

# In Celebration of The Tale of Genji, the World's First Novel: Year In Review 2001

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One thousand years ago in Heian Japan, a woman of whom little is known was widowed. But for her personal loss, that woman, known as Murasaki Shikibu, might never have written *Genji monogatari* (c. 1010; *The Tale of Genji*), which is considered the greatest work of Japanese literature and the world's first novel.

The details of the author's life are sketchy. Even her actual name is unknown; Murasaki Shikibu was assigned by scholars—who used the name of the book's dominant female character (Murasaki) and the author's father's position (Shikibu) at the Bureau of Rites to identify her. Born into a lesser branch of the noble and highly influential Fujiwara family, she had been well educated, learning Chinese (generally the exclusive sphere of males). She had married a much older distant cousin and borne a daughter by him, and after two years of marriage, he had died. It is not known how, four years later, she came to be summoned to the court. In any case, her new position within what was then a leading literary centre enabled her to produce a diary, a collection of poetry, and, most famously, the classic romance *Genji monogatari*.

Because Chinese was the scholarly language of the Japanese court, works written in Japanese (the literary language used by women) were not taken very seriously. Nor was prose considered the equal of poetry. What made Lady Murasaki's work different is this: although it is prose, it is clearly informed by a comprehensive knowledge of Chinese and Japanese poetry; it is a graceful work of imaginative fiction, not a personal account of life at court; it incorporates some 800 *waka*, courtly poems purported to be the writing of the main character; and its supple narrative sustains the story through 54 chapters of one character and his legacy.

At its most basic, *Genji* is an absorbing introduction to the culture of the aristocracy in early Heian Japan, its forms of entertainment, its manner of dress, its daily life, and its moral code. The era is exquisitely re-created through the story of Genji, the handsome, sensitive, gifted courtier, an excellent lover, and a worthy friend.

Eminent British sinologist Arthur Waley was the first to translate *Genji monogatari* into English, completing the last of six volumes in 1933. Waley's was a beautiful and inspiring translation, but it was also very free. Edward Seidensticker's 1976 translation was true to the original in both content and tone, but its notes and reader aids were very sparse, an assessment not lost on *Genji*'s third translator, American scholar Royall Tyler of Australian National University. The publication of Tyler's version in 2001—nearly a millennium after *Genji monogatari* was written—attests to a continuing fascination with early Japanese culture and the durability of one remarkable woman's literary achievement.

Kathleen Kuiper