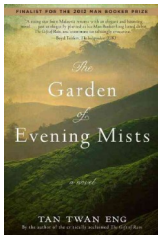


The Garden of Evening Mists



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This beautiful historical novel is set in an exotic place, rural Malaya, after World War II before it became the country of Malaysia. It's also one of the rare novels that is centered on a Japanese garden.

The narrator, Teoh Jun Ling, a woman of Straits Chinese heritage, has just retired from her career judging war criminal cases. Previous to that, she was a prisoner of war in a Japanese camp. In fact, she was the only person to survive; after being tortured there, she developed a great hatred for all things Japanese. Yet her dear sister, Yun Hong, who died at camp, always had a passion for Japanese gardens after she had visited the island nation as a child.

Yun Ling returns to the highlands to see old friends and also to visit the tea plantation of Yugiri where an ex-Japanese, Aritomo, has long worked a spectacular garden. Although she is repulsed at asking a favor from someone Japanese, she requests that Aritomo build a Japanese garden in her sister's memory.

He adamantly refuses. But then a few days later suggests an alternative. If she is willing to serve as his apprentice, he will teach her how to create her own.

The garden descriptions in this book are magical. You learn about techniques that help you to see the world in a new way. One of these concepts is *shakkei*, which is "borrowing from emptiness to create more emptiness." An example of *shakkei* would be creating a pond on your land that will reflect trees and sky. Another Japanese maxim about gardens is, "A pond guarded by waterfowl will bring peace to the house."

Complicating the plot, many Malaya war enemies still hide in the neighboring hills and commit random acts of violence against the population. As a former judge, Miss Teoh is a likely victim. Besides the intricate aspects of Japanese gardening, Miss Teoh also learns Japanese archery, and there is a vivid chapter written in the voice of a kamikaze pilot who misses his suicide mission because of engine trouble. In another chapter, Yun Ling and Aritomo visit a cave deep in the forest to find bird nests for soup.

And yes, a relationship develops between Teoh Yun Ling and Aritomo. But much in this novel is mysterious and unfolds gradually. Some truths only surface when Yun Ling returns to Yugiri several decades later as an old woman.

For books set in a neighboring country, try Indonesian Toer's *This Earth of Mankind*. It tells the story of a young Javanese man battling the strictures of colonialism on a tropical island.

Posted by Dory L. on October 7, 2013

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