baron Matsunaga Tsuneyoshi**—Mameha’s danna, a selfish and temperamental drunk who also happens to be a member of one of Japan’s most powerful banking families.

**Dr. Crab**—a neurotic physician with an insatiable appetite for virgins, he is the winner in the bidding for Sayuri’s mizuage.

**Uchida Kosaburo**—a prominent artist who discovers in Sayuri the inspiration for one of his most famous ink paintings.

**General Tottori Junnosuke**—a powerful military man who defeats Nobu in the fight to become Sayuri’s first danna. Mameha convinces Mother that the General will be the most favorable provider in the lean times to come.

**Yasuda Akira**—a newly successful designer, he is one of the first young men Sayuri comes to know in her career as a geisha. He is also the first man to show her that sex can be fun.

**Deputy Minister Sato**—Japan’s freshly appointed Deputy Minister to France. In the wake of World War II, he holds the fate of the Iwakura Electric Company in his ignorant, drunken hands. Nobu asks Sayuri to help him save the company by entertaining the Minister, but Sayuri realizes that by giving the Minister a little extra entertainment, she could save herself from Nobu.

## V. streams of themes

In a good book, thematic concerns tend to run together, so overlap is to be expected.

**Masks, Artifice, and Deception.** Geisha, as we learn from the novel, must spend several hours each day to create their face and costume, to construct an elaborately artificial illusion of exaggerated femininity. Mere physical appearance, however, does not a geisha make. These girls must commit a lifetime to the study of the arts of movement, music, deportment, voice, and facial expression, all in the hope that they may enchant the most influential and prosperous of men. But under this mask of enchantment, according to Golden's book, we will find a very cold, calculating, and practical world, one in which the desire for wealth and status determines even the smallest of actions, motivates even the slightest of details. We are left to question the possibility that any geisha, even one of Sayuri's character, can have the chance to experience a genuine moment. We are left to wonder who is the more duped by this system—is it the women, or the men? And in a novel which is disguised as a memoir, which is masked by a fictional translator, we are left to ponder the meaning of our own and the author's position in these layers of artifice.

**Beauty and Elegance vs. Ugliness and Mediocrity.** As we follow Sayuri's path from poor but pretty child to pretty but powerless geisha, we learn that beauty does indeed demand suffering. The geisha sacrifices herself on an altar of physical and emotional pain, submitting to a battery of torture in order that she might emerge as the most elegant, most elusive embodiment of female perfection. Painted and primed to look the part, prompted and prodded to act it, she arrives at the teahouse to astound the party, only to find that the men, as usual, want to play drinking games. Sayuri repeatedly attempts to correct her Western audience's assumption that the geisha's life is a glamorous one; she generally represents it as mundane rather than magical. This novel also features a host of grotesquely repulsive characters, and a heaping quantity of hideous behavior. Still, we must take a closer look at the novel's balance of the good, the bad, and the ugly. Can we deny that Sayuri's beauty grants her access to a life and lifestyle more exotic than that of which even the most imaginative Yoroida fisherman could dream?

**Competition, Plotting, and Intrigue.** While many geisha continue to entertain even at an advanced age, it would appear that it is a rare geisha who can rest on her laurels. Mameha says that Hatsumomo is like a cat, happy to bask in the sun so long as no other cats get in its way. The problem for Hatsumomo, and indeed for all the other women in the novel, is that new cats keep showing up. Again and again, we watch as the geisha and their dependents scheme, manipulate, plot, and maneuver to crush their competition. As the novel is told from a geisha's perspective, the scenes of bitter, vicious, and relentless rivalry that we witness most commonly take place between woman and woman. As readers, we also have a front row view of the way that the women strategically manipulate the complacently ignorant men. Offstage, the men must battle other men, vying for the favors or ownership of the most desirable geisha.

**The Money and The Power.** We could argue that it's a relentless lust for cash and position that drives the geisha system's incessant cultivation of mystique, beauty, and competition. After all, you have to look pretty hard in the novel to find actions, encounters, or relationships that are not in some way motivated by material concerns. Or, we might point out that this fixation on yen and social status is both natural and practical, considering that the geisha system supports an entire network of people in addition to the geisha—the okiya owners, the teachers, the dressers, the kimono designers, the telephone operators, the maids—just to name a few. And we should examine what happens to all of these people, both the high and the low, when the government shuts down the geisha districts during the war.

**Rules, Regulations, and Ritual.** The world that Golden represents in the novel is one governed in all ways by a rigidly structured order. Every person has a proper place in this hierarchy; every action must conform to firmly established laws of propriety. Few, if any, are brave or foolish enough to challenge the status quo, the accepted way of being and doing. Most find comfort in the highly ritualized and highly regimented cultural traditions of their ancestors, which grant the sense that all is as it should be.

**Fate vs. Choice.** “Nowadays,” Sayuri comments as a retired geisha living in America, “many people seem to believe their lives are entirely a matter of choice, but in my day we viewed ourselves as pieces of clay that forever show the fingerprints of everyone who has touched them” (295). In telling her story, Sayuri repeatedly compares these ideals of active and passive living, repeatedly defends her own cultural viewpoint, as a Japanese woman and a Japanese geisha, which respects the inevitable forces of fate and destiny. After all, in such a strictly ordered social system, it is incredibly dangerous to hope for change, and incredibly difficult to take the responsibility for creating it.

**East vs. West.** Although Sayuri has very limited contact with Western culture in her early years as a geisha, she does spend the largest part of her adult life in New York City. And she consistently addresses an American audience as she explains the ancient, Eastern ideals of mind, body, and spirit that the geisha system is based on. It is interesting to look at the way that Western ideas and interests are confronted, challenged, and mediated in the novel, even if they are not always explicitly addressed. This is especially interesting in light of the fact that the author is a Western man recreating an Eastern world for a Western audience.

## VI. doorways to discussion

While reading a good book should help you make discoveries about both yourself and the outside world, our questions are designed to help you focus on the book. It's certainly not wrong to talk about your personal experiences when talking about your feelings about a book. But group discussion will generally be more lively and intellectually rewarding if you try as much as possible to explore what's happening in the world of the book. Also, as many contemporary novels and stories are about sensitive, controversial issues, this can help your group avoid a debate that takes on an uncomfortably personal nature.

Think of these questions as many doorways into one big room, which is your book group discussion. It's a good idea to look over the questions before you meet with your group, so you'll have specific ideas for discussion (you might want to star questions you're most interested in discussing with your group). The questions have been designed to build off one another, but do not be discouraged if you don't get to address every question; ultimately, your group must decide which issues are the most intriguing and important to you. **If a particular question doesn't excite you, move on. Conversely, if you find yourself spending a lot of time on a question, that's okay too—as long as everyone is having a good time.** Once you begin talking about one question, your discussion will naturally engage issues that are raised in other questions. Remember that these questions provide many ways to enter the discussion. During your meeting, keep your list of questions by your side so that if and when your discussion loses steam, you can look at a new question and open a new door.

### Introductory Questions

1. **Briefly discuss your initial impressions of the novel.** You might find it helpful to appoint a person to take some notes on the elements of the story that each participant is most eager to consider.
2. **Re-read the “Translator’s Note” which introduces the novel. How does this segment influence our reading of the novel, our tendency to regard the book as fiction or non-fiction?** Why do you think that Golden chooses this method of framing Sayuri’s story? Examine the translator’s account of his own upbringing and his interest in Sayuri. How does Jakob Haarhuis’ preface direct your thoughts about either Golden or his fictional geisha?
3. **As you consider the “Translator’s Note,” focus on the distinction that Haarhuis makes between memoir and biography. How, according to his explanation, do the two differ?** How does he say that we should read memoir in general? What does he feel is different about this memoir? Who has the most control in shaping the story?

### Specific Questions on *Memoirs of a Geisha*

4. **Why does Sayuri want to document her life?** What are her motives and concerns in telling her story? Who is she telling the story for—that is, who do you think she imagines as her audience? Is her intended audience the same as Golden’s? Do you agree with the critic who argues that Sayuri “shies away from reflection”?
5. Sayuri reports that her mother had too much water in her personality, and married her husband because he had too much wood in his. “Water flows from place to place quickly and always finds a crack to spill through. Wood, on the other hand, holds fast to the earth” (9). **How would you interpret or describe the effects of too much water in Sayuri’s personality?** How about the effects of too much wood in her sister Satsu’s personality?
6. **Why would most people find it incredible that Sayuri was born in Yoroido?** Would you say that her childhood in Yoroido was a happy one? Sayuri claims that the afternoon she met Mr. Tanaka was both the best and worst of her life. Do you think that Mr. Tanaka had good intentions for the young girl Chiyo’s future? Whether intentionally or unintentionally, did he do her a favor? Is Chiyo’s life ultimately better than it would have been had Mr. Tanaka not interfered?
7. **How is Chiyo evaluated by the older women she meets—the fortune teller, Mother, Granny, or Auntie?** What about her do they see as valuable, and what about her do they see as dangerous? What do we learn about the Nitta women’s own past? Does this past justify their behavior to Chiyo?
8. Mother claims that everyone in the okiya thinks of only one thing: “how we can help Hatsumomo be successful as a geisha.” **How does a geisha’s success or failure affect all those in an okiya?** How does a geisha’s success or failure affect those in the larger community of Gion?

9. **Does Hatsumomo have any redeeming characteristics?** What is her main purpose in the novel? Are we encouraged to feel any sympathy for her, at any point?
10. When Chiyo first sees Hatsumomo, Auntie is striking a piece of flint on the geisha's back for good luck. **Can you recall other specific ways that geisha are superstitious?** Is there anyone in the novel who is not? Why do you think that geisha would be so particularly dependent on signs, omens, almanac, and zodiac?
11. Look back at the section where Chiyo first describes the geisha's makeup, hairstyle, and costume (61-66). **What do we learn about the cost and care of such a transformation? What aspects of the woman's face or body are dramatized, revealed or concealed?** As a retired geisha telling the story, Sayuri observes that it is the very heaviness and artificiality of the geisha's get-up that make her so naked, so revealing. How do you explain this? Why do men find this manufactured "nakedness" so appealing? Consider some of the geisha's arts—proficiency in dance, musical instruments, tea ceremony, and social conversation—how would you describe the geisha's overall claim to heightened feminine perfection? What ideals of womanhood does she represent?
12. **What, exactly, do geisha do? What don't they do?** Why do men invite them to parties, and what do they expect from them? What did you think about geisha before you read the novel? What, if anything, do they have in common with prostitutes? In what ways are they different from prostitutes? Would you agree with Sayuri's estimation that the life of a geisha is much less exotic than Western people imagine? Discuss your opinions about the amount of power, control, excitement, or glamour that a geisha experiences in her life. How much power and excitement does she enjoy compared to other Japanese women of her time?
13. **Examine Mameha's training of Chiyo and her creation of Sayuri the geisha. What kind of example does she set for her "little sister"?** Mameha tells Chiyo that she is "not making the best" of her versatile water personality. An excess of water in the personality, Mameha says, is especially useful for a geisha, since "all we can do is flow where the landscape of our lives carries us" (125). How does Chiyo respond to Mameha's lessons? Does she decide to flow with the landscape of her life? If so, is this decision a good one? A wise one? Does Chiyo's personality change much in her new life as Sayuri?
14. **How do you feel about Chiyo/Sayuri's love for the Chairman?** How does the Chairman inspire this love? Is he worthy of her feelings? Is it a good thing or a bad thing that he gives Chiyo/Sayuri "the only purpose" in her life? Is he the most influential force in Chiyo's successful career as Sayuri the geisha?
15. **How does Chiyo/Sayuri respond to beauty or to ugliness?** Does she value her own beauty, or the beauty of other women, or the beauty of either material or natural things? How does she feel about those who are physically unattractive? In general, would you say that the novel's physically ugly characters turn out to be emotionally ugly as well?
16. **Speaking of the physically ugly, let's move on to Nobu. How would you characterize him as a man, a friend, a lover?** How does he feel about the geisha system, about geisha in general? Do you agree with the Chairman's statement that Nobu is, in reality, a strong believer in destiny? Does he meet with the fate that he deserves? When Nobu disappears from Sayuri's life, after losing out first to Dr. Crab, then to General Tottori, she claims that "at the time I lived in anguish." Do you anticipate that her feelings for Nobu will turn into a mature love that will replace her childlike idolatry of the Chairman?
17. **Speaking of the emotionally ugly, or at least, from a Western viewpoint, the emotionally questionable, how do you feel about the geisha tradition of mizuage?** Does this tradition and ritual serve any positive or constructive purpose for the apprentice geisha? What would you say about a man like Dr. Crab, who "specializes" in the practice of mizuage?
18. **Consider Sayuri's representation of her first two sexual experiences: the loss of her innocence to the Baron, the loss of her virginity to Dr. Crab. What feelings do these experiences arouse in Sayuri?** In your opinion, does Sayuri the narrator, or Golden the author, eroticize these encounters in any way?
19. Examine the description of Sayuri's participation in Dances of the Old Capital (265-268). **What inspiration and emotion does Sayuri draw upon to create the mood and movement of her dance?** How do the particular dances that Sayuri and Mameha perform reflect the reality of each geisha's life, or the geisha's life in general?

20. Sayuri spends a large part of her womanhood in the geisha district of Gion, where in many ways she leads a fairly sheltered life. But she also spent her first years in a rough little fishing village, works like a peasant in the country during the war, and moves to New York City in her thirties, where presumably, she must adjust. **Overall, how much contact does Sayuri have with the world outside the geisha system? Do she appear to be radically affected by her experience in the war, or by her move to America?**
21. **Just for fun, consider Sayuri's descent from geisha, one who wears elaborate kimono, to worker, one who helps make those kimono.** Consider the way that she ruins her hands, slaving away during the war, and the way that she must choose between two men—one whom she's loved since childhood, the other who loves her because he sees the woman hiding underneath the costume. Remind you of any epic Southern novel, made into an epic Hollywood movie in 1939?

### **General Questions on *Memoirs of a Geisha***

22. Nobu complains that while geisha depend on almanacs, on superstition, to make the most trivial decisions, that they are happy to look the other way when they run up against something that can affect their entire lives. Sayuri argues, "It's less a matter of looking the other way than of closing our eyes to what we can't stop from happening" (314). Earlier, Mameha has made the same point, that "destiny isn't always like a party at the end of the evening," and that "we become geisha because we have no other choice"(294). **Do you think that the geisha use the concept of fate or destiny to justify a choice that they do have the power to make?**
23. During her first airplane ride to the island of Amani, Sayuri notices that the wings of the plane are decorated with the symbols which once decked the enemy war planes of America. Sayuri comments, "We had given up our past; this was something I understood fully, for I had done it myself once" (394). **Do you see other parallels between Sayuri's relationship with the geisha system and Japan's relationship to America?** How does Sayuri give up her past on the island of Amani? How do you feel about her decision, at this point, to take steps to change the course of her future?
24. **Are you surprised that Pumpkin betrays Sayuri?** In general, do you think that Sayuri has more to fear from female or male antagonists? Which leads to the big question. Who do you think has the most power in the world of the novel, the men or the women? Think about this carefully, and consider the different kinds of power that certain men and certain women wield.
25. **In the end, the Chairman saves the day and rides off with the girl into the sunset, or, into the Big Apple. How do you feel about this ending?** How do you feel about the Chairman's unspoken choices to influence the course of Chiyo's life and Sayuri's career? Is Sayuri happy to quit her job as a geisha? Why does she decide to move to New York? How does she respond to America?
26. Several critics made note of the fairy tale quality of this novel, with Hatsumomo as the evil witch, Sayuri as Cinderella, and the Chairman as her knight in shining armor. Take a look at the "All in the Family" section of the guide and think about the fairy tales you know best. **What do fairy tales have in common with Sayuri's story? In what ways are they different?**
27. Some critics liked Golden's insistent cataloguing of Japanese culture and geisha tradition while others found that "the constant, heavy emphasis on Sayuri's Japaneseness ultimately serves to render it artificial." **What do you think of the combination of ethnography and storytelling in the novel? When you think of memoir, do you think of a "true story"?** Take a look at the information in the *All in the Family* section of the guide. How do you understand the difference between memoir and fiction in general, and how does this help you understand their complex relationship in Golden's novel?
28. One critic called Golden's use of first-person an "ambitious act of ventriloquism." Many writers have discussed the complexities they encounter when they break that famous rule and don't "write from what they know." **What do you think of Golden, a white American man in the last half of the twentieth century, writing from the point of view of Sayuri, a Japanese geisha woman in the first half of the twentieth century?** Are you convinced by Golden's narrative voice? If Golden is the ventriloquist and Sayuri is his dummy, can you see his lips moving? What can we tell about Sayuri from the things that she doesn't say?

## VII. taste test

Sometimes reading a captivating book inspires us to find other books on the same topic or with a similar theme. Pursuing a theme or genre for several sessions with your book group can be especially rewarding. We understand that even when we like the same book, we may like it for different reasons. With that in mind, we offer the following suggestions.

You can get a more complete description of any of the books listed below from our Greedy Reader Menu, available on the internet at [www.goodbookslately.com](http://www.goodbookslately.com). You may also request a hard copy by contacting Good Books Lately by phone, email, or mail.

### **If you would like to read more about Japanese or Asian culture, and the roles of men and women,**

- consider major literary prizewinner Chang Rae Lee's new novel, *A Gesture Life*, whose protagonist, Doc Hata, a retired pharmacist living in an American suburb, must deal with his adopted daughter's disappearance and his memories of his war-time job as medic and caretaker of Korean comfort women.

### **If you want to follow another strong female character's pursuit of happiness,**

- try out Isabelle Allende's *Daughter of Fortune*, a current bestseller that describes the adventures of a young Chilean woman's immigration to California during the height of the Gold Rush in 1849.
- pick up the novel that's been called this year's *Bridget Jones*, the wonderful and witty *The Girl's Guide to Hunting and Fishing* by amazingly insightful author Melissa Banks.
- discover eight formidable female characters in Mary McCarthy's classic novel *The Group*, about an octet of Vassar grads, class of '33, confronting the new expectations of womanhood in a brand new era.
- check out Denzy Senna's great first novel *Caucasia*, and read about Birdy, the daughter of a white mother and a black father, trying to figure out where she belongs.
- savor a dynamic domestic novel, Gail Anderson-Dargatz's *A Recipe for Bees*, as an elderly woman looks back on her life as daughter, wife, mother, secret lover, psychic, and beekeeper.

### **If you would like to read another sweeping, historical novel,**

- enjoy Andrea Barret's intriguing story *The Voyage of the Narwhal*, which features a conflicted naturalist named Erasmus Darwin Wells and his part in a nineteenth-century expedition to the arctic.
- consider Rosina Lippi's unique novel *Homestead*, composed of several linked short stories about the inhabitants of an insular Alpine village in a remote corner of Austria.
- don't forget Barbara Kingsolver's newest novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*, which focuses on the missionary attempts of a Southern Baptist family in a tiny village in the Belgian Congo.
- find yourself a new favorite Latin American novelist while reading Rosario Ferre's *The House on the Lagoon*, an enchanting, absorbing epic that spans a century of change for five generations of a Puerto Rican family.

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