

Biography Resource Center

Arthur Golden

1956-

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Career](#)

[Further Readings](#)

[Media Adaptations](#)

[Personal Information](#)

[Sidelights](#)

[Source Citation](#)

[Writings](#)

[Works In Progress](#)

"Sidelights"

Arthur Golden made a splash when he came on the literary scene in 1997 with the publication of his novel *Memoirs of a Geisha*, the fictional autobiography of a Japanese geisha during the 1920s and 1930s. A phenomenal best seller, this novel sold more than four million copies in English alone in a little over three years and has been translated into thirty-three languages. Many reviewers have praised the work for its portrayal of an obscure and little-understood part of Japanese culture and have marveled that a white American male should write such a work. *Newsweek* reviewer Jeff Giles called it "a faux autobiography ten years and 2,300 pages in the making. . . . A few reservations aside, Golden has written a novel that's full of cliffhangers great and small, a novel that is never out of one's possession, a novel that refuses to stay shut." Film rights were sold to an American motion picture company, and work proceeded slowly on the project, which was still a work-in-progress in 2004.

Golden was raised in a literary family; his cousin Arthur Ochs Sulzberger is publisher of the *New York Times*. After earning a bachelor's degree in art history from Harvard University, a master's degree in Japanese history from Columbia University, and another master's degree in English from Boston University, Golden worked for an English-language magazine in Tokyo from 1980 to 1982. While in Japan, he met a man whose mother was a geisha and found the topic interesting. When Golden began toying with the idea of writing a novel, he remembered the intrigue he had felt about geishas and believed the topic would adapt well to a fictional treatment. Although an oft-taught tenet of writing is to write about topics the writer knows, Golden decided it was "better to write about what sparks . . . [the] imagination," he told *Maclean's* writer Tanya Davies, "and the geisha district in Kyoto, Japan, sparked mine."

Golden is well-versed in the Japanese language, and even in Mandarin Chinese, so the language posed no barrier to his research. After conducting copious research about geishas in secondary sources, he embarked on the writing of a third-person novel that begins with the son of a geisha as a child. He discarded the novel when he decided that the geisha as the central character would be more interesting. Golden began his "second" novel after meeting Mineko Iwasaki, who had been a geisha during the 1960s and 1970s. From Iwasaki, whom he interviewed for several weeks, Golden learned details of geisha life that helped in the writing of the new version; but the second version, also in third-person, earned the

epithet of "dry" from several of Golden's friends, who are professional writers. Not wanting to give up on a project with six years of effort invested, Golden rethought the novel, obsessing over it for a week. Finally he decided to make the leap to writing in first-person, which turned out to be the right move.

Even so, Golden knew that he had several cultural divides to bridge and that the success of his endeavor would be judged by how well he managed these issues: another and non-Western culture, another time period, and another gender. Even after deciding on the first-person voice and relying on his new research, Golden had to find a way to integrate the information needed by non-Japanese readers to understand the culture. The solution turned out to be placing his Japanese heroine in the West and employing the device of a fictional translator, as Golden explained at the Random House Web site: "The content is entirely fiction, although the historic facts of a geisha's life are accurate. The translator is also an invention. . . . I had to find a way to make it believable for Sayuri to annotate the story as she told it. . . . I wanted the reader to know from the beginning of the book that she is living in New York City, telling her story, looking back at her life . . . and talking to a Westerner. Under these circumstances, she would naturally annotate her story as she told it."

As Joanne Wilkinson wrote in *Booklist*, Golden "melds sparkling historical fiction with a compelling coming-of-age story." The work recounts the tale of young Chiyo Sakamoto, born to a poor family in a Japanese fishing village. Following their mother's death during the depression years, their father sells nine-year-old Chiyo and her older sister Satsu. Satsu's fate is to become a prostitute, but the lovely Chiyo is bought by the madam of the Nitta okiya. Chiyo learns music, dance, and the tea ceremony, and wears the heavy costumes and makeup of the geisha. Her beauty soon surpasses that of the scheming Hatsumomo, until then the okiya's head geisha. Chiyo loses her virginity to a man who pays a record price in a bidding war.

Many reviewers discussed the author's ability to adequately portray the thoughts and feelings of a woman. "What is striking about the novel is Mr. Golden's creation of an utterly convincing narrator, a woman who is, at once, a traditional product of Japan's archaic gender relations and a spirited . . . heroine," wrote Michiko Kakutani in the *New York Times Book Review*. "Mr. Golden allows her to relate her story in chatty, colloquial terms that enable the reader to identify with her feelings of surprise, puzzlement and disgust at the rituals she must endure. . . . Mr. Golden gives us not only a richly sympathetic portrait of a woman, but also a finely observed picture of an anomalous and largely vanished world." Chiyo is tutored by Mameha, a renowned geisha, and becomes very successful during the 1930s and 1940s. As a professional, she takes a new name, Sayuri. After many men and years, she becomes mistress of the Chairman of an electrical supply company, whom she first met in the okiya; and he cares for her until his death. Golden has often been asked about the role of geisha in Japan as compared to the Western notion of the prostitute; he likens the geisha, to a mistress maintained by a single lover in Western culture.

Not all reviewers found Golden's characters convincing, however. While *New Leader* critic Gabriel Brownstein praised Golden's use of inanimate details, he found that his characters "fail to convey any emotional, psychological or historical complexities. His narrative is imposed on an exotic world rather than organic to it" and felt Sayuri's desire for the Chairman "is not demonstrated through the logic of the story either. She merely reiterates it in a series of widely spaced asides to the reader." Almost as if answering Brownstein's critique, Golden, commented in an *Amazon.com* interview: "I was not able . . . to really create a fully developed character in the Chairman. . . . Because my father and mother divorced when I was young, my father moved away when I was seven or eight, died when I was thirteen, and for some reason I suppose it's emotionally toxic territory. And I just have a difficult time writing about it. And the Chairman was in many ways based upon my father. . . . When the Chairman was on the page, things were inert. I had so much trouble trying to create a believable person!"

Other reviewers also found fault with Golden's characterizations, including John David Morley, who wrote in *Working Woman* that Golden's "decision to write an autobiographically styled novel rather than a nonfiction portrait is most obviously justified in terms of empathy. . . . Unfortunately, Sayuri's personality seems so familiar it is almost generic. . . . What about the woman inside the sumptuous kimono, underneath the white mask?" Morley said the character Hatsumomo has "the potential one looks for and finds wanting in the heroine . . . with as many bad sides as Sayuri has good ones." Morley felt that if Golden "had been willing to develop this richer, more complex character, he might have been able

to rouse the kind of empathy the novel needs--and perhaps one or two other qualities besides. Eroticism, for example." Morley said the book is much more successful with its facts, "filled as it is with colorful nuggets of information."

Much of the novel's verisimilitude results from Golden's use of detail, as Golden himself told Repps Hudson of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, "Absolutely everything's in the details. The book will fail, at least by my standards, if you don't get the details right." Lindsley Cameron wrote of Sayuri in the *Yale Review*: "By the time she is living happily ever after at the Waldorf, the reader has learned quite a lot about geisha culture. . . . Many of these 'facts' are sartorial: not since reading the memoirs of that delightful seventeenth-century transvestite the Abbe de Choisy . . . have I encountered such drooling dwelling on the details of costume. The effect is piquant, something like reading soft-core pornography that keeps turning, as though in a dream, into the catalogue of a textile auction at Christie's." Brownstein also contended that Golden "is masterful at describing teahouses, hairdressers' shops and alleyways of Gion, the Geisha district of Kyoto. He excels, too, at teaching us about the way geisha put on makeup, the stages of their education and how they earn their living." "The meticulous research makes Gion come alive," wrote Hannah Beech in *Time International*. "Hatsumomo slathers on facial cream made of nightingale droppings, and geishas burn one-hour incense sticks to keep track of how much to bill per night. . . . Like a geisha who has mastered the art of illusion, Golden creates a cloistered floating world out of the engines of a modernizing Japan." Among the work's other enthusiasts was *Library Journal's* Wilda Williams, who asserted that Golden "has brilliantly revealed the culture and traditions of an exotic world, closed to most Westerners," and a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer, who wrote, *Memoirs* is "rendered with stunning clarity. . . . Golden effortlessly spins the tale."

Memoirs of a Geisha sparked controversy in one arena. In 2000, after publication of the Japanese translation, former geisha Mineko Iwasaki brought suit against Golden for supposedly breaching her promised anonymity and for libeling her. "I spent seven to eight hours a day for two weeks talking to him, but he did not get anything right," Iwasaki complained to *U.S. News & World Report's* Joseph L. Galloway. Because of the fictional memoir format, used in the West in such classic works as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders* and because of the author's acknowledgment of Iwasaki's help at the book's opening, Iwasaki contended that Japanese readers believe she has done everything the main character of the book has done. In 2002 Iwasaki published her own memoir, *Geisha of Gion*. Golden has continually maintained that although Iwasaki influenced his portrayal of Sayuri in *Memoirs of a Geisha*, the "character of Sayuri and her story are completely invented," as he wrote in the preface to *Memoirs of a Geisha*.

After *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Golden began work on another historical novel, this time to be set in the United States. As he told Hudson, "My pep talk to myself now is that I did this by permitting myself to take a risk and giving myself a real challenge and figuring out how to rise to it. My job now is to do exactly the same thing."

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Born 1956, in Chattanooga, TN; married Trudy Legge, 1982; children: two. **Education:** Harvard College, B.A. (art history); Columbia University, M.A. (Japanese history), 1980; Boston University, M.A. (English), 1988. **Avocational Interests:** Classical guitar. **Addresses:** Home: P.O. Box 419, Brookline, MA 02446.

CAREER

Writer. Worked for an English-language magazine in Tokyo, 1980-82.

WRITINGS:

- *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Knopf (New York, NY), 1997.

Memoirs of a Geisha has been translated into thirty-three languages.

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

Memoirs of a Geisha was recorded as an audiobook, Random House (New York, NY), 1997, and adapted as a film, written by Robin Swicord, directed by Rob Marshall, and released by Columbia Pictures and DreamWorks Entertainment.

WORKS IN PROGRESS

A historical novel set in the United States.

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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- *New York Times Book Review*, October 14, 1997, Michiko Kakutani, review of *Memoirs of a Geisha*, p. 32; February 14, 1999, review of *Memoirs of a Geisha* (audio version), p. 32.

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- *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (St. Louis, MO), February 22, 1999, Repps Hudson, "It's All in the Details," p. E1.
- *Sunday Times* (London, England), April 29, 2001, Cherry Norton, "Betrayal of a Geisha," p. 14.
- *Time International*, March 30, 1998, Hannah Beech, review of *Memoirs of a Geisha*, p. 49.
- *Times Literary Supplement*, December 12, 1997, review of *Memoirs of a Geisha*, p. 21.
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