

# The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon

*The Diary of a Courtesan in Tenth Century Japan*

BY ARTHUR WALEY (TRANSLATOR)

AND DENNIS WASHBURN (FOREWORD)

SINGAPORE: TUTTLE PUBLISHING, 2011

144 PAGES. ISBN: 978-4805311080, HARDCOVER

Reviewed by Fay Beauchamp

## Pleasant Things

A slim book rests lightly in one's hand  
The apricot curving lips of the dust jacket woman  
Tile-red rectangle with white lettering  
Red-tile endpapers' pattern of faint white dots  
Soft leaves of text  
A few shiny pages with golden clouds, dark green tatami, and pines

## Things that Are Fitting

A 2011 edition of *The Pillow Book* pleasant to sight and touch  
A book whose origin is a "bundle of paper" given by an Empress to a Court Lady  
A celebration of paper after 1,000 years

## Sei Shōnagon's References to Paper (translated by Waley)

Her Empress passes "a picture or a book to look at" (34)  
Someone "brings her a note on light green paper, very prettily got up"(39)  
A note from the Captain "written on thin paper stamped with the white-flower pattern"(48)

## Disagreeable Quotes From Arthur Waley, As Editor:

"our intense curiosity about the past. . . sharply distinguishes us from the ancient Japanese." "[their]Intellectual passivity". . . differentiates them from us"(25)  
"the real religion of the Heian was the cult of calligraphy"(27)  
"the effeminate and decadent society of Heian"  
"the old attitude towards religion, half childish, half cynical"(30)  
"women, though quick at acquiring spoken languages, have seldom shown much aptitude for the study of difficult scripts"(126)  
[The last line of Waley's edition]: "women geniuses . . . all the more remarkable seeing that from the fourteenth to the end of the nineteenth century not a single woman writer of any note made her appearance in Japan."(127)

## Traditionally the first lines of Sei Shōnagon's *Pillow Book* (from the Penguin edition, translator Meredith McKinney)

"In spring, the dawn—when the slowly paling mountain rim is tinged with red, and wisps of faintly crimson-purple cloud float in the sky." "In summer, the night—moonlit nights, of course, but also at the dark of the moon, it's beautiful when the fireflies are dancing everywhere in a mazy flight. And it's delightful too to see just one or two fly through the darkness, glowing softly. Rain falling on a summer night is also lovely."(3)

*Sei Shōnagon's concrete, vivid style captures the beauty around her with a beauty of style where the word, the image, radiates meaning.*



This review begins with lists because Sei Shōnagon's *Pillow Book* perfected a genre where brief observations and vignettes offer a direct and immediate sense of a time and place. Her book is invaluable because it reflects

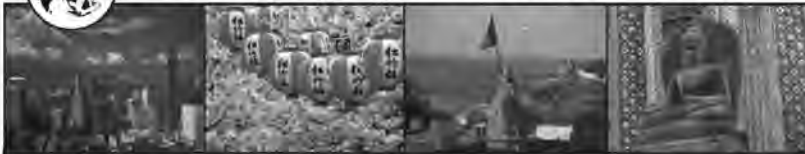
Eleventh Century Japanese court life; because of the beauty of her style; and because, in fact, women writers recognized for genius have indeed been scarce worldwide until 1750. As a primary text, *The Pillow Book* is useful in high school or college history and literature and interdisciplinary courses seeking to give multiple perspectives on the world. Sei Shōnagon's view is literally limited—by confinement in a few rooms, behind screens, or in a carriage that occasionally takes her to a festival or new home. Yet she and the Empress that she waited upon created a world of relationships, where women, as well as men and women, engage in repartee and contests they contrive for amusement; Sei Shōnagon records the quarrels, loss, love, and admiration. Here, senses of touch, smell, sound, and above all vision made life "delightful"—*okashi* is a word used so often that translators use different synonyms to avoid repetition. It is not only a particular world of Japanese aristocrats, but it is also an environment available to all of us—to look at how the dawn varies each morning or season; to listen to different sounds of insects; to appreciate cloth, ink, paper, even at a time when we gaze at computer screens.

Sei Shōnagon's concrete, vivid style captures the beauty around her with a beauty of style where the word, the image, radiates meaning. She anticipates haiku's brevity with its economy of the well-chosen word that so influenced writers like Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot and, through a modern style we in the West continue to admire. Her descriptions of scenes are much harder to write than students suspect, so assigning Sei Shōnagon is excellent for the thousands of expository and creative writing courses in high school and college.

If one wants then to teach Sei Shōnagon, the question becomes, what edition and how much of her writing to assign. This is a review of Tuttle's 2011 reissue of the 1928 Waley translation, in which a very restricted and idiosyncratic selection interweaves so much of Waley's comments with his translations that it is hard to discern where Waley ends and Sei Shōnagon's own voice begins. Worse, as I tried to illustrate with quotations from Waley, this edition is from an early part of Waley's career (1928 for a scholar who kept writing until his death in 1966). Later, he revised introductions himself because he was embarrassed by earlier biases. In the Tuttle edition, Dennis Washburn's introduction does a fine job in pointing out Waley's failings, but why bother? The students who need to read Sei Shōnagon don't need to learn about why Waley presented himself, although Jewish and perpetually snubbed by Pound and the Bloomsbury set, as if he were an integral part of a British ruling class. Even Washburn doesn't get to those complications. Twentieth century history is interesting but not to students



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who want to study gender relations in Heian Japan or how to master the intertwined skills of seeing and describing.

So what to do? One can use the current *Norton Anthology of World Literature*, which has a decent number of selections chosen and translated by Meredith McKinney, or for the same low price of the Tuttle book, one can get the Penguin Classics paperback *The Pillow Book* with McKinney's full translations replacing the older Penguin Classic with Ivan Morris as editor and translator. I recommend the Penguin edition so students can draw their own conclusions by reading through a primary text with more range, diversions, and revelatory passages than one might expect. Penguin also has drawings of curtains, costumes, and diagrams of Kyoto and the Inner Palace. The Tuttle 2011 Waley edition doesn't even include Sei Shōnagon's famous lines about the dawn, yet that description makes life worth living for another day.

But alas—the Penguin edition is a sorry replacement when it comes to paper. There is nothing here to suggest why a Kindle version would not be better. A teacher might assign the Tuttle edition to say, “This is a hardback book; the name for the paper cover is a dust jacket; the patterned paper glued so carefully to the back of the hardcover is called an endpaper, even when it is at the beginning.” Feel the pages, and try to describe that sense of touch. Look at the illustrations, and try to put into words the colors shining from each page as if from silk. Keep this book because you may never own another that will fit in your hand so well. *The Pillow Book* deserves that. ■

FAY BEAUCHAMP is Professor of English and Director of the Center for International Understanding at Community College of Philadelphia. She has published articles on the Chinese poet Bai Juyi in *EAA* (2009) and on the Asian Origins of Cinderella in *Oral Tradition* (2010). She is currently directing a project funded by the Japan Foundation's Center for Global Partnership for the Japan Studies Association and working on a study of connections between *Ramayana* and *Journey to the West*.



Drawing of Sei Shōnagon by Kikuchi Yosai (1781–1878).  
Source: <http://tiny.cc/obwj6w>.

The Pillow Book is one of the three most important works of its kind in Japanese literature, and Professor Morris has given it handsome treatment., Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland. Gives all sorts of insights into the court life of the times, and into the worldly character and mentality of its author. It is not the complete Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon, but rather contains only a portion of the whole work. I wish this had been more clearly indicated in the product description. In any case, you should be aware that if you order this version you are not getting the whole thing. The Pillow Book is the precursor of a typically Japanese genre known as zuihitsu (occasional writings, random notes) which has lasted until the present day and which includes some of the most valued works in the country's literature. In his scintillating volume, The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon, which contains translated extracts totalling about a quarter of the original work, Arthur Waley says: As a writer she is incomparably the best poet of her time, a fact which is apparent only in her prose and not at all in the conventional uta [31-syllable poems] for which she is also famous.

The Pillow Book is one of the three most important works of its kind in Japanese literature, and Professor Morris has given it handsome treatment., Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland. Gives all sorts of insights into the court life of the times, and into the worldly character and mentality of its author. It is not the complete Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon, but rather contains only a portion of the whole work. I wish this had been more clearly indicated in the product description. In any case, you should be aware that if you order this version you are not getting the whole thing. Brief Biography of Sei Shonagon. Sei Shonagon was a real-life figure in Heian Japan. She was the daughter of Kiyohara no Motosuke, a provincial governor and noted poet. Little is known of Sei's biography beyond the experiences she records in The Pillow Book. Even her personal name isn't known for sure. Sei is a variation of the family name, Kiyohara, and Shonagon might be a reference to a husband's or other relative's rank. She was probably married to a courtier named Tachibana Norimitsu while still in her teens, and they may have had a son, but the marriage does not seem to have lasted.