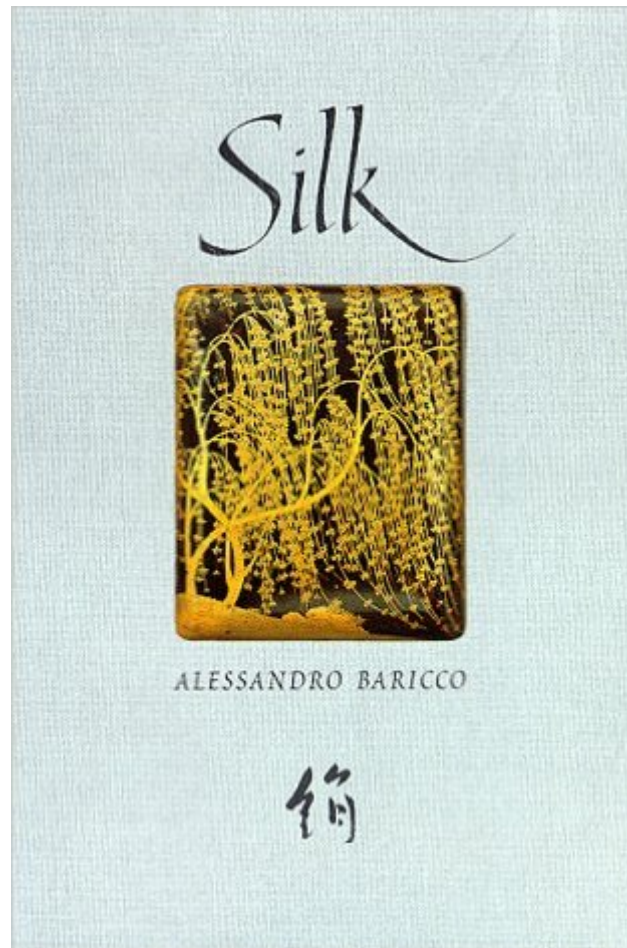


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Silk



Synopsis

When an epidemic threatens to destroy the silk trade in France, the young merchant Herve Joncour leaves his doting wife and his comfortable home in the small town of Lavilledieu and travels across Siberia to the other end of the world, to Japan, to obtain eggs for a fresh breeding of silk worms. It is the 1860s; Japan is closed to foreigners and this has to be a clandestine operation. During his undercover negotiations with the local baron, Joncour's attention is arrested by the man's concubine, a girl who does not have Oriental eyes. Although the young Frenchman and the girl are unable to exchange so much as a word, love blossoms between them, conveyed by a number of recondite messages in the course of four visits the Frenchman pays to Japan. How their secret affair develops and how it unfolds is told in a narration as beautiful, smooth and seamless as a piece of the finest silk.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Silk, by Alessandro Baricco, is the story of Hervé Joncour, a French silk breeder living in the small town of Lavilledieu. In 1861, when epidemics were striking the hatcheries of Europe, Joncour began to travel to Syria and Egypt to acquire healthy eggs for the town. When his friend, Baldabiau tells him of the extraordinary silk produced in Japan, Joncour embarks on the first of four journeys to what then was determined to be "the end of the world." Traveling by train, horseback, and ship, Joncour always takes the same route and always deals with an enigmatic man named Hara Kei, "the most elusive man in Japan, master of all that the world contrived to carry off the island." But more important to Joncour than Hara Kei is Hara Kei's concubine, a young girl, of which we learn nothing,

except that "her eyes did not have an Oriental slant." Even though they do not touch and do not speak, Joncour, a true romantic, falls instantly in love with this strange and beautiful girl and comes to believe that his love is returned, although by his fourth and final trip to Japan, he does resign himself to the fact that she will remain forever out of his reach. Civil war in Japan has torn Hara Kei's village apart and Joncour returns to Lavilledieu and to his faithful and loving wife HÃ©lÃ©ne, resigned that "in the whole world there was nothing beautiful left." Now a wealthy man, Joncour settles down to life in Lavilledieu with HÃ©lÃ©ne until the arrival of a letter, posted in Belgium, arrives. Written entirely in Japanese, Joncour believes it looks "like a catalogue of the footprints of little birds, fantastically meticulous in its compilation."

Alessandro Baricco's *SILK* is a rare extended poem or aria of a novel. The author's background as a musicologist is evident in the way he fashions his tale of sensuality and eroticism: statements are made only to be repeated verbatim later in the story of four excursions to Japan as though having said it once merely requires a reprise; moments of visual senses and responses are in fragments, like breaths inhaling and exhaling the unspeakable quality of beauty and desire; the 'chapters' are brief, often one page in length, like an aside to the reader. It is a hauntingly beautiful song and Baricco composes it well (the translation from the original Italian by Ann Goldstein is equally as sensitive). HervÃ© Joncour is a silkworm merchant living in 1861 France in a town Lavilledieu whose wealth is dependent on the silk manufactured from the eggs and hatched larvae of the silkworm. He is married to HÃ©lÃ©ne Joncour, a beautiful wife who allows her husband to make trips to far away lands to support the town industry. They are a happy couple, hoping for a child. Baldabiau is a businessman who encourages Joncour to travel to the then dangerous Japan to gather silkworm eggs not infected with the disease that threatens local eggs. Joncour sets out to Japan, a long journey through Europe, Russia, Siberia, and China to a Japanese village Shirakawa where he meets the chieftain Hara Kei - but more importantly, where he first encounters the gaze of a nameless beautiful woman - a girl with eyes not the shape of Oriental eyes - who appears to be a mistress of Hara Kei. That exchanged gaze, wordless, leads to the obsessive infatuation that rules Joncour's life. The story repeatedly visits this moment and the clandestine 'love' that occurs between the two.

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