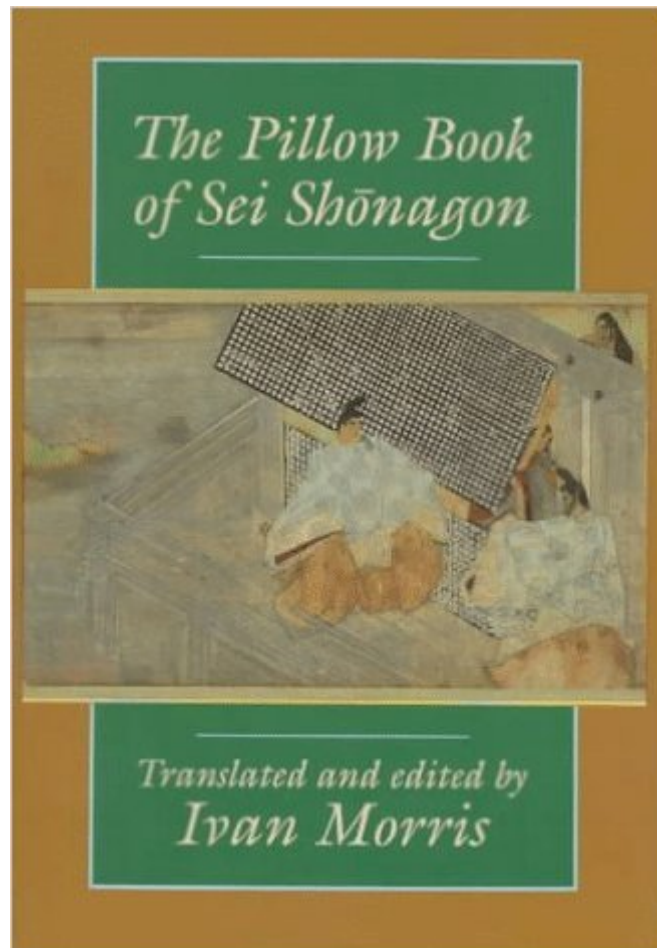


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The Pillow Book Of Sei Shonagon



Synopsis

The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon is a fascinating, detailed account of Japanese court life in the eleventh century. Written by a lady of the court at the height of Heian culture, this book entralls with its lively gossip, witty observations, and subtle impressions. Lady Shonagon was an erstwhile rival of Lady Murasaki, whose novel, *The Tale of Genji*, fictionalized the elite world Lady Shonagon so eloquently relates. Featuring reflections on royal and religious ceremonies, nature, conversation, poetry, and many other subjects, *The Pillow Book* is an intimate look at the experiences and outlook of the Heian upper class, further enriched by Ivan Morris's extensive notes and critical contextualization.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Relatively little is known about Sei Shonagon's life, except what is revealed in "The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon." What is known is that she was a court lady in tenth-century Japan, at the pinnacle of the Heian culture. Her reminiscences and thoughts add up to both an entertaining read and a glimpse back in time. The story behind the *Pillow Book* is that when Shonagon (possible real name: Nagiko) was serving the Imperial Family, the Empress received a bunch of notebooks that she couldn't use, so she gave them to Shonagon. Part diary, part lists, part essays on things around her, the *Pillow Book* pretty much defies classification. One of the most intriguing things about the *Pillow Book* is the glimpse into tenth-century Japan that it gives. Shonagon's stories are about little things

like flutes, disobedient dogs, clothes, and the Empress's ladies betting on how long it would take a giant mound of snow to melt (no, I'm not kidding). It makes the past seem a little less distant. And the people in it seem more like people and less like historical paper dolls. An example is the Empress chatting as her hair is being done one morning. It's pretty obvious that Shonagon was a bright and witty woman, although she could be quite a snob. However, her appreciation for simple pleasures will probably win over readers. Her charming love of beauty is often enchanting; she often lists things that she finds pleasing, such as moons, summer nights, flowers and willow trees. She also listed her pet peeves (such as parents worshiping a very unappealing child -- something that made me chuckle), things she found depressing or annoying. A stickler for form and etiquette, she had very precise ideas about how things should be done (right down to how lovers should act). "The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon" is beautifully-written and highly entertaining. You don't have to be well-versed in this sort of literature to appreciate this unique memoir by a unique woman.

I would like to disagree with the last reviewer and stress that Sei Shonagon was certainly not a highly intelligent statue and she was not particularly zen either. Shonagon was a lively wit and intellect, known for her erudition and scholarship. The thing that I found most wonderful about the Pillow Book was not its serene contemplation of nature, which was often a literary conceit in Heian times, but rather her robust enjoyment of life. In the Tale of Genji, the Gossamer Diary, and the Sarashina Diary, you find disappointed women, unhappy with the way their lives turned out and often betrayed by their men. Although several lovers are hinted at in the Pillow Book, Shonagon never lets anything get her down. The time she describes was probably not a happy time, her patron, the Empress was suffering due to lack of political support, and Shonagon's own future must have looked bleak. However, she never falls into self pity and rather treats us to a delightful look through the eyes of an extremely intelligent and realistic woman. Her description of the worst lover ever is hilarious today. I've read it to friends of mine who have never read any other Heian literature and it made them laugh. Shonagon's keen observations and ready wit shine through after a thousand years and a translation. It stands as a testament to the fact that somethings, love, laughter, friendship, and the relations between men and women never change.

I have just completed a reading of Ivan Morris' translation of the Sei Shonagon Pillow Book and I cannot recommend it enough. What is striking about the literature of Heian era Japan is not only that the great majority of it was produced by brilliant women, but that the parallels between the ancient human condition and that of the modern are amazing. Reading about the joys and annoyances in

the life the brilliant and quick witted Sei Shonagon are comfortingly familiar. In comparison to other literature of the time it is also an extremely candid look at a fascinating civilization. What sets Shonagon apart from her contemporaries is her ability to express uncensored opinions that are both hilarious, beautiful, and heartbreaking. She does not show the aversion to boldness that some of her (though equally brilliant) sisters of the ancient courts demonstrate. All the writing of this era is fascinating and becoming unfortunately harder to find (eg - the out of print status of the beautiful Izumi Shikibu Diary - Nikki) If anything, purchase this book to keep the brilliant voices of women past alive in our hearts, minds and presses today!

The book is timeless. It's not about Heian era Japan - after the not very taxing mental effort you can detach yourself from Oriental trappings, they are very secondary. The style is so pure and unpretentious there is no need to cut through the layers in a quest for the meaning. It's the best testimony to the eternal truth of the human character regardless of the century or country it lives in. Sei Shonagon's life was secluded, not rich in dramatic events, she did not travel much. She was mostly imprisoned in the palace, highly intelligent human statue. So she just went inward and the contemplation of the floor mat texture became as important as the details of the court life. She accepts everything with the same detached smile. Her time is filled with making a catalogue of words, senses, mountains and flowers - her universe. I think that book is vital to our world with its meganews-every-minute media and attention spans reaching zero. It shows how to sit back and look at all this with a small benevolent smile, craving neither isolation nor wild participation in the daily rush. This book was not intended as a key to happiness but it is. Take it.

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