

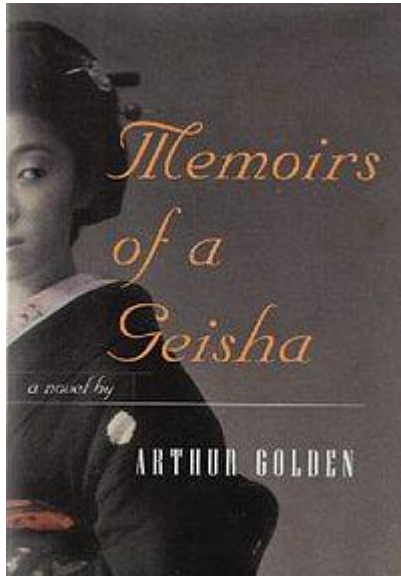
Memoirs of a Geisha

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This article is about the book. For the film, see [Memoirs of a Geisha \(film\)](#).

Memoirs of a Geisha



First edition cover

Author(s)	Arthur Golden
Country	United States
Language	English
Genre(s)	Historical novel
Publisher	Alfred A. Knopf
Publication date	September 23, 1997
Media type	Print (hardback & paperback)
Pages	448 pp (hardcover edition)
ISBN	ISBN 0-375-40011-7 (hardcover edition)
OCLC Number	37689141
Dewey Decimal	813/.54 21
LC Classification	PS3557.O35926 M45 1997

Memoirs of a Geisha is a novel by American author [Arthur Golden](#), published in 1997. The novel, told in [first person perspective](#), tells the fictional story of a [geisha](#) working in [Kyoto](#), Japan, before and after [World War II](#). It contains many Japanese terms for aspects of the geisha culture, occasionally using the Kyoto counterparts.

Eight years later, in 2005, a [film version](#) starring Chinese actress [Zhang Ziyi](#) as the titular geisha was released.

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[\[edit\]](#) Plot summary



This article's plot summary **may be [too long](#) or [excessively detailed](#)**. Please [help improve it](#) by removing unnecessary details and making it more concise. *(September 2010)*

The novel begins with an introductory note by the fictional translator, a [New York University](#) professor named Jakob Haarhuis, who is the fictional author of the novel and has interviewed the retired [geisha](#) Nitta Sayuri. She narrates in a flashback format with continuous references to the time between her career and the present.

Born Sakamoto Chiyo into the poverty-stricken fishing village of Yoroido on the coast of the [Sea of Japan](#), she is sold into an [okiya](#) (a geisha boarding house) in [Gion](#), the most prominent [hanamachi](#) (geisha district) in [Kyoto](#) when she is nine years old. Her mother is dying of what she suspects is bone cancer, and her father is very old and also believes death is coming. To Chiyo's dismay, her older sister Satsu is not sold into the Nitta okiya with her. Determined to run away, Chiyo remains in the okiya to begin training as a geisha, along with another young girl her age living in the same okiya, whom she (and everyone else) has nicknamed Pumpkin. The okiya is run by three women: the elderly and grumbling Granny, the money-obsessed Mother, the okiya's mistress, and Auntie, a failed geisha who trained alongside Mother as her "sister" and the only one of the three who is generally nice to Chiyo. It also houses just one geisha, the malicious Hatsumomo, who is also one of the most popular in Gion. Everyone is willing to overlook her cruelty (in particular towards Chiyo) because she serves as breadwinner for them, and Hatsumomo even uses Chiyo to her personal benefit, at one time [blackmailing](#) her by withholding her sister Satsu's whereabouts. She makes Chiyo swear her loyalty to her, letting her take the blame for a ruined [kimono](#) and even accusing her of stealing a [brooch](#). These add to Chiyo's debts considerably, on top of the fees paid for her acceptance into the okiya, her lessons and food among others. This only strengthens Chiyo's desire to leave, and she manages to find her sister, who has been sold as a prostitute and is also desperate to run away. Days before her escape, however, Mother learns (from Chiyo) that Hatsumomo has been hosting a boyfriend in the okiya for some time now – something that is forbidden among geisha – and the okiya doors are locked at night as a consequence.

Chiyo decides to escape via the roof, but fails and ends up breaking her arm, as well as immediately ceasing to be a geisha-in-training for dishonoring her okiya, reduced to being a maid.

A few years after this, Chiyo, crying in the street, is noticed by a man whom she immediately never forgets, giving her his handkerchief and money to buy [shave ice](#). Despite the change being enough to facilitate her escape once and for all, she donates it to the [Gion Shrine](#), praying to become a geisha in the hopes of seeing him again. Several years pass and Pumpkin becomes a geisha on her own under Hatsumomo's tutelage, while Chiyo remains a maid. However, she is unexpectedly taken in as a protégé by Mameha, the owner of the kimono Hatsumomo previously made Chiyo ruin and one of the very top geisha in all of Japan. Mameha persuades Mother to reinvest into Chiyo's training, and Chiyo becomes the geisha Sayuri, with Mameha as her "older sister" (mentor).

After she embarrasses Hatsumomo in a joke during an informal party, the latter uses her influence to sabotage Sayuri by spreading rumors and trailing her and Mameha from party to party. Mameha insists that she must create a plan to keep Hatsumomo out forever lest Sayuri's career ultimately die, and so arranges for her [mizuage](#) (portrayed as a deflowering "ceremony" for maiko as a step to becoming full-fledged geisha) to be bidden upon by several influential men, namely Nobu Toshikazu, the president of the Iwamura Electric Company in the novel; and reputed *mizuage* specialist "Dr. Crab", dubbed so by Sayuri due to his appearance. From Sayuri's point of view, the Chairman does not recognize her, but treats her with kindness; and as he is Nobu's business partner with a relationship known across the country, he would never bid against him for her *mizuage*. Unfortunately, Hatsumomo somehow learns that Mameha has something going on (although Sayuri herself is still unaware at this point of the plan), and ruins the image Dr. Crab has of her. It takes some amount of convincing from Mameha and Sayuri's combined efforts to enlighten Dr. Crab on this matter. Ultimately, he wins the bid for Sayuri's *mizuage*, paying a record sum that is enough to more than repay all of Sayuri's debts to Mother. This leads the latter, who had already been considering adopting Pumpkin as her heiress, to adopt Sayuri instead, ultimately destroying the two girls' friendship – Pumpkin was looking forward to the adoption so that she could have some kind of security in her old age. Hatsumomo, on the other hand, starts to spiral downward, now that she is no longer in favor, and is eventually thrown out of the okiya.

Nobu, on the other hand, bids to become Sayuri's [danna](#) (principal patron with a role akin to a husband), but loses to an army general. This, Mother believes, is because of the current political climate – Japan is on the brink of entering [World War II](#). When the war breaks out, many Geisha are evacuated to other cities to work in the factories. This is as good as a death sentence, as the factories require hard labor and are targets for bombs. Also, subsequently, the General is demoted and is unable to use any influence to send Sayuri to a safer spot. However, help unexpectedly arrives in the form of Nobu, who sends her far north to a kimono maker. Nonetheless, Sayuri and those close to her must endure a life of hard labor during the war that follows. After the end of the war, Nobu visits Sayuri and asks that she return to Gion, whose doors have opened again, to help entertain the new Deputy Minister Sato, whose aid can be instrumental in saving Iwamura Electric, the company the Chairman founded and Nobu runs, which was all but destroyed during the war.

Sayuri, Mameha and Pumpkin entertain the Minister together regularly. Some time after, Nobu formally begins proposals to become Sayuri's *danna*, leaving her in despair because

this would mean the end of any hopes to a relationship with the Chairman. On a weekend trip to the [Amami Islands](#) with Iwamura Electric, Sayuri devises a plan to humiliate herself with the Minister in front of Nobu, who, she is sure, will never forgive her for being with the Minister (whom Nobu despises despite his need of help from him). She arranges for Pumpkin to bring Nobu to a place where he will "stumble" upon Sayuri and the Minister making love. However, Pumpkin still harbors resentment towards Sayuri's adoption, and knows she is fond of the Chairman. She brings the Chairman to the theater instead of Nobu. Humiliated, Sayuri believes that her dream of being with the Chairman is lost forever, but afterwards, she receives a call to meet with Iwamura Electric. She is saddened as she anticipates meeting Nobu and discussing his patronage, but is surprised when the Chairman shows up rather than Nobu. Sayuri reveals that her acts in Amami were for personal reasons. The Chairman, in turn, expands on his feelings of debt toward and friendship with Nobu, and how he was not able to take away the woman his friend showed so much interest in. When he learned through Pumpkin that Sayuri's intention was for Nobu to see her with the Minister, he decided to tell Nobu what he had seen. The latter refuses to ever see Sayuri again, therefore freeing the Chairman to advance. She and the Chairman kiss, Sayuri's first kiss of true love.

The story ends with Sayuri recounting her subsequent life with the Chairman as her *danna*, and her eventual retirement as a geisha. She never freely admits that she has a son with the Chairman, but speaks of moving to New York City in order to avoid complications regarding inheritance of Iwamura Electric. The story concludes with a reflection on her life in New York and the important people in her life.

[\[edit\]](#) References to actual locations

Much of the novel is set in the popular [geisha district](#) of [Gion](#) in [Kyoto](#), and contains references to actual places frequented by geisha and their patrons, such as the [Ichiriki Ochaya](#). Part of the story is also set in the [Amami Islands](#), and Sayuri narrates the story from her suite in the [Waldorf towers](#) in New York City.

[\[edit\]](#) Controversy

After the Japanese edition of the novel was published, Arthur Golden was sued for breach of contract and defamation of character by [Mineko Iwasaki](#), a retired geisha he had interviewed for background information while writing the novel. The plaintiff asserted that Golden had agreed to protect her anonymity if she told him about her life as a geisha, due to the traditional code of silence about their clients. However, Golden listed Iwasaki as a source in his acknowledgments for the novel, causing her to face a serious backlash, to the point of death threats.^[1] In his behalf, Arthur Golden countered that he had tapes of his conversations with Iwasaki.^[2] Eventually, in 2003, Golden's publisher settled with Iwasaki out of court for an undisclosed sum of money.

Iwasaki later went on to write her own autobiography, which shows a very different picture of twentieth-century geisha life than the one shown in Golden's novel. The book was published as *Geisha, a Life* in the U.S. and [Geisha of Gion](#) in the U.K.

[\[edit\]](#) Film version

Main article: [Memoirs of a Geisha \(film\)](#)

In 2005, film director [Rob Marshall](#) made a film version of the novel. It stars the Chinese actresses [Zhang Ziyi](#) as Sayuri, [Gong Li](#) as Hatsumomo, and [Michelle Yeoh](#) (who is [Malaysian Chinese](#)) as Mameha; and Japanese actors [Ken Watanabe](#) as the Chairman, [Suzuka Ohgo](#) as Sayuri's childhood incarnation Chiyo, and [Youki Kudoh](#) as the adult Pumpkin.

Filming was primarily done in California, and in some locations in Kyoto, including [Kiyomizu-dera](#) and [Fushimi Inari-taisha](#). It was nominated for and won numerous awards, including nominations for six [Academy Awards](#), three of which – [Best Cinematography](#), [Best Art Direction](#) and [Best Costume Design](#) – were won.

Marshall was criticised in Japan for choosing a Chinese actress rather than a Japanese one for a role having so much to do with traditional Japanese culture.

[\[edit\]](#) See also



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- [Geisha](#)
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[\[edit\]](#) Footnotes

- ↑ Barry, Richard Lloyd (March 30, 2006). ["The Queen and the Geisha"](#). *The Times* (UK). Retrieved October 23, 2008.^[*dead link*]
- ↑ [A Geisha Scorned](#) *The Rough Guide to Japan: The Rough Guide*, by Jan Dodd, Simon Richmond. Published by Rough Guides, 2001. [ISBN 1858286999](#). Page 889.

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- McAlpin, Heller. "Night Butterflies; Memoirs of a Geisha". [Los Angeles Times](#), November 30, 1997. Pg. 8.
- [Dalby, Liza](#). "Geisha". 1983. pp. 54–64 (prostitution); pp. 109–112 ("deflowering" and mizu-age).

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