

Oka-San Ichi and Me

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Create Space

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Oka-San Ichi and Me is a delightful and historically relevant little volume that seems both larger and meatier than its forty-three pages. Each short chapter offers an opportunity to ponder universal human themes that transcend time and geography. The subjects explored—from the pain of loss to not fitting in—are appropriate for all ages older than ten or so.

Oka-San Ichi and Me is written from the viewpoint of Oka-san's daughter, Oba-chan Mari, who wanted to record her mother's life story as a testament to a brave and independent woman in early and mid-nineteenth century Japan. Oba-chan Mari also shares much of her own fascinating, happy life. The book does have some awkward moments and moves a bit too fast at times, but these cause the reader only fleeting disappointment and are easily forgiven.

The story begins with Oka-san heading off to Canada as a young woman in 1914 to marry a Japanese lumber mill worker. Three children are born, two live, her husband gets sick, they return to Japan, he dies and his abusive parents compel her to leave without her children. This chop, chop, chop style is used throughout the book. Over the next several years, Oka-san endeavors to regain her children, fails, becomes a housekeeper to a European ex-pat, meets a Frenchman and with him bears a daughter, Oba-chan Mari.

To live with a foreigner was scandalous during this period in Japan, and mixed-blood children were rare and ostracized. These two burdens proved meaningless as Oka-san ferociously raised her daughter with strength, humor, a European sense of style, and not a hint of shame. Oba-chan Mari, with her Western features and curly hair is a feisty character that loves her mother passionately and enjoys their unusual life.

World War II finds them living in the Japanese countryside, sheltered from the worst aspects of the conflict, but still exposed to suffering and dramatic incidents. Their ability to speak English serves them well after the war. Oka-san finds work as a translator, while Oba-chan gets a job with the US military. She soon falls in love with Nick, a Japanese-American serviceman, and they marry secretly, as marrying a Japanese citizen was not acceptable as a social norm at the time.

Shortly thereafter, the young couple leaves Japan for the San Francisco Bay area where they have four children. Oka-san finally joins them in the early 1960's, after a long emigration battle. An involved grandmother, she remained active up to her somewhat sudden death. The story ends on a sad note with Oba-chan Mari lamenting that it was suddenly too late to ask her mother for details about her father or tell her how much she loved her. One is left to contemplate this powerful lesson, a bittersweet ending to a great little memoir.

PATTY SUTHERLAND (February 1, 2011)

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