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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆

Expatriate Heart

Janet James Sasaki
BookSurge (January 2008)
Softcover $15.00 (566pp)
978-1-4392-5229-1

Compassionate, meditative, and often achingly beautiful, Expatriate Heart is the thoughtful exploration of an American woman's coming-of-age in Japan. Janet James Sasaki considers every aspect of her main character's surroundings, from the traditional way of folding paper to the pattern in the stone wall by the family's house. The result is a heady atmosphere, in which each detail is accounted for. The reader becomes totally immersed in post-war Japanese culture, learning the day-to-day rituals of Tokyo as it revives into a booming metropolis.

Expatriate Heart follows Alice from her early childhood into maturity. The elder daughter of Christian missionaries, she is between two worlds, and acts as a witness to the many changes in her family, her neighborhood, and Japan. Interestingly, her Christianity is discussed as little as Tokyo's destruction. Instead, it is a backdrop for the main action of the story and is never directly addressed. The roundabout way in which the story is told—the landscape beautifully described, but the dialogue and action withheld—makes Alice seem opaque. Throughout the story, she seems to be a passive observer, rather than the hero in her own life.

Sasaki's writing is strongest when she spins out the fine details in a scene. When Alice is invited to a neighbor lady's house, she is aware of the luxury of the stranger's house. "The daughter brought in a tray with three tall, cool glasses of the newly popular Japanese summer drink called Calpis, a syrup concentrate made from fermented milk and fruit extracts sold in attractively polka-dotted, paper wrapped bottles." Each piece of the landscape receives equal attention, and Sasaki gently evokes a world that has faded into the past. The equanimity of this writing style sometimes makes it difficult to distinguish the story's focus—is it really about Alice? Or is Japan the true main character? Sasaki tends to show Alice's surroundings in great detail, while "telling" what happens between the characters. Even very important events, like an argument between Alice and her mother, seems flat—the dialogue does not have the clarity of the bottles that line the window sash. But overall, Expatriate Heart is a delight to read, if only for the scenery.

Like a glimpse into the past, Expatriate Heart is a tender recollection of an American life in Japan. It shares the post-war years with a freshness that is exciting to read, and a precision not often found in contemporary literature. In Expatriate Heart, landscape is everything—and it is a pleasure to wander there, learning the names of the flowers, the traditions of the people, and the blossoming maturity of a young woman in a foreign country.
CLAIRE RUDY FOSTER (May 18, 2010)

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