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Clarion Review ★★★★½ HISTORICAL

Taiso

Peter G. Bailey
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Shakespearean plot and a complicated hero make this authentic samurai tale exciting.

Like James Clavell's epics of Japanese history, prolific author Peter Bailey's *Taiso* is a superb example of its genre. With its seamless blend of samurai rituals and sixteenth-century Japanese history, Bailey's engaging story of Kumi Takura is a highly recommended read.

As the *taiso* (army general) of the novel, the fictitious Takura is a rising star in the imperial army of real-life Shogun Toyotomi Hideyoshi. But on a trip home to Yamanishi, on the island of Shikoku, to visit his mentally ailing father after an absence of several years, he is arrested. Despite his protests, his ship is impounded until he can pay his family's outstanding taxes.

As he unravels his difficulties, Takura discovers that a dishonest chancellor has absconded with funds, his scatterbrained brother has become an absentee landlord, his hated stepmother has taken a young lover, his self-serving uncle has schemed to usurp the family estates, and his childhood sweetheart has married his brother during Takura's military service. In a plot worthy of a Shakespearian play, Takura struggles to restore his family's honor by paying the debts, winning an increasing number of bloody battles, and often ruthlessly resolving the family's internal and external conflicts.

Bailey reinforces the authenticity of his story by frequently using Japanese terminology for which he has provided an adequate glossary. His descriptions of castles, towns, and the *chonin* (townspeople or tradespeople) are realistic. The strategies employed in the battles are riveting but often startling for the savagery of the killing and cruelty in torturing enemies by slow-death crucifixions. Samurai traditions of *hara-kiri* (ritual suicide) are explicit. And the treatment of Japanese women is far from the romantic love of Western tradition, although Takura treats his lover with respect and two of his young concubines with kindness. However, he rapes another.

Like the heroes of classical literature, Takura is well rounded, with as many flaws as virtues. Unflinching in his cruelty toward his enemies—he burns a family alive—he erects a memorial shrine to his two concubines, also the victims of a fiery death. Cheered on by his officers, soldiers, and longtime bodyguard, he reviews the decapitated heads of their foes after every battle to award commendations and promotions. Then, after contracting a *ninja* (hired assassin) to kill a youth who threatens his power base, Takura faces his own fate involving a flash-flood river that runs "dark, swift, and turgid."

The flow of the reading is sometimes disrupted, however, by typos such as "felt foot" for "left foot," the absence of many necessary commas, and the frequent misuse of semicolons. A map of the island of Shikoku with its relevant sites would be helpful.

Although a lengthy saga, Bailey's novel, one of the many he has written, never lags in the interest and excitement promised by the enticing cover of armored samurai swordsmen. Surprises occur in the plot at just the right moments.

There are many enlightening episodes that highlight the food, fashions, religions, and entertainment of the times even though “there was little fair about society in Japan in the sixteenth century, biased as it was, in favor of the unaccountable elite samurai culture.”

WAYNE CUNNINGHAM (August 20, 2013)

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