

A Single Rose

Muriel Barbery

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In Muriel Barbery's evocative novel *A Single Rose*, a woman travels to Japan following the death of her father.

Rose is forty, lives in France, and has never met her mysterious father, Haru; she only knows that he is Japanese and wealthy. When she's summoned to Kyoto for the reading of his will, she begins a journey of personal and cultural discoveries. Haru arranged for her to stay at his home, and to be taken to various Buddhist temples and gardens. He was a well-regarded art dealer, and his housekeeper, chauffeur, and assistant, Paul, are all intent upon making Rose's stay as meaningful and comfortable as possible.

Rose visits the assigned sites, along with local restaurants, tea houses, and bars. Her itinerary results in insights about both Haru and Japan, but she is at first resistant to her newfound heritage. Her mother was depressive and suicidal, and the continued absence of her father left her with a void of uncertainty and contempt.

A Single Rose is heady with exquisite descriptions, elevating even a sip of plain green tea into an "onslaught of leaves and grass...a smooth, pale concentrate of the forest." The Zen parables that begin each chapter are of a measured beauty, as is the subtle intertwining of nature, history, and modern life. Rose's guides are a source of humor and compassion in the otherwise intense, melancholy story. And while the eventual romance between Paul and Rose is unsurprising, Paul's open-mindedness and wry wit are a welcome challenge to Rose's often prickly reserve.

Though *A Single Rose* is centered around vulnerable, tenacious Rose, its core is found in its Japanese setting. The novel balances lush, cultivated gardens and weighted symbolism with mischievous foxes, matcha, sliced eel, and sushi, all forming "one happy chaos" and a fascinating maze of emotional release.

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