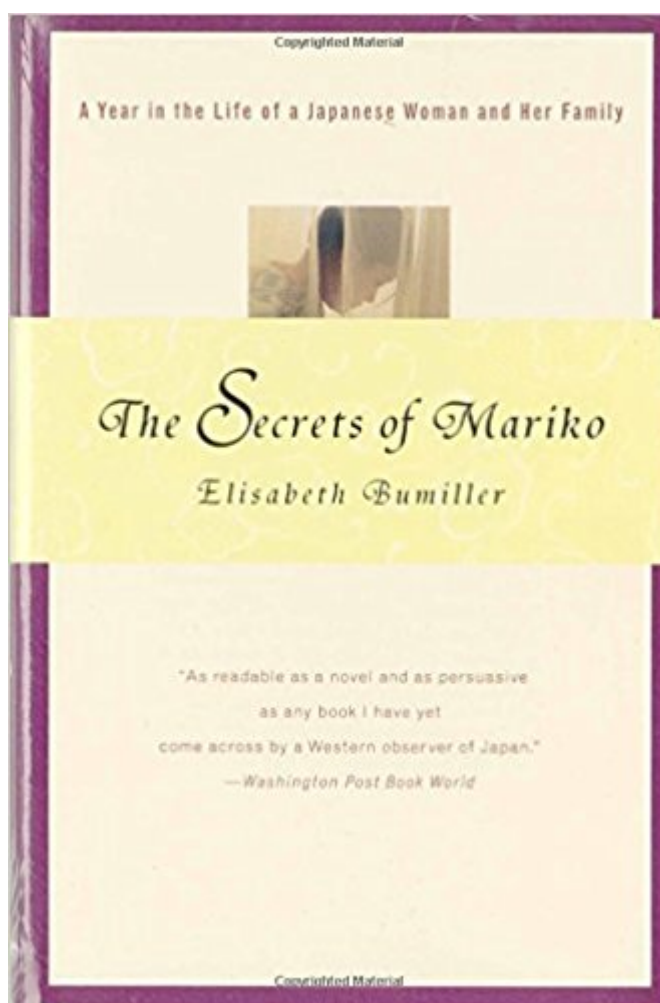


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# The Secrets Of Mariko: A Year In The Life Of A Japanese Woman And Her Family



## Synopsis

As it follows a Japanese housewife named Mariko Tanaka over the course of a year, *The Secrets of Mariko* transcends reportage to yield the kind of human insights we expect from literature. Meet Mariko, a cheerful, overscheduled woman who cares for three children, two aging parents, and an unresponsive husband. As readers watch Mariko take part in PTA meetings, bicker with her teenagers, and pursue independence through her part-time job, they come to see Mariko as someone whose dreams and disappointments mirror our own.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

An examination of contemporary Japanese society as seen through a year in the life of a middle-class woman. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc.

While interviewing in Japan for the *Washington Post* in 1991-92, journalist Bumiller chronicled through an interpreter a year in the life of Mariko, "an ordinary Japanese woman," and her family and neighborhood. Her struggle to balance her own needs with those of her family is a "reminder that certain universalities transcend borders." Like the author's *May You Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons* (LJ 5/1/90), about Indian women, *Mariko* is best suited to young adults despite its occasional clichés. In 1910 Makiko Nakano (1890-1978) was a newlywed daughter-in-law with responsibilities in a busy family community that functioned both as a residence and as a store. Likable, assiduous Makiko detailed changes taking place in her early-20th-century Japanese town and domestic life in her diary. Nakano Takashi's 1981 publication of his mother's record is in

Japanese-language collections of many university libraries. Translator Smith (Japanese, Cornell Univ., ret.), who is associated with the creation of *The Diary of a Japanese Innkeeper's Daughter* (Cornell Univ. East Asia Program, 1984), provides all the relevant explication, notes, maps, and illustrations a researcher of modern Japanese social history could desire. Both works offer insights into the daily lives of 20th-century Japanese women and help dispel the mythology; both are recommended for public library and women's studies collections, though Makiko's Diary is essential for academic and scholarly libraries. ?Helen Rippier Wheeler, formerly with SLIS, Univ. of California-Berkeley, Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc.

If you are an American with an interest in Japan, this is a great read. Bumiller does a great job of drawing comparisons between Japanese and American culture without making one or the other sound wrong or alien. Mariko herself is a fascinating person and the story of her childhood, marriage and family, which gets teased out throughout the course of the book, is riveting. I felt like I was reading a novel, but a particularly poignant and honest one.

The best books about other cultures are those that start at the bottom and work up. In this book Elisabeth Bumiller interviews a Japanese women and her family, friends and others linked to the family to give a very detailed picture of a Japanese family from 1991 to 1992. We get to join festivals, sit in at PTA meetings, visit mobsters, learn about local politics, find out what family issues the Japanese have and even the family's view on America and international events. NOTE: The author has very strong views of her own and will state them, but don't let that get in the way of the rest of the book. She digs up a LOT of information and makes it clear that while the Japanese might have different ways of thinking or doing stuff, they do have some of the same goals, dreams and fears.

This book about Japanese society is written from the point of view of an American. It is highly readable and enjoyable, but here and there are typical American's biases. If you want to know why American's way of living is different from Japanese's, this is the book for you. If you want to know why Japanese's way of living is different from Americans, look for a more intelligent book.

An OK story, but still a very boring, drawn-out, and poorly-written read. It does tell you a little about Japanese culture. But I didn't actually learn anything from this book, nor was I grabbed by the story or characters. Not my favorite book/story.

This book provides glimpses of the lifestyle of an average Japanese housewife. Written by a journalist rather than an anthropologist, the author explores the life and important events of Mariko over the course of a year. Through the author's interviews, we learn the history of the family and the views of Mariko, her husband and children on such topics as family life, parenting, and work. As a journalist, Bumiller is quite interested in Japanese opinions and attitudes about current events, so Mariko and her family explain some of their complex feelings about the U.S. We visit the children's schools and work places, and see where they go on vacation. Along the way, Bumiller also interviews prominent Japanese who are in some way connected to aspects of Mariko's life, such as politicians, the head of the mob, and a talk show host. By the end of the book, readers are familiar with many details of average Japanese family life, something that would be unattainable unless one were to either grow up in Japan or live for long enough in Japan to develop close friendships with locals. But even Bumiller points out that she has only scratched the surface, and there is much about Mariko's life that we can never comprehend just by reading a book.

I have just finished this book, and found it thoroughly enjoyable in a sober sense. Each chapter gave me something to think over; the book left me with a deeper understanding of Japanese culture and the way relationships are intertwined in that nation. As I am studying Japanese, I may have found this book much more interesting than someone who has no particular interest in Japan. That said, if you have an open mind and interest in the culture, there's a good chance you'll love this book as much as I did. At times, it seemed the author was a little too self-seeking. I would certainly hope she has kept in some form of contact with Mariko, and perhaps passed on some royalties from the book - given the massive amount of time Mariko and her family spent with the author (she did give Mariko's family a gift at the end, but to me that didn't seem enough). Aside from that, the book was a real eye opener and I couldn't put it down. Bear in mind the author spent time with Mariko between 1991-1992, so by now there will certainly be some cultural discrepancies and perhaps attitude changes.

After having lived in Japan for almost twenty years it was a pleasure to read *The Secrets of Mariko*. Most books portray the Japanese with an overdose of stereotypes and generalizations so people who are not familiar with Japan can get inaccurate ideas. By interviewing Mariko and her family and acquaintances in depth, the author of this book managed to come up with a fairly accurate portrayal of modern Japanese life. Even though the interviews took place in the

early 1990's and Japan has changed since then, a reader can get a pretty good idea of what life is like for many Japanese families today. Mariko's family situation is, of course their own and is unique in many ways. The family's attitudes and ideas, however are not unique. If a reader wants to get a good understanding on modern Japanese life this is an excellent book to read.

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My main impression of this book is that it would have made an excellent (long) magazine article or series. It seriously needed some editing to hit the highlights instead of going on and on with details. For instance, the whole storyline of the trees being razed for a parking lot, and the way the author could never fully understand it, was quite tedious. That being said, I did read an advance copy of the book, so it may have improved before publication. (I still think it would have been better as an article) This book does provide a great peek into an ordinary life, and I've come away with a different view of certain aspects of Japan. I was surprised to learn of how the teenagers fight with their parents, and dismayed to see how much time the Japanese man spends at work instead of with his family (or anything else, for that matter).

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