Memoirs of a Geisha
by Arthur Golden

SUMMARY

When Memoirs of a Geisha was published in 1997, the insights that it gave into the Japanese world of the geisha created enormous interest and the novel became a bestseller. A film of the novel, directed by Steven Spielberg, is soon to be released.

Memoirs of a Geisha tells the fictional story of Chiyo, a young Japanese girl, whose family, unable to support her, sell her to a geisha house in the city of Kyoto during the 1930s. A geisha is a professional female companion for men in Japan, trained in music, dancing, and the art of conversation. The geisha training is a life of virtual slavery, and Chiyo finds herself working as maid to a malevolent geisha called Hatsumomo who, jealous of Chiyo’s beauty, makes her life utterly miserable. One day, as Chiyo weeps by a stream in the city, a wealthy man stops and comforts her. Chiyo, deeply moved by the man’s kindness, knows that she will never forget him. Two years later, a geisha called Mameha, as kind as Hatsumomo is cruel, takes Chiyo under her wing. Chiyo, now renamed Sayuri, becomes a successful geisha, renowned for her beauty. Then one day she meets the man who had comforted her by the stream. But life does not run smoothly for Sayuri and there are powerful obstacles that prevent the two from coming together...

ABOUT ARTHUR GOLDEN

Arthur Golden was born and brought up in Tennessee in the United States. He graduated from Harvard College in 1978 with a degree in art history, specialising in Japanese art. In 1980 he obtained a postgraduate qualification in Japanese History and also studied Chinese. He then went to work for a magazine in Tokyo. It was there that he met a young man whose father was a famous businessman and whose mother was a geisha. Golden was fascinated by this, and on returning to the United States, began a fictional novel about a young man whose mother was a geisha. However, realising that his real interest was in the secretive geisha world, he then resolved to write a novel about a geisha. While studying for a second postgraduate degree in English at Boston University, Golden started researching the geisha world. He did an enormous amount of research and the novel took many years to write. He wrote three versions of the book before it was finally accepted by a New York publisher. The authenticity of the novel brought Golden much-deserved success. The author lives in Brookline, Massachusetts, with his wife and children.

BACKGROUND AND THEMES

The Japanese geisha world is traditionally a world of ceremony and masks. Behind the elaborate make-up of the geisha girl lies a world that the ordinary Japanese person knows little about, and foreigners even less. Now, at the start of the twenty-first century, the geisha traditions have become largely a thing of the past. Arthur Golden’s achievement has been to prise open this world and reveal it in all its detail, so that the reader, fascinated – and sometimes shocked – is compelled to read to the end of the story.

In an interview, Golden describes how he was introduced to a Kyoto geisha just as he was about to revise his manuscript. The information she gave him about geishas "took my understanding of a geisha’s daily existence and stood it on its head. I had to throw out my entire 800 page draft and start (again)."

Golden now wrote another 750 page draft. Like his first draft, it was entirely fictional, describing the heroine, Sayuri, and her life from the point of view of an observer. However, editors, when they read the story, soon lost interest in it. Finally, Golden realised that he had not succeeded in making his heroine real. He now wrote a third draft in which the narrator is Sayuri herself. This technique brought the novel triumphantly to life – Sayuri lives and breathes in the pages of the story.

Sayuri’s story is in many ways a sad one. Uprooted from her family environment, she is treated with great harshness at the okiya (geisha house) to which she has been sold. She learns very quickly that geisha girls have little hope of love and warmth, either from other geisha girls, who are fiercely competitive, or from the men in their lives. A successful geisha will usually have a danna – a permanent lover who acts as her patron and pays her expenses. But as the geisha Mameha says in the novel, ‘A geisha who expects understanding from her danna is like a mouse expecting sympathy from a snake’.

But Sayuri, right from the start of the story, is driven by her need for love, and in the end she succeeds in becoming the mistress of the man who truly cares for her and has always seen beyond the geisha ceremony to the woman beneath. Sayuri’s journey to happiness is long, and her life undergoes many changes – the hardships of the second world war turn geisha life upside down and after...
MEMOIRS OF A GEISHA

the war, many of the old traditions are destroyed forever. Sayuri, however, has the resilience and intelligence to adapt – the last part of her life is spent in New York, as the successful owner of a Japanese teahouse.

Sayuri is a heroine that one is able to identify with. Though intelligent and beautiful, she is not perfect, and indeed, deeply hurts several people in her life. This is not done intentionally, but is a result of her desperate attempts to escape from the geisha world. And because of this, most readers, one suspects, can forgive her the pain she causes. Other characters in the novel are boldly drawn: the vindictive geisha Hatsumomo, the beautiful and kind Mameha who acts as Sayuri’s older sister, the ultimately pathetic geisha Pumpkin, once Sayuri’s friend, who turns on her and attempts to destroy her. These characters are all part of the large canvas that Golden paints, in a compelling story that will keep you gripped to the last chapters, where a clever surprise awaits the delighted reader!

ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK
Ask students to write down the first seven words that come into their heads when they think of Japan. Elicit these words from students and write them on the board. Then point at a word and ask the student who gave it to you to explain why he/she associates that word with Japan.

Translator’s Note and Chapters 1–3
Put students into pairs. Write the phrase ‘Translator’s Note’ and the titles of the three chapters up on the board. Ask students, under these headings, to write down the main points or events of the chapters without looking at the book. Then each pair joins up with another pair and students compare what they have written. They may want to make changes to their notes at this point.

Now elicit main points from students and write them up on the board under the chapter headings. Finally, students check the main points against the book itself.

Chapters 4–6
Put students into pairs. Ask them to write down ten things that they have learnt about Japanese culture. Elicit these things from students and write them on the board.

Chapters 7–9
Put students into pairs. Write the following question on the board for students to discuss:

What are the good things about being a geisha, in your opinion? What are the bad things? Does anything shock you?

Then have a whole class discussion about the questions.

Chapters 10–12
Put students into pairs. Ask them to write two or three paragraphs describing Sayuri. Ask students to say whether they like her or not and their reasons for this. Then have a class discussion.

Chapters 13–14
Put students into pairs. Ask students to imagine that Mameha comes to visit Sayuri in New York. Ask students to make the conversation between Mameha and Sayuri.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK
Divide the class into half and then divide each half into pairs. Ask one half of the class to think of arguments why the geisha tradition should continue in some form in Japan. Ask the other half to think of arguments why it should not continue. Then have a debate about this, choosing one student from one side to speak and then choosing another student from the other side to reply.

(Note: The geisha tradition does still continue in some form in Japan, but the women are free to leave the profession when they wish.)

GLOSSARY

The following teacher-led activities cover the same sections of text as the exercises at the back of the Reader and supplement those exercises. For supplementary exercises covering shorter sections of the book, see the photocopiable Student’s Activities pages of this Factsheet. These are primarily for use with class readers but, with the exception of the discussion and pair/groupwork activities, can also be used by students working alone in a self-access centre.

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Glossary

It will be useful for your students to know the following new words. They are practised in the ‘Before You Read’ sections of exercises at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Active Study Dictionary.)

Chapters 1–3
cherry (n) a small red or black round fruit with a long thin stem
courtyard (n) an open space that is partly or completely surrounded by buildings
futon (n) a flat soft cushion used for sleeping on
gi (n) a Japanese woman who is trained in the art of dancing, singing and entertaining, especially for men
kimono (n) a traditional piece of Japanese clothing like a long coat, that is worn at special ceremonies
mat (n) a small piece of thick rough material which covers part of a floor
memoir (n) an account written by someone of their life and experiences
rickshaw (n) a small vehicle used in Asia for carrying people, pulled by a person walking or riding a bicycle
shrine (n) a place that is connected with a holy event or person, that people visit to pray
talcum powder (n) a fine powder that you put on your skin after washing to make it dry
yen (n) the standard unit of money in Japan
Chapters 4–6
apprentice (n) someone who agrees to work for an employer in order to learn a skill
baron (n) a man who is a member of the lowest rank of the nobility
engagement (n) a party or social activity
fan (n) something you wave in your hand to cool your face
novice (n) someone who has no experience in an activity; a beginner
sumo wrestling (n) a Japanese form of wrestling
Chapters 7–9
Admiral (n) a high rank in the navy
crab (n) a sea animal whose body is covered in a shell and has two large claws on the front legs
im (n) a small pub or hotel
turning point (n) a time when important change starts
Chapters 10–12
cabaret (n) entertainment with music, songs and dancing
grunt (n) a short low sound that you make deep in your throat
parachute (n) the thing you wear on your back to make you fall slowly when you jump out of an aeroplane
stump (n) the short part of a tree or someone’s arm or leg that remains when the rest of it has been cut off
Chapter 3

1 Who says these words? Who to? Explain the situation.
   (a) ‘Oh, the day’s too pretty for such unhappiness.’
   (b) ‘Don’t make yourself late because of me. I’m only a silly girl.’
   (c) ‘Hatsumomo has driven other attractive girls out of Gion.’
   (d) ‘I’m like a river that’s stopped flowing because Hatsumomo is in the way.’
   (e) ‘If you think you can make Chiyo into a more successful geisha than Pumpkin, you can expect a big surprise.’
   (f) ‘I had no idea what a fine day this would be.’

2 Chiyo says: ‘I knew then that I would always keep the handkerchief and I would never forget him.’ Who is Chiyo talking about? Why does she feel she will never forget him, do you think? What part do you think this person might play in Chiyo’s life?

Chapter 4

1 Find the word ‘prospectus’ in your dictionary. Imagine that you are the head of the school for geishas. Write a prospectus for the school.

2 How do you think Pumpkin feels about herself? How do you think she feels about Chiyo? Give reasons for your opinion.

3 Explain what preparations Chiyo makes for her life as a novice geisha.

Chapter 5

1 Answer these questions.
   (a) Why doesn’t Sayuri go to many formal parties?
   (b) Why do Mameha and Sayuri have to keep leaving parties?
   (c) Why do Hatsumomo and Pumpkin keep following Sayuri and Mameha?
   (d) Why does Mamehan tell Sayuri that she must stay at home and not go to parties?
   (e) Why does Mrs Nitta decide to adopt Pumpkin?

Chapter 6

1 Answer these questions.
   (a) Describe Sayuri’s meeting with the Chairman and Nobu. What are her feelings towards both of them and what are her hopes and fears? Explain the reasons for her feelings.
   (b) Describe the relationship between the Chairman and Nobu.
   (c) Explain the meaning of these words: mizuage, sumo, Hataki-komi
2 What do you think is likely to happen in the next chapter? Write down your predictions.

CHAPTERS 7–9

Chapter 7

1 Are these statements true or false?
   (a) Sayuri’s kimono was accidentally torn.
   (b) Sayuri visits Dr Crab in order to be treated for a small wound on her leg.
   (c) Dr Crab was called by this name because of the way he walked.
   (d) Mameha tells Sayuri to behave in a very innocent way with the doctor.
   (e) During Sayuri’s visit to Ichikiri Teahouse, Hatsumomo defeats Sayuri yet again.
   (f) Nobu’s presentation of an antique comb to Sayuri pleases the Chairman.
   (g) Hatsumomo told Dr Crab a vicious lie about Sayuri.
   (h) Dr Crab’s acceptance of Sayuri’s gift of a box of ekubo proved that he had chosen to believe Mameha rather than Hatsumomo.
   (i) Dr Crab wins the bidding for Sayuri’s mizuage.

2 Write one or two paragraphs describing Sayuri from the point of view of Pumpkin.

Chapter 8

1 Put the following sentences in context and explain the situation.
   (a) ‘One day the okiya will be yours.’
   (b) ‘When you go downstairs, ask the maid to bring tea for Sayuri and me.’
   (c) ‘... Pumpkin passed me in the okiya with a worried look, avoiding my eyes ...’
   (d) ‘Only a fool would turn down an offer like the one Nobu Toshikazu has made.’
   (e) ‘I couldn’t give myself to the one man who would put him out of reach forever.’
   (f) ‘Maybe what you mean is that you want something more than kindness. And that is something you’re in no position to ask for.’

2 Work with a friend. Imagine that Hatsumomo is talking to a friend from another okiya and telling her about how Mrs Nitta has adopted Sayuri and the changes that have taken place as a result. Act out this conversation.

Chapter 9

1 Explain:
   (a) how Mameha persuades Mrs Nitta that General Tottori Junnosuke would be a good danna for Sayuri.
   (b) how Hatsumomo is finally defeated by Mameha and sent away from Mrs Nitta’s okiya.

2 What are your feelings towards Hatsumomo at the end of chapter 9? Try and explain why you feel this way.

CHAPTERS 10–12

Chapter 10

1 Explain the importance of these dates:
   (a) March 1939
   (b) December 1942
   (c) January 1943
   (d) Spring 1944
   (e) August 1945
   (f) Spring 1946
   (g) November 1948

2 Explain the part that the following men play in Sayuri’s life during this period:
   General Tottori The Chairman Nobu

Chapter 11

1 Answer these questions:
   (a) What do Nobu and Sato want from Sayuri, or what do they want her to do for them? Does she give them what they want?
   (b) What does Sayuri want from Pumpkin? Does she succeed? Say why/why not.

2 What do you imagine Sayuri’s feelings are at the end of the chapter? What do you think might happen next?

Chapter 12

1 Complete these sentences:
   (a) Sayuri plans to end her relationship with Nobu by ...
   (b) Sayuri asks Pumpkin to help her by ...
   (c) Sayuri’s plan doesn’t work because ...

2 Why do you think Pumpkin brings the Chairman to the theatre instead of Nobu? Can you understand Pumpkin’s action?

CHAPTERS 13–14

Chapter 13

1 In this chapter, Pumpkin and the Chairman tell Sayuri several things that surprise her. What are they?

2 Describe your feelings at the end of this chapter.

Chapter 14

Write one or two paragraphs describing Sayuri’s life, first in Kyoto and then in New York.

Describe how these characters change during the course of the story:
   Sayuri; Pumpkin; Hatsumomo