



The Salaryman's Wife

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Japanese-American Rei Shimura is a 27-year-old English teacher living in one of Tokyo's seediest neighborhoods. She doesn't make much money, but she wouldn't go back home to California even if she had a free ticket (which, thanks to her parents, she does.) Her independence is threatened however, when a getaway to an ancient castle town is marred by murder.

Rei is the first to find the beautiful wife of a high-powered businessman, dead in the snow. Taking charge, as usual, Rei searches for clues by crashing a funeral, posing as a bar-girl, and somehow ending up pursued by police and paparazzi alike. In the meantime, she manages to piece together a strange, ever-changing puzzle—one that is built on lies and held together by years of sex and deception.

The Salaryman's Wife Details

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Susan says

I kept reminding myself that this was written in 1997.

As an Asian woman who likes mystery novels, I was looking forward to reading a mystery novel with an Asian woman protagonist (so rare in the English speaking world!) and the subsequent disappointment could mean that I am reacting more harshly than I would otherwise. I had two main issues with this book: 1) that it was in first person. Everyone who knew me at this point knows that I dislike first person narratives and it must be an absolutely amazing story for me to overcome that strong, strong dislike (seriously I think I might've hated Lupin, who's one of my favorite characters from HARRY POTTER, if I had to read him in first person). In this case because I had to follow Rei's every thought, I couldn't help but judge her for them and find her bratty and ...in need of common sense. Which ties me to the second point 2) The love interest. Who's a Caucasian Man (I will now abbreviate this as CM in all my future reviews with a WOC protagonist, I think) who overrides Rei's spoken opinion at so, so often that...okay Rei, if someone just tried to murder you in your room and you asked the hotel for a new room, DON'T LET THAT CM THAT YOU'VE KNOWN FOR LESS THAN TWO DAYS OVERRIDE YOUR OPINION AND FORCE YOU TO STAY OVERNIGHT WITH HIM! The fact that she ends up going along with HIS opinion nearly all the time 2a) DOES NOT EXCUSE HIS BEHAVIOR and 2b) is grating like nails on chalkboard. I got to the point where I found myself gritting my teeth as I tried to read the book and finally just decided I can't make my way through it anymore. Instead I flipped to the ending out of curiosity just to see how it turns out, and of course, of course, at the crucial moment the CM steps in and Saves the Day.

As I've said, this was written in 97, so the opinions are bound to be a little dated. However, THIS is 2014 and the implications (however unintentional) of the narrative in this book made me too uncomfortable to finish reading it.

Michael says

I had thought I would enjoy this book, but maybe because it was our Festive Season, I may have been distracted, but I really did not engage with the story nor find that I wanted to continue reading it, so using my mark of the first 50 pages for engagement, I discarded it.

Sudha says

This book is written by Sujata Massey. She has one east Indian parent and one Scandinavian parent. She spent many years of her life in Japan, and this book provides an intricate, detailed and engrossing depiction of Japanese culture. The heroine, Rei Shimura is a dealer in Japanese antiques, and so there is a great deal of interesting information about Japan's extensive art heritage also. In addition, Rei's conflict between her American and Japanese side is very interesting also.

Although this series by Sujata Massey is a mystery series, I find it a window into Japanese culture I have not seen elsewhere.

Lydia LaPutka says

Not bad for an old book! This one was recommended to me by a flight attendant. I didn't realize how old it was until I read some of the references like making a call from a phone booth. Wha? Copyright 1992. Ah! I get it now!

It IS one of those books where things are just conveniently situated to make the protagonist's life easier. You know, the distracted teller so she isn't noticed. That sort of thing. You're never quite certain how solid her relationship is with the boy. And it was surprising to come across some descriptive sex scenes that seemed sort of thrown in. Were they necessary? Probably not.

Still, there were some fun twists and turns, and it's always enjoyable to immerse myself in another culture.

I definitely can relate to feeling uncertain about my own identity when it comes to race like the main character experienced. I am 100% hispanic but cannot speak spanish. My married name is all white (maiden name Martinez), and because my skin is very spanish pale, no one realizes I am hispanic at all anymore. It's a sad loss but somewhat of a relief because people often assumed I could speak spanish due to my maiden name. But I kind of miss being recognized as hispanic! I know, strange . . .

Tocotin says

It's an interesting, but ultimately condescending and stereotypical mystery set partly in the Japanese Alps, and partly in Tokyo. The main character, Rei Shimura, comes from a wealthy Japanese-American family, and for reasons I couldn't really comprehend, leads a pretty miserable life in Tokyo as an ELT. She can speak fairly good Japanese, but can't read, and she doesn't like the culture at all save for its material manifestations (her mother deals in antiques, so Rei buys old Japanese curios for her).

The plot is as follows: she goes to a small town deep in the mountains to spend her New Year vacation, and there encounters a mixed group of salarymen and tourists. One of the salarymen has with him a trophy wife, whom he treats as badly as she treats others. It's the wife who gets murdered, and all of a sudden Rei begins to investigate the murder. The mystery is all right I guess (I rarely read mysteries only if I'm interested in the setting), but the characters, maybe with an exception of Rei's roommate, Richard, are kinda underdeveloped, all the Japanese are painfully stereotyped (salarymen are gods and their wives are oppressed and boring), and Rei is more like a convenient mannequin than a compelling and interesting person. She gets involved with the murder even though there was a mutual antipathy between her and the victim, she gets involved with the guy who's a suspect even though he's a foreigner and she doesn't like foreigners. She lives in a (supposedly) seedy neighborhood, even though her family is rich and she could afford to move out. She complains about Japanese men whom she has to teach, even though she was stupid enough to climb the table and let them photograph her under the shirt (this is the lamest story I've ever heard). So, basically, it's a book which says: "Look how weird this Japan country is, they are all creepy and rude, but I happen to know something about it. Groping on the train! Hostess bars! Tabloids! Yakuza! Xenophobia! Clueless white people! American bases! Let me lecture you on all this stuff, you'll like it!"

Rei seems to be always discriminated and distrusted as a foreigner, but that may be because of her own attitude: she always suspects the Japanese of the worst, and at the same time she disdains other foreigners. There is an unpleasant mention of her telling her friend who wants to introduce her to some foreign guys: "I don't do gaijin". Now, I know that lots of expats refer to themselves by this word, and it's universally accepted as meaning "a white foreigner in Japan", but it doesn't change the fact that it's a derogatory term, and even Japanese children are well aware of it. I cringe every time I hear a foreigner use this word, which is

usually either when 1) they don't know Japanese well enough, 2) they want to be accepted by the Japanese whatever the cost, 3) both. I think it's number one with the author. Some Japanese she uses is all right, but some is, well, strange, like the word "kareisa" intended to mean "beauty", but it's more like "magnificence, splendor". Also, she writes the (rather outdated) word "konketsuji" ??? (a multiracial/biracial person) as "konketsujin", which is a mistake.

Oh well. I liked it because it was a fast read and about Japan, which the author didn't worship, so points for that, but on the other hand I'm not sure what kind of reaction she wanted to get from me, and the stereotyping was a bit too much. I don't know. Would like to give two and a half stars but can't. Hmm.

Anne Pinckard says

Young Rei Simura, a half-Japanese, half-white American, decides to try to "make it" in Japan as an English teacher. She becomes entangled in a murder mystery when she discovers the body of a high-profile company executive, and finds herself on the front page of the Japanese tabloids.

It's a fun mystery, but the characterization is awkward, to say the least, and there are some odd generalizations and conclusions drawn about Japan and the Japanese language that I would disagree with (being half-Japanese myself and having spent a fair amount of time in the country). Also, somehow the protagonist attracts quite a bit of attention and sympathy from people though she is rather curmudgeonly and kind of bitchy (in the guise of being feminist).

Tuiké says

Ööööäääh. Olin kuullut hyvää Rei Shimura -dekkareista ja innostuin lupauksesta jonka mukaan samassa kirjassa on paitsi mehevä jännärijuoni, japanilaista kulttuuria ja toimiva lukuromaani. No, tässä oli kököin vähään aikaan näkemäni mysteeri (murhaajan arvasti about tokassa luvussa), paperisen ohuita hahmoja ja kiusallisen tekonokkelaa kieltä. Japanikonteksti oli kuitenkin hyvä.

Barbara says

3.5 - Smart murder mystery set in a small vacation village in Japan.

Trixie Fontaine says

Good/entertaining for what it is (not a great work of art, but fun with enough supporting detail & sexiness to get immersed).

The only stand-out annoyance for me was unexpectedly hitting upon yet another plot relying upon "rescuing" a female character from her sordid life of sex (or nearly-sex) work: hostessing, in this case. She's told she's "better" than that which means she should make less money doing something more honorable. It makes me want to write to the author and say she could do so much BETTER than write a book that hooks readers immediately with an erotically-charged story of sexual assault on a crowded train. I'm not mad at her,

though, for giving the majority of readers what they want; just a pet peeve of mine.

Because the book was fun and I'm curious how the author develops I'll probably pick up another of her books when I want a relaxing read.

Richard says

A few years back I ran across a used copy of this book, and bought it because I like Japan and I like mysteries. I was immediately enthralled, and enjoyed the book well enough to eagerly track down the entire rest of the series immediately. I gobbled the first 9 within a couple of months, and then paced my room until the 10th volume (Shimura Trouble) came out.

I really like this whole series. The protagonist is a very real person, adorable, likeable, funny, charming, etc. And her environment is quite real. Having lived in Tokyo, I've personally been to several of the locations mentioned in the books, and that always tickles me. One great thing about this series is that the books are chronological and follow the protagonist's life through a few years in a coherent and consistent way, with recurring characters, etc. It's almost like one big novel in 10 volumes -- which is actually a remarkable achievement. After I raved about the set, my wife got hooked, too.

Sophie VERStand says

Rei Shimura, ihres Zeichens Halb-Amerikanerin, Halb-Japanerin, Englischlehrerin für einen japanischen Großkonzern möchte zu Silvester einen ruhigen Jahreswechsel in einem Badehaus verbringen. Doch dann wird die Leiche der Ehefrau eines japanischen Geschäftsmannes tot aufgewunden. Wo anfangs noch über Suizid spekuliert wird, eröffnen sich bald größere Probleme und Konflikte, die auf einen Mord hindeuten. Rei fühlt sich verpflichtet, dieses Verbrechen aufzuklären und gerät dabei an den schottischen Anwalt Hugh. Es kommt zu vielerlei Verwicklungen, die nicht nur Reis Spürsinn, sondern auch ihre emotionalen und sexuellen Bedürfnisse ansprechen.

Die Erzählung dieses Krimis ist eher ruhig, manchmal ist es aber schnell ein regelrechtes Hin und Her, dem sich Rei Shimura ausgesetzt sieht. Leider ist ihre Unterwürfigkeit ggü. Männern extrem stark und sie lässt sich viel zu leicht einwickeln. Ein wenig mehr Taffheit entwickelt sie m. E. erst zum Ende des Romans, was hoffen lässt, dass der Folgeband eine selbstbewusstere Rei zeichnet. Sehr unterhaltsam, sprachlich okay.

Die Nebenfiguren sind leider viel zu stereotyp.

Gerade die erste Hälfte des Romans erklärt einem unerfahrenen Japan-Unwissenden sehr viele Begriffe aus den Bereichen Kultur, Kunst, Essen, Namenszusätzen (-san/-kun/-sensei..) und gängigen Traditionen, genauso wird ausführlichst dargestellt, welche Schwierigkeiten Rei mit ihrem leicht ausländischen Aussehen in Japan hat. Sehr authentisch beschrieben.

Elizabeth (Alaska) says

I freely admit to not know what was going on most of the time in this. There was an obvious suspect who I immediately discarded as a candidate, and then waffled even on him. But mostly I wasn't able to follow any thought process because there seemed to be multiple motives or no motive, depending. In many ways, it became more of a mystery than many mysteries.

This is also interesting because of the setting. The opening few chapters take place in the Japanese Alps and the remainder in Tokyo. We are provided with a lot of Japanese culture. After my graduation from high school more than 50 years ago, my mother and I traveled to Japan - I remember almost nothing. However, I remember that trip fondly, and I welcomed the opportunity to revisit Japan. It is clear that Tokyo has all of the problems of any big city, while being a very old city with a long heritage. Japanese society is very strict and women do not have a place of power.

I think this just barely steps over the 3-/4-star line. I will gladly read others in this series, though I have no current plans to chase after them.

Beth Robinson says

I enjoyed this mystery and was pleased with the twists and turns of the plots and the final solution. I don't know enough about the subtleties of Japanese culture to know how much of the story was based on what occurs (or was at the time of writing) and how much was based on some level of stereotyping, but it felt nuanced in the middle of it. And the culture, and possible culture clashes, was inherent to the story itself in many ways. While reading, you see the world through a brash narrator with very determined opinions, so I'm sure that is supposed to color the perspective, and I found the voice more refreshing than grating.

LeeAnne says

The thing that I liked best about this book was the cultural aspect of it. It was interesting to get a glimpse of modern Japan and to learn some cool vocabulary. The mystery of the book was a bit scattered and the writing was just so-so but overall, I enjoyed it. I'll definitely read other books in this series. (I'm a sucker for series!)

Andrea says

I thought it might be fun to read a mystery novel -- I haven't read any in a while, and I used to be a big fan (though mainly classics like Agatha Christie and Sherlock Holmes, as well as younger stuff like Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys). In addition, the Neverwinter Nights module I'm working on has kind of a murder mystery aspect to it, and so I thought maybe I could get some inspiration.

I think I picked the wrong book.

While the immersed-in-Japan aspect of the book was well-researched and interesting (and accurate, as far as I could tell), the mystery and romance were not so well-done. For one thing, it was hard to care about the woman who got murdered, since we only saw her once and she wasn't that nice or interesting, and it wasn't clear why the protagonist cared enough about her to go and investigate the whole thing. In addition, cliched attempts on the protagonist's life seemed unrealistic, and when we finally discovered who the murderer was, it felt more like a random pulling of a number out of a hat than the one true solution.

The romance also felt unrealistic. Maybe it was just hard for me to understand the protagonist sleeping with the guy after knowing him for a day or two, or maybe I just didn't like either of them very well at all. But their "romantic encounters" seemed contrived, and their whole relationship seemed based on lust and mutual

interest, and not really anything deeper.

So, while you may learn something about Japan reading this book, you probably won't learn anything useful about mysteries or romance.
