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Descending Stories: Showa Genroku Rakugo Shinju 1



Synopsis

THE STAGE IS SET A hapless young man is released from prison with nothing to his name, but he knows exactly what he wants: to train in the art of rakugo comedic storytelling. After seeing an unforgettable performance from one of Japan's greatest masters, Yakumo Yurakutei VIII, during his time in jail, he will settle for nothing less than to become apprentice to the best. Yakumo, notorious for taking no students, is persuaded to take him on, and nicknames him Yotaro "the fool". Yotaro has no formal training or elegance, but something about his charisma reminds Yakumo of someone from his past. The saga of a generation of love, art, and storytelling begins here.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I was prepared to not enjoy this. In fact, after the first few pages I had this, "Ohhhh man, this is going to be a snore" reaction. (I'm more of a Parasyte, Another, and One Punch Man person ... if you know what I mean.) But, about half way through reading, I realized that I was really enjoying it! The story simple but charming: a former prisoner seeks refuge and learning in the theater. He becomes the "pet" to the renowned actor/artist Yakumo. At first, he is used for his good-looks (and to carry luggage), but things soon change ... (no spoilers here). While the story is endearing, there is a strong message concerning the treatment of women. Adult readers may find truly gripping. Earlier in his life, Yakumo took in a female child after her father was killed. Now an adult woman, she wishes to perform Rakugo (in tribute to her father). However, both Yakumo and the conventions of the theater do not permit this. Her passion is undeniable and yet she is repeatedly told women cannot perform Rakugo. It is truly compelling to watch this young woman plead her case and be

denied repeatedly. In fact, since Rakugo is a dying art, there are implications that the art itself will die before women are permitted entrance into this world. The writing is superb (I would have never believed I would enjoy a manga about the theater). The artistry is captivating. It's everything I enjoy but didn't know it yet. This volume taught me a lesson ... maybe step out of horror manga once and while.

This is the first volume of the series. The tale revolves around the apprenticeship of an ex-convict who takes on the name Yotaro which in Japanese slang means "dunce" or "blockhead." He convinces a rakugo master named Yakumo to take him on as an apprentice, something Yakumo has never done before. The story is primarily character driven with three main characters, Yotaro, Yakumo, and Yakumo's ward Konatsu who is the daughter of a deceased rakugo master who died under mysterious circumstances. Konatsu pines to become a rakugo performer herself, but women are not allowed to perform (this has actually changed somewhat as there are now a few female rakugo performers of note, such as the comedienne Showko). In addition to learning about the people who perform in the rakugo universe, you also learn about the rakugo performance environment itself. In that, this is highly recommended for those who have already seen performances who wish to get a deeper understanding of how the rakugo environment works. E.g., a zenza is a beginner who gets to warm up an audience before the main performances and subsequently serving tea and snacks to customers as well as assisting the sensei in his preparations; a "yose" is the venue for the rakugo performances; rakugo performers' names can be passed on from master to apprentice (Yakumo's full name is Yakumo Yurakutei VIII as he is the eighth in succession to carry the name). I wouldn't call this a true introduction to the Japanese art form of storytelling, rakugo, as it assumes a familiarity with the art form at the outset. If you already have been introduced to the basics of the art form this doesn't really do that as it's more about the people and the environment of the performers. I have been to two "academic" presentations of rakugo where stories were told in English and Japanese; between the performances mini-lectures were given about the specifics of the form. The wikipedia article on rakugo does a good job of explaining it, and there are quite a few YouTube videos of rakugo performances in both Japanese and English. The art is fairly typical of manga and leans towards more realistic drawings of people rather than caricatures. The story and text lean strongly on Japanese culture and slang, some of which are explained in footnotes. For the non-rakugo initiate, Haruko Kumota's book might not be a good fit. However, if the reader is interested in learning about this part of Japanese culture, and true Japanese culture in general, Descending Stories is a real gem.

I actually ended up looking at the manga before anything, and I REALLY thought I would not like it after a page or so. It has a specific feel to it that is different, and that difference seems - slow - if you catch this in the wrong mood/at the wrong time. I actually paused because of this at first, only to return at a later time to find that this was much more engrossing than I was expecting. So not to spoil this, the description that is currently posted: "A hapless young man is released from prison with nothing to his name, but he knows exactly what he wants: to train in the art of rakugo comedic storytelling. After seeing an unforgettable performance from one of Japan's greatest masters, Yakumo Yurakutei VIII, during his time in jail, he will settle for nothing less than to become apprentice to the best. Yakumo, notorious for taking no students, is persuaded to take him on, and nicknames him Yotaro "the fool". Yotaro has no formal training or elegance, but something about his charisma reminds Yakumo of someone from his past." It is interesting how the anime for this captures certain things better than the manga does, and how the opposite holds true for other items. Something compelling within that "Showa Genroku Rakugo" did not completely capture in some ways (completely my opinion on this) are specific complexities within some characters. That is not to say that it did not house complexity of character of that it was not good; quite the contrary in fact. There is just something in the written medium that translates well in this, and that I enjoyed the two parts as companions. At the same time, "Showa Genroku Rakugo" actually showcases rakugo, where the manga interestingly leaves this out in some portions or adds its own style here and there. The anime is also artistically beautiful and interesting as well, and the two make something great when taken apart but especially together.

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