

Bamboo Secrets: One Woman's Quest through the Shadows of Japan

Patricia Dove Miller

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This is a transcendent exploration of the fascinating people, culture, and landscape of Japan.

Patricia Dove Miller's memoir *Bamboo Secrets: One Woman's Quest through the Shadows of Japan* relates experiences both harrowing and beautiful with gentle clarity. It is also a celebration of Japanese culture, of nature, of love and relationships, and of the beauty found in the everyday ephemeral.

At fifty-one years old, Pat is beyond ready to finally find her niche in life. When the opportunity arises to join her husband, an anthropology professor, in Kyoto, Japan, she embraces the adventure and challenge wholeheartedly. She immerses herself in traditional Japanese pursuits while exploring the countryside shrines, gardens, markets, and festivals, hoping that the trip will be a personal journey of discovery.

Her entire world is turned upside down, though, when her husband is detained by a formidable group of Japanese officials. Unbeknownst to her, Steven has been struggling with marijuana use, a habit that places him squarely in the middle of a frightening investigation, costing him his job and freedom while upsetting the foundation of their marriage.

Set in 1992 Japan, the rituals, ceremony, societal formalities, and expectations of the time all play a prominent role in Pat's struggle to accept and understand her circumstances. Her respect for the culture is evident throughout, particularly as she shares her passion for *shakuhachi* (the bamboo flute), *ikebana* (the traditional art of flower arrangement), and forays into *shodō* (Japanese calligraphy), cooking, language, tea ceremony, and a variety of other traditional pastimes. Haiku, both from well-known Japanese literature and Pat's own original verses, are interspersed throughout, adding to the text's cultural engagement.

A natural observer and observer of nature, Pat makes full use of the senses in her descriptions, whether the fall of light and shadow through a window, the texture of the tatami mats, the murkiness of a bowl of miso, or the smells of fresh ink, clay, and flowers. A complete and vivid picture comes to mind as these smallest details converge.

Relationships are a bit trickier. Pat struggles to form lasting bonds within the complicated social hierarchy of students and teachers, sponsors, mentors, and the traditional roles of men and women. *Bamboo Secrets* explores Pat's internal struggles and inclinations as a people pleaser, even as she seeks solace in meditation. A uniquely introspective character study emerges as she recalls events from her childhood and first marriage that had lasting repercussions.

Despite the drama and tension of the drug charges and investigation, the tone and pace of the narrative remain soft and even. Suspense and outbursts are tempered with contemplation as Pat processes overwhelming feelings of betrayal, anger, and helplessness. Pat reflects on the balance, "Maybe I've learned to distinguish between the public legal face of Japan and the private artistic face. I can resent the one and love the other."

Patricia Dove Miller's *Bamboo Secrets* is a travel adventure, a story of personal transformation, and an account of a legal battle, but above all it is an exploration of the fascinating people, culture, and landscape of Japan.

PALLAS GATES MCCORQUODALE (April 7, 2017)

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