

How to Be an American Housewife by Margaret Dilloway

I really enjoyed this book and it turned out to be an unexpected story...not what the title insinuates. This book tells the story of the power of family, culture, secrets and forgiveness. It was a great example of perseverance and stoicism. After reading several other stories about Japanese culture, I felt that it held true to the traditions of the Japanese culture and to their pride and resolution to go beyond what their history depicts.

Shoko's life from the beginning seems to be a story of survival and strong will. When she and her brother Taro are kidnapped by the nanny, it looks like their little lives would be cut short, but Shoko prevails and becomes the heroine of her own life, as well as Taro's. Shoko seems to never truly have control of her life as a woman in shadow of post-WWII Japan, but she kind of does. She may not have the education she craves but she still takes the opportunities she has to leave her small town and work to make her own money (and help support the family). As a woman, her society expects her to accommodate her life for men. First she must change her life when her father changes their societal status and becomes a priest. Then she is the sole provider of money so that her brother Taro can get an education. She is then forced (by Taro and her father) to flee Japan with a baby and with an American husband. Her husband then forces her to keep Mike's conception a secret. Shoko embraces America and leaves Japanese culture and language behind to accommodate her husband and children. Shoko does not return to Japan because Taro cannot forgive her "choices". Shoko also doesn't return to Japan because of her American husband, Charlie. Shoko's son Mike is a disappointment...she raised him in the Japanese way but in America so he is a clash of two cultures. Although, Shoko is bound by the constraints of her Japanese culture, she still prevails after time heals their family secrets. She is the strength of her family.

Mike is Shoko's oldest child and biggest secret. I felt that Shoko tended to treat him with more care than she did with Sue because of his gender and possibly to make up for his real father's death. Shoko gave Mike free reign of his life when he actually needed more control. She needed to be more controlling with him versus giving him freedom like she thought Japanese boys needed. Mike is an anomaly because he is 100% Japanese but his mentality is completely American. It seems like the whole family has given up on Mike and has no hopes for his future.

I feel that Charlie knew that Shoko was pregnant with another man's child from the beginning but that his love and admiration for her was always genuine; therefore, he didn't care about Shoko's past. I do believe that he never wanted to control her but that society created the man versus woman dichotomy. I do think that in their actual household, Shoko ruled the roost. Charlie liked Shoko's control over the household and accepted anything that she wanted. He embraced her culture and wanted to keep her life from Japan alive for her in America. I think he was truly in love with her from the beginning.

Taro is a complex character because he owed so much to Shoko (his life, education, family) and yet could not forgive her for marrying an American soldier (even though it was his father's wish). I almost feel that he used Shoko as the scapegoat for the ruining of Japan. She was the example of the old Japan relinquishing itself to American culture literally and symbolically. Shoko saves Taro's life when he is an infant but pride

prevents him from forgiving her. His forgiveness doesn't come easy but it seems like he was ready to salvage their relationship and he seemed like he missed her. I think that he never wanted to banish her but that his stubbornness prevented him from embracing anything foreign.

The only man that gives Shoko a choice and a chance at true freedom is Ronin. It is ironic that he is what ends up binding her to a life of secrecy. Because of his lack of a societal foothold, Ronin had no prejudices for gender or rankings. He saw America as his opportunity to shed his label and to make opportunity happen for him, and sequentially Shoko. His true love for her was so sweet and innocent.

Sue and Helena are Shoko's hope for the future. Isn't it ironic that they are women and not the typical expectation of hope in Japanese culture or even American culture? These two ladies are only $\frac{1}{2}$ and $\frac{1}{4}$ Japanese but embody more of the Japanese culture and fully embrace its history. It seems like Sue has always wanted to be Japanese but that she was hindered by her mother and by society. I loved that she embraces her family's past and that she travels to Japan and helps her mother unravel all of the family secrets. She is brave, like Shoko, and is passing her bravery on to her daughter. Sue may have been the "sleeper" of the entire book.

This story reminded me of stories from my family's history where poverty and circumstance really determined your "Lot in life". So many dreams of education and success are doused by the reality of your place in the world. While some have all and continue to do so, others have little and do what they can to better themselves...sometimes by a lot and sometimes by very little. The expectations of our lives are mostly due to free will but are also determined by our opportunities. It's what we do with those opportunities that makes a difference. It's also a perspective on our acceptance of what is and finding satisfaction with the lives we live.

Is Taro ungrateful? Is Taro selfish? Or is he just playing to the expectation of Japanese culture?

Is culture and pride enough to hold a grudge? Is this the only reason Taro cannot forgive Shoko's pregnancy and American marriage?

Is Shoko the heroine? Is Sue the heroine? Why?

Why is there more complexity to Sue's character than Mike's?

Why is Mike so underwhelmed by the news of his biological father? Is his reaction in accordance with the news or with his personality?

Do the men in this book control Shoko to be cruel or because of how our cultures treat women and men?

What are similarities of the American and Japanese cultures? Differences?

What are your thoughts on the anecdotes at the begging of each chapter? Where you amused by the titles to the "fake" book chapters?

Do you feel constraints by your culture? Gender? Family? What family issues do you relate to in this book?

Is this book about gender (man vs woman), culture (Japanese vs American) or family (Shoko vs Taro)? What perspective do you feel was strongest?

P.S.

How to Be an American Housewife

The quotes from the fictitious book are hilarious. Which was your favorite? Mine were:

-“It is not advisable to teach your American-born children Japanese. It will only confuse their language development...They are Americans and should learn only English, as Americans do. (page 200)” In today’s political climate, it seems fitting that we are discussing immigration and refugees. I am American born with Mexican heritage and I do speak fluent Spanish. I do feel embraced by some and repelled by others. Why is it that other countries “allow” citizens to speak several different languages and yet our “melting pot” looks negatively at it even in 2016?

-“Child-rearing in America is a good deal more callous and cold than in Japan. Americans do not believe in letting the baby sleep with them, or carrying them all the time, the way a Japanese mother does. They take a far more disciplinarian approach to child-raising than we do in Japan. (page 156)” There are so many contradictory parenting approaches these days and this quote really articulates how Americans truly are different in their parenting skills. With my first child, I tried to instill the strict baby sleeping schedules and no sleeping in the bed and not carrying him all of the time. But with the birth of my second son, I really changed my tune. Now they both are allowed in our bed and I hold them as much as possible. I realized that the strictness was hard on all of us and now we have a more peaceful co-existence.

-“Getting used to American negativity can be difficult. Americans do not politely defer or help you save face; they simply say, ‘No,’ loudly and emphatically. Being aware of this phenomenon will help prevent shock. (page 38)” This quote is hilarious because it is so true. Why are we so rude?! It is hard to see ourselves through others eye but I know that’s what other cultures think of us. When we moved to Germany for our first military assignment, the one thing we were told was “Don’t act like an American!” It did make living in a foreign country much more pleasant because we got along and understood their culture.