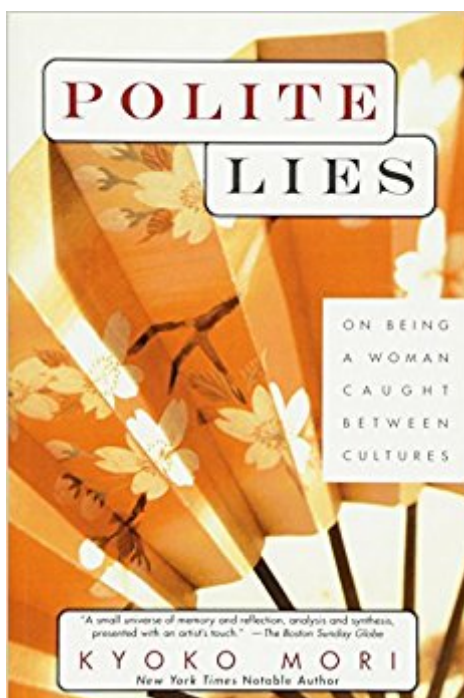


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Polite Lies: On Being A Woman Caught Between Cultures



Synopsis

In this powerful, exquisitely crafted book, Kyoko Mori delves into her dual heritage with a rare honesty that is both graceful and stirring. From her unhappy childhood in Japan, weighted by a troubled family and a constricting culture, to the American Midwest, where she found herself free to speak as a strong-minded independent woman, though still an outsider, Mori explores the different codes of silence, deference, and expression that govern Japanese and American women's lives: the ties that bind us to family and the lies that keep us apart; the rituals of mourning that give us the courage to accept death; the images of the body that make sex seem foreign to Japanese women and second nature to Americans. In the sensitive hands of this compelling writer, one woman's life becomes the mirror of two profoundly different societies.

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Customer Reviews

Kyoko Mori spent a largely unhappy childhood chafing at social restrictions in Japan before migrating to the American Midwest. In 12 beautifully turned essays she shuttles between these two cultures, observing local customs with a wondering eye. Too bold to be emotionally fluent in either land, Mori scrutinizes--and sometimes ridicules--the sound of a woman's voice raised in a childish squeak; the differences between Americans who marry for love (and divorce the day it dissolves) and traditional Japanese women, who may be more likely to find happiness in an honorable widowhood; and the navigation of uncomfortable truths and painful emotions. "Having a conversation in Japanese is like driving in the dark without a headlight," she says. "Every moment, I

am on the verge of hitting something and hurting myself or someone else, but I have no way of guessing where the dangers are." Despite frustration and puzzlement, Mori rarely swerves even to make her own limitations more palatable. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Creative writing professor Mori (*Dream of Water*, LJ 12/94) offers a poignant portrait of her dichotomous life: a childhood in Japan and an adulthood in the American Midwest. These 12 personal essays show the insight evident in Mori's previous works. "Polite lies" refers to the imbalance present in the two cultures and the resulting balance Mori establishes for herself and her readers with wit and warmth. Topics include family, secrets, the body, and tears. The distinction between the public and the private colors the double world that Mori speaks of so eloquently. Sacrificial deaths, tragic suicides?all these may be exalted in Japanese art and literature, yet the personal tragedy of Mori's mother's suicide was "shameful instead of glorious"?she was never to mention the event. This strong collection binds one woman's old country with her new one, repeating her impassioned desire not to be swept up in a lifetime of polite acquiescence as were the women of her youth.?Kay Meredith Dusheck, Univ. of Iowa, Iowa CityCopyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I wanted this book to be good because I thought it would be interesting to read about the differences between cultures or the difficulties of living "between cultures" as the book promised. I wanted to hear about how someone overcame those difficulties to become a better person. I read on all the way to the end hoping that the tone of the book would change, but it never did. The book is about a woman who complains incessantly about everyone and everything and has no problem criticizing groups of people based on singling out a few. She has a clear resentment toward Christianity and Japan. I could easily see someone have the same life as her and consider it a blessing to experience a full and enriching life.I got so tired of hearing the complaints about other people and wondered what the point of the book was. Almost right at the end, everything became clear. Here is a quote that sums it up, "There is nothing virtuous about gossip, but we enjoy it to the utmost...the guilt never cancels out my pleasure in getting away with the offense. Gossip can be malicious. It can be used to spread false rumors, to destroy someone's reputation...". I'm not sure who the "we" is that she is referring to, but I hate gossip and I hate lies, which is probably why I hated this book.

Ms. Mori, in her social commentary and comparison between the Midwest and Japan, exposes the

soft underbelly of contemporary Japanese culture. Having hosted over 25 exchange students from Japan (all women) I began to have a deeper understanding of what their experience of Japan really was. To be sure, Ms. Mori is an English professor, and her social examinations are based on her own experience, yet her generalizations do strike a chord with what I have come to know of both Japanese and American culture. While we either praise or damn other cultures what I have found is that both cultures have their flaws. What I found most interesting is that she has confirmed my thesis that Japan never had a Renaissance. The country went directly from a Feudal state to an Industrial state without the pain of dealing with the questions of humanity. The social structures of Japan still reflect the Feudal culture of the Tokugawa era. To be sure, there are beauties in both cultures. And, a bad childhood can easily mask the good side of the culture you live within. Read this book if you want to understand contemporary Japan from the eyes of a child who lost her mother and had an abusive father. There is a lot of pain and suffering found here. There are also the seeds of what will be the yet to come Japanese Renaissance. That will be interesting to watch.

A book that should be read by every business person that ever has dealings with Japan and Japanese. The book (at least in the beginning) gives an accurate description of the pyramid like quality of the Japanese language and Japanese customs. It conveys a sense of the Japanese high regard for formalities and their need to be addressed by title and rank. It is as if they are from another century. The book is actually an autobiography of Ms. Mori's life. I got the feeling she has a very hard side to her. Anyway, great book especially its conveyance of the Japanese culture to the world.

I understand her pain in losing her mother through reading the work "Dream of Water." However, it is quite unfair to base the entire society of Japan around one family. That's similar to someone else saying "Well I had a bad childhood and my father beat me and my mother was a severe drug user so therefore everyone else in the United States beats their children and uses drugs." I notice that she discusses social issues which are also a bit too general. People are individuals and don't act alike, even in conformist societies -- we all have little quirks. Therefore, it's unfair to generalize about social characteristics of the Japanese. Also, because she had one or two experiences with vulgarity on the trains in Japan doesn't make a whole race of men pigs. We have problems with people acting up in New York City subways, but that doesn't make every person in NY insane or vulgar. If it wasn't for her great writing style I'd be severely disappointed. However, I still find myself floating in and out of reading the book while reading on the train, and it's not because the people are

being vulgar or obnoxious, it's just redundant to her last work. I was also very turned off to her treatment of her husband, and I agree with other reviewers that her rationale is clouded at points. I would rework this into a more socially - current work if I were Ms. Mori, because there's definitely nothing wrong with the writing.

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