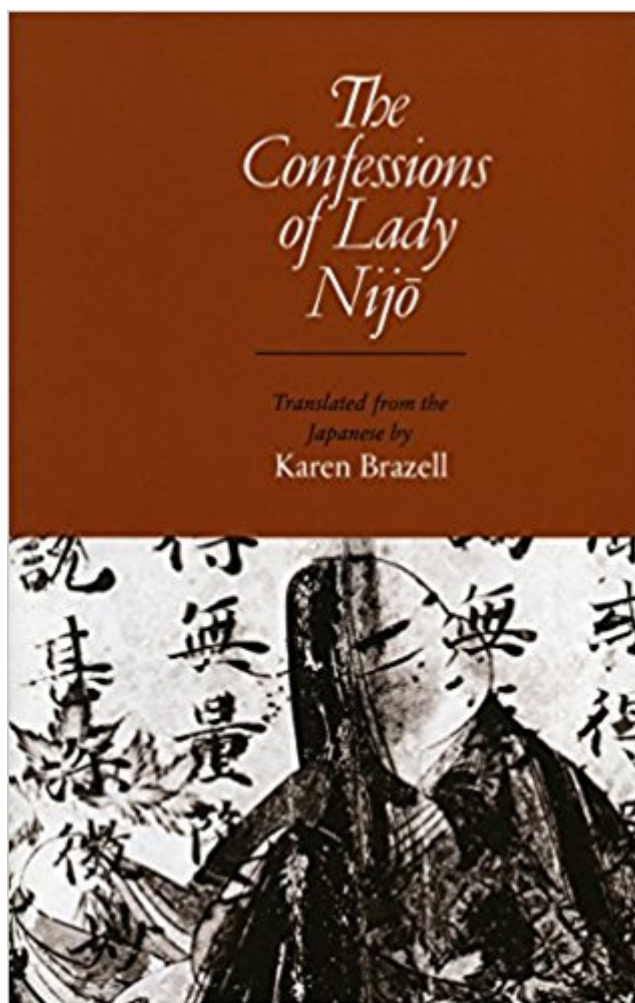


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The Confessions Of Lady Nijo



Synopsis

In about 1307 a remarkable woman in Japan sat down to complete the story of her life. The result was an autobiographical narrative, a tale of thirty-six years (1271-1306) in the life of Lady Nijo, starting when she became the concubine of a retired emperor in Kyoto at the age of fourteen and ending, several love affairs later, with an account of her new life as a wandering Buddhist nun. Through the vagaries of history, however, the glory of Lady Nijo's story has taken six and half centuries to arrive. The Confessions of Lady Nijo or Towazugatari in Japanese, was not widely circulated after it was written, perhaps because of the dynastic quarrel that soon split the imperial family, or perhaps because of Lady Nijo's intimate portrait of a very human emperor. Whatever the cause, the book was neglected, then forgotten completely, and only a single manuscript survived. This was finally discovered in 1940, but would not be published until after World War II in 1950. This translation and its annotations draw on multiple Japanese editions, but borrow most heavily from the interpretations offered by Tsugita Kasumi.

Book Information

Paperback: 288 pages

Publisher: Stanford University Press; 1 edition (June 1, 1973)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0804709300

ISBN-13: 978-0804709309

Product Dimensions: 5.6 x 0.9 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 15.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 12 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #297,779 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #27 in [Books > Literature &](#)

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Customer Reviews

"The recent discovery of the only surviving manuscript of The Confessions of Lady Nijo created a sensation in the world of Japanese literature, not only because this journal of a court lady was previously unknown, but because it is a literary masterpiece. It describes with extraordinary honesty and beauty the life of a woman whose lovers included emperors, statesmen, and priests. Surely there can be few comparable books in the world, and Karen Brazell's fine translation makes it a joy

to read." —Donald Keene,"Karen Brazell's translation . . . is given in unaffected contemporary idiom and assisted by introduction and notes of just the right scope. This is the kind of work to revive that much deprived person, the general reader. . . . We owe thanks to Lady Nijo and to Karen Brazell for making available to us a fine story and fresh understanding of human life. In this translation it seems much more human than strange even after these seven centuries and in a different cultural setting." —Earl Miner, *Journal of the Association of Teachers of Japanese*"A fascinating work for several reasons, among them its precise documentation of ways of life and feeling that are wholly dissimilar to the West's." *The New Yorker*

In about 1307 a remarkable woman in Japan sat down to complete the story of her life. The result was an autobiographical narrative, a tale of thirty-six years in the life of Lady Nijo.

This is a literary master piece! History comes alive. Karen Brazell takes you into the ancient world of Japan in a way no author ever has.

The fascinating autobiography of a highborn woman in Japan at the end of the 12th and beginning of the 13th centuries. Her life revolved completely around the court until she became a nun and started going on distant pilgrimages. She gained some independence then, but had really been at the mercy of men before. Some loved her, like the Emperor Go-Fukakusa and others, some just used her. It is interspersed with poems, like all women's writings of the period.

This is a moving and remarkable autobiography. First, there is the quality of the writing itself, full of beautiful short poems ('A hidden love and tears/enough to form a river-/were there a shoal of meeting/I would drown this self of mine'), comparisons ('my years had passed as quickly as a racing horse glimpsed through a crack') or metaphors ('life is more fleeting than a dream within a dream'). It confirms Lady Nijo's saying that 'the most important accomplishment for a beautiful woman is the ability to write poetry'. Secondly, there is the extraordinary eventful itinerary of Lady Nijo emotionally as well as physically. Emotionally, she cannot forget her father ('I shed tears of longing when I recall the care my father gave me') or her first lover at the age of 14 (the Emperor). Physically, she gives birth before her 18th birthday to two children from different fathers and in her later life struggles for survival. Thirdly, it gives an interesting look at court life in this period: drinking, singing, playing music, competition between the concubines and promiscuity showing general human characteristics ('She complains that I am treating you as an empress' or 'This road is too easy to be

interesting'). But this book also paints aspects of common life: the fact that many children are taken away from their parents, religious customs or prostitution. Fourth, it gives a general impression of the importance of religion and psychology: the mighty influence of the karma principle ('I am convinced that this unbearable passion is simply the working out of some karma from the past') and the importance of dreams ('I just dreamed that I turned into a mandarin duck and entered your body'). The overall tone is melancholic ('No matter how many tints the autumn leaves reveal, once the wind rises they do not last long'). K. Brazell's translation as well as her notes are excellent. I would have preferred an afterword instead of an introduction which reveals already the fate of the author. This is a truly moving tale, not only for Japanese scholars.

Extraordinary look into the life of a 13th century concubine who definitely had something within her that wasn't common among her contemporaries of the time. I was introduced to Lady Nijo many years ago when taking a dramatic literature course in college during which reading Caryl Churchill's 'Top Girls' was assigned to us. I absolutely loved the play and it inspired me to learn more about the women Ms Marlene hosted at dinner. I love this book.

This book is set about 200 years after the events described in the diaries of Sei Shonagon and Lady Murasaki (and Tale of Genji), however, this memoir reveals a world fossilised, doing its very best to imitate the 'elegant' world shown in Lady Murasaki's masterwork Tale of Genji. What comes across is a very conservative society, and if you weren't told the dates of the events taking place you would believe they were set in the 10th or 11th century. The writer of this memoir is a very independent and sensual woman - who took her lovers regardless of the consequences. The second half of the memoir details her travels around Japan's sacred shrines as a nun later in life. Lady Nijo constantly finds on her travels that the world outside Heian-Kyoto has changed since the days the poems she learnt at court as descriptions of Japan's famous sights were written. Some of the old 'famous' sights have gone and she finds new ones to fill their hole. If you've an interest in these old Japanese diaries and memoirs, this should be added to your list. It's a later, and lesser known book, but worth the effort of reading.

For such an interesting book its extraordinary so few people have left a review. Anyways, much of the court we see in the novel through Lady Nijo's eyes is truly fossilized as one reviewer said before, they even go so far as to try and copy musical concerts after those written about in Genji, and there are a great many allusions in the narrative to the Tale of Genji. The diary itself is extremely

enjoyable to read, poignant at times, as for instance when she runs after Gofukakusa's funeral procession barefoot down the street until she loses sight of them. Other times it's extremely funny, I'm pretty sure Sei Shonagon mentioned the holiday where the women get slapped with sticks, the same was true with Lady Nijo, except she got revenge on the retired emperor by sectioning off the halls and setting up other ladies to keep an eye out for him, when he comes, they descend and all start whacking him with these sticks for revenge. After that there was a huge uproar within the court that the women actually smacked royalty around. Overall Lady Nijo is very real, and very human in her writing, it makes for an interesting literary and historical read of the Kamekura age. One thing I personally enjoyed was that Lady Nijo was not as vain and condescending as Sei Shonagon, for instance when she's a travelling nun, Nijo actually speaks with commoners, ex-prostitutes, etc etc.

It's an intriguing read, but a little difficult to get into.

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