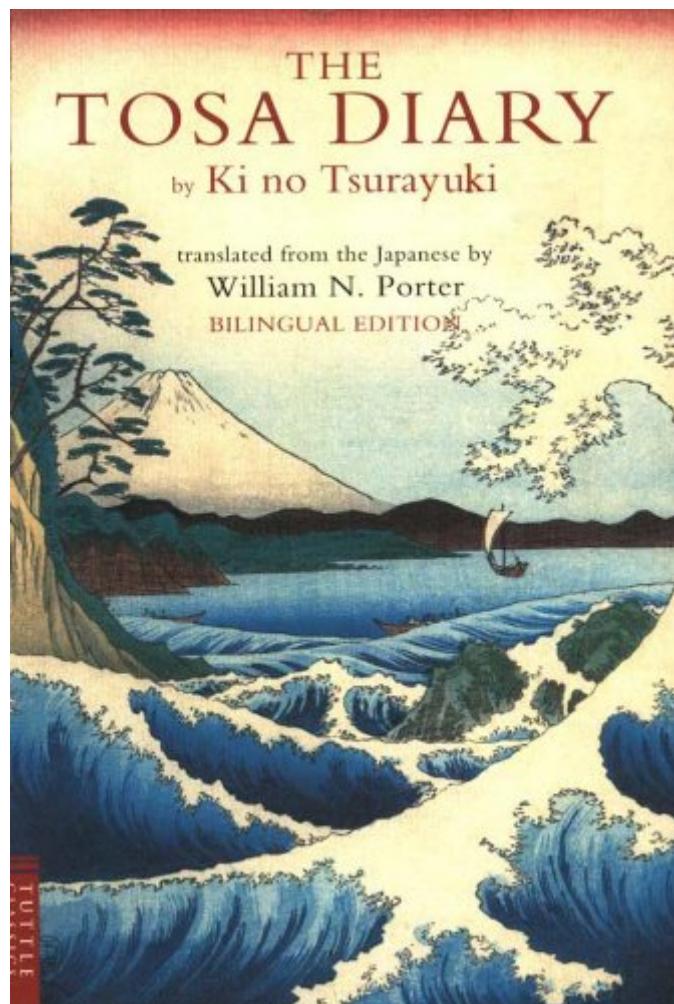


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Tosa Diary (Tuttle Classics)



Synopsis

The Tosa Diary reveals the life of a traveler in tenth-century Japan whose journey lasted 55 days on a ship from Tosa, where Ki no Tsurayuki served as governor, to Kyoto. This engaging translation provides the modern reader with a fascinating look at ancient Japanese life and travel, and is written with an artless simplicity and quiet humor. Seasickness, grief, and pride are just a few of the emotions readers will feel as Tsurayuki's personalized account unravels. Complete with a detailed introduction and thorough translation notes, The Tosa Diary can be counted among those that are labeled Japanese classics.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Excellent book, a sort of diary-fiction with Japanese on the facing pages and plenty of reference notes.

THE TOSA DIARY was written in 935 by a famous Japanese scholar, poet and government administrator named Ki no Tsurayuki who lived in the reign of the Emperor Sujaku. Tsurayuki had

served a term as Governor of Tosa on the island of Shikoku and while returning to the capital Kyoto he kept a diary to mark the journey. It is the earliest surviving work of Japanese prose. Other diaries of this period exist. The great novelist known as Murasaki Shikibu (the first name is a nickname taken from her book Genji Monogatori, the second is an honorary term her father was entitled to) kept a diary over the years 1008 - 1010. Sei Shonagon (again the names are ceremonial ones not personal) was a court attendant during the same period and kept a diary known as the Pillow Book. These diaries were widely circulated to show the refinement and culture of their writers. They are full of personal observations and details of court procedures unknown from any other sources. The Tosa Diary is written in a style of sophisticated simplicity. Tsurayuki writes as a woman would, without using Chinese characters, in hiragana, and his language is thus simple, everyday style, not literary. His book is a short one, 60 pages in my edition. The journey took less than two months to cover the 200 miles distance, rowing most of the way and stopping frequently for hospitality and shelter from bad weather. To while away the time the passengers composed tankas, as they would have done at home or at court. There are almost 60 tankas in the Tosa Diary, forming about half of its content and making the diary more like a poetry collection than we would expect. The tanka was a verse form of 5 lines and 31 syllables in the rhythm 5-7-5-7-7, and composing these extempore was a polite accomplishment of the culture (like doing YouTube videos today). There were many poor examples, which were mercilessly mocked and satirised. Good ones were very highly admired. Among these tankas in the Diary there are a number which express personal emotions, perhaps the reason why the diary was written in hiragana. Tsurayuki was accompanied on his journey by his wife and small daughter. On one occasion he is delighted and proud when the child recites quite an accomplished tanka. But he and his wife are in mourning for another daughter, who died in Tosa at the age of nine. The grief he expresses seems very real. These versions, made (with apologies) by the translator of my edition William Porter, give some idea of sense if not of poetry: Though I now return To my home the Capital Sad it is to think One for whom I mourn in vain Never will return again And again Could I e'er forget What is past I still should grieve If she were not here Seeking for her I should say 'Where's my little girl today?' And once more In the midst of life Cares in plenty though there be Yet the little child Whom I loved beyond compare Was by far my greatest care There are many other examples, along with poems which express delight at the seasons and the blossoms and make comments on places passed during the journey. In the same way the prose portions of the Diary sometimes give amusing details of people afflicted with seasickness or make tart comments on the behaviour of the steersman, but also tell how Tsurayuki tries to cheer up his grieving wife. The diary ends with the comment (Tsurayuki writes of himself in the third person) 'His

sorrows, which he can never forget, are more than he can ever express'. Then the final words: 'Well ' this must be torn up at once'. We must be thankful it wasn't, and that this glimpse of an intelligent and sensitive man from a distant era can still make sense in our own.

You know, there's always some level of hype about the "latest translation" and all, but this wonderful translation of "The Tosa Diary" by William Porter, originally published in 1912, demonstrates that we are not always so much more clever than those who came before. Porter is carefully faithful to the sense of the original while capturing its tone and mood in English with great talent. And his method of rendering the waka poems scattered throughout the story is inventive and interesting--though sometimes understandably a bit strained; he has taken the original and fashioned it into something that is true both to waka poetics and to the English poetics of his time (before T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and all that jazz), with a rhyming couplet at the end corresponding to the way the last two lines of a waka break off from the first three thereby completing the poem with a flourish. Compare his rendering of a poem by Ariwara Narihira with Helen McCullough's more conservatively literal (though not inferior) rendering, and you'll get a sense of Porter's distinctiveness here: Porter: "If the cherry trees/Nevermore burst forth in bloom,/Twould be better far;/For the saddest time of all/Is the spring, when petals fall." McCullough: "If this were but a world/To which cherry blossoms/Were quite foreign,/Then perhaps in spring/Our hearts would know peace." As for the story itself, it is a fairly interesting early attempt at prose narrative, though it is pretty uneventful and kind of drags in spots (one almost wishes the much-feared pirates had actually caught up with Tsurayuki's boat). The thing I found most significant about the tale, though, was the manner in which Ki no Tsurayuki here fleshes out in narrative form the principle he elucidates in the first paragraph of his preface to the "Kokinshu" waka anthology, i.e. poetry being the expression of people's emotional reactions to their experiences and sensual perceptions. Here we see that principle in action all along this otherwise rather tedious trip back to the Capital. Certainly, such moments were Tsurayuki's primary focus and interest, not "Pirates of the Inland Sea" per se. This book also has the original Japanese text on one side with the English translation on the other, so it is really handy for students of Japanese literature.

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