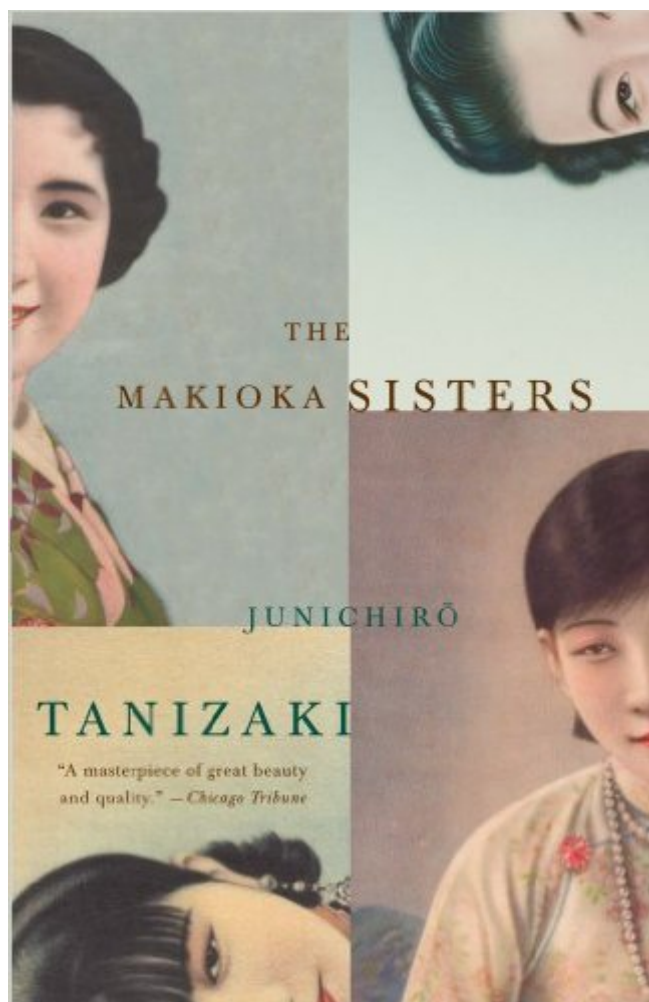


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The Makioka Sisters



Synopsis

Junichirô Tanizaki's magisterial evocation of a proud Osaka family in decline during the years immediately before World War II is arguably the greatest Japanese novel of the twentieth century and a classic of international literature. Tsuruko, the eldest sister of the once-wealthy Makioka family, clings obstinately to the prestige of her family name even as her husband prepares to move their household to Tokyo, where that name means nothing. Sachiko compromises valiantly to secure the future of her younger sisters. The shy, unmarried Yukiko is a hostage to her family's exacting standards, while the spirited Taeko rebels by flinging herself into scandalous romantic alliances and dreaming of studying fashion design in France. Filled with vignettes of a vanishing way of life, *The Makioka Sisters* is a poignant yet unsparing portrait of a family—and an entire society—sliding into the abyss of modernity. It possesses in abundance the keen social insight and unabashed sensuality that distinguish Tanizaki as a master novelist. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

The Makioka Sisters (Sasame Yuki, Light Snow), first published in 1948, was written by Junichiro Tanizaki (1886-1965). Tanizaki wrote *The Makioka Sisters* after translating the *Tale of Genji* into modern Japanese and the Murasaki novel is said to have influenced his own. It tells of the declining years of the once powerful Makioka family and their last descendants, four sisters. It has been translated by Edward G. Seidensticker in 1957. Powerfully realistic, it mourns the passing of greatness while celebrating in wonderfully evocative detail the beauty of a particular time and place, Osaka in the 1930s. In its creation of beauty out of sadness it can be compared to another family saga, *The Maias* (1888), by the Portuguese master Eça de Queiroz (1845-1900). Why is this

long book, largely concerned with trivial family procedures, one of the finest novels written? It is not concerned with great events, causes or philosophies. It has little concern with the war Japan was fighting with China, and then the USA, when the book was first published. Indeed its characters don't think about the war, and in a positive way, which doesn't trivialise their concerns at all (most people in fact don't think about the reasons for a war: perhaps it's better that way). This doesn't mean the book is escapist or superficial, just as the concern with women's lifestyle, dress, makeup, etiquette or social vanity make it something written just for women (books and films were once made - by men - to capitalise on what were considered women's 'little' concerns). Tanizaki does that wonderful thing a great artist can do, he finds the universal in the most exact examination of the particular, and makes a work of relevance to us all.

The *Makioka Sisters* is a special novel for two reasons. Much of Japanese literature this century is very taut and relatively short. One thinks of Soseki, Mishima, Dazai, Kawabata and the two most important of Tanizaki's other novels, *Some Prefer Nettles* and *Diary of a Mad Old Man*. Instead of being 150-200 pages, this book is around 500 pages. The popular description of this book, about a merchant family in decline, might imply a book like *Buddenbrooks*. Yet this book is very different from Thomas Mann's fine novel. For a start it only covers four years, not a couple of generations. More important the theme of decline is not a primary one, and Mann's theme of cultural enervation is absent. What we have instead is a book that seeks to be a work of "photographic realism." It seeks to be "real" not in the sense that Flaubert or James or Tolstoy are realistic. Instead of portraying complex themes and ideas while keeping an eye on what would be actually plausible, Tanizaki seeks to describe what actually happens. This sort of realism is not highly valued since it is often unimaginative and often psychologically shallow. And indeed in this book it can often appear tedious and unrewarding. But a closer examination reveals certain virtues. In a sense Tanizaki's book is "like life." The story of Taeko of the youngest sister who cannot marry because custom dictates she must wait for her older sister Yukiko to be married. The story of her two possible fiancés and the eventual pre-marital pregnancy appear, not as part of a complex, organic scheme as, say, the story of *Anna Karenina*, but as a series of discrete events, moved often by coincidence and chance.

The first time I read *The Makioka Sisters*, I called it "fragile and lovely." Recently, I read it again. It's not really fragile and lovely. Actually, it's very matter-of-fact. The narrative mostly recounts events and the characters' reactions to the events. There isn't much description or imagery, like in Kawabata. Even big events like the Osaka flood are recounted straightforwardly, with precision

instead of lyricism. But the book is very perceptive about its characters. Tanizaki knew everything about the social class of the Makioka family. The book is full of countless trivial little details about their daily habits, mannerisms, styles of dress and conversations. For example, during one of the family's attempts to marry off the third sister Yukiko, the prospective husband is concerned that she seems moody, and the whole family tries to dissuade him in writing and on the phone. Tanizaki perfectly captures the frantic, businesslike quality of the negotiations, simply by describing their arguments at length. He is so perfectly attuned to the routine of a family of this class that, just by describing it, he can recreate a whole period of history. And his extensive knowledge of small details also makes the narrative very lively, and often funny. The book moves slowly, but I found it addictively readable, both the first time and now. The book is much more than a period piece. It captures the superficiality and transience of a sense of closeness between people. The four Makioka sisters are surely very close to one another. They've been together since they were little, and they get along very well. The three younger sisters live under the same roof until they're all well over thirty. Basically they're each other's closest friends.

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