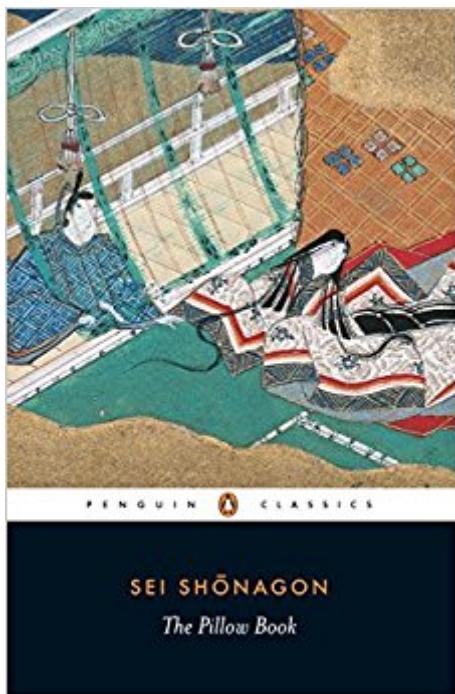


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The Pillow Book (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

The classic portrayal of court life in tenth-century Japan. Written by the court gentlewoman Sei Shonagon, ostensibly for her own amusement, *The Pillow Book* offers a fascinating exploration of life among the nobility at the height of the Heian period, describing the exquisite pleasures of a confined world in which poetry, love, fashion, and whim dominated, while harsh reality was kept firmly at a distance. Moving elegantly across a wide range of themes including nature, society, and her own flirtations, Sei Shonagon provides a witty and intimate window on a woman's life at court in classical Japan. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Sei Shonagon was born approximately a thousand years ago (965 is a likely date) and served as lady-in-waiting at the Court of the Japanese Empress during the last decade of the tenth century. Her father was a provincial official, but is best known as a poet and a scholar. It is possible, though unlikely, that Shonagon was briefly married to a government official, by whom she may have had a

son. Her life after her Court service came to an end is totally obscure. There is a tradition that she died in lonely poverty: but this is probably an invention of moralists who were shocked by her promiscuity and thought she deserved retribution. Our knowledge of Shonagon's life and character rests almost exclusively on the Pillow Book itself.

How recent can a life lived 1000 years ago seem to be? Sei Shonagon (c. 966–1017) wrote down her thoughts and observations while she was a lady-in-waiting to empress Teishi. Today those notes read as if one of us had written them down (also thanks to Meredith McKinney's translation) except for the strangeness of customs and the foreignness of living arrangements but this only adds to the adventure of reading the Pillow Book. Sei speaks to the reader in a familiar voice. She makes lists of pleasant things and those that are disagreeable. She likes everything that cries in the night, be it a bird or a cricket, but NOT babies. She finds women without interest who lead dull lives and rejoice in their petty little pseudo-pleasures despicable. She derides men who fall asleep and snore during a romantic visit at night. She loves a good sermon, as one would an interesting presentation, also for the fun of the outing to a temple, but complains about parking problems and the behavior of some carriage owners. In Sei's world, what people wore, how they combined the colors of their clothing was very complicated and most important for men and women so we get detailed descriptions of who wore what and how he or she looked in it (there was a Bureau of Clothing in the imperial palace). She has strong opinion about style and taste but she hardly mentions facial features and body types. In the love affairs and romantic interests, it was taste and sensibility, not physical appearance, that were the focus. She sights that the man you love and the same man once you've lost all feelings for him seem like two completely different people. It was a joy to read Sei Shonagon's Pillow Book in Meredith McKinney's translation.

The headline describes Sei Shonagon's peruse of language-- her attacks and retorts to court life and the individuals around her are classic and narcissistic in such a delicate way that one cannot help but be drawn in by her poisonous personality. She speaks for the guild of aristocratic folks in Japan and their lifestyles in this extraordinarily distinct and vivid piece of Japanese literary art.

Interesting translation.

Had I a time machine, I'd go and try to garner a kiss. Sei Shonagon is absolutely lovely with her use of language.

Very interesting and informative!

Good

Great book a must read.

This is a wonderful translation of the book that used to be described as "the original blog" and is now probably described as "the original Twitter account." There's some truth to both of those descriptions, but it's so much more than that--poignant, touching, and vexing. It has an astonishing power to make you suddenly feel exactly the same as a noblewoman who's been dead for about a thousand years and lived in a world almost unimaginably different from ours. Comparing Arthur Waley's loose and overly elaborated reinterpretation, Ivan Morris' too-edited and sometimes overly academic translation, and this translation, this one is my favorite by far. McKinney has impeccable academic/linguistic credentials, and was more scrupulous in compiling her source material (not leaving things out as I recall that Morris did--readers can skip whatever isn't interesting to them, which I think is far preferable). In addition, she also writes well in English, so it's generally a pleasure to read--it's translated well without being overly flowery. McKinney's notes are very detailed and explain almost everything that might confuse a modern and/or non-Japanese reader (almost to a ridiculous extent--occasionally it's not quite worth turning to the note!). This version is enjoyable for both readers who are new to the book and enthusiasts or academics who have encountered it before.

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