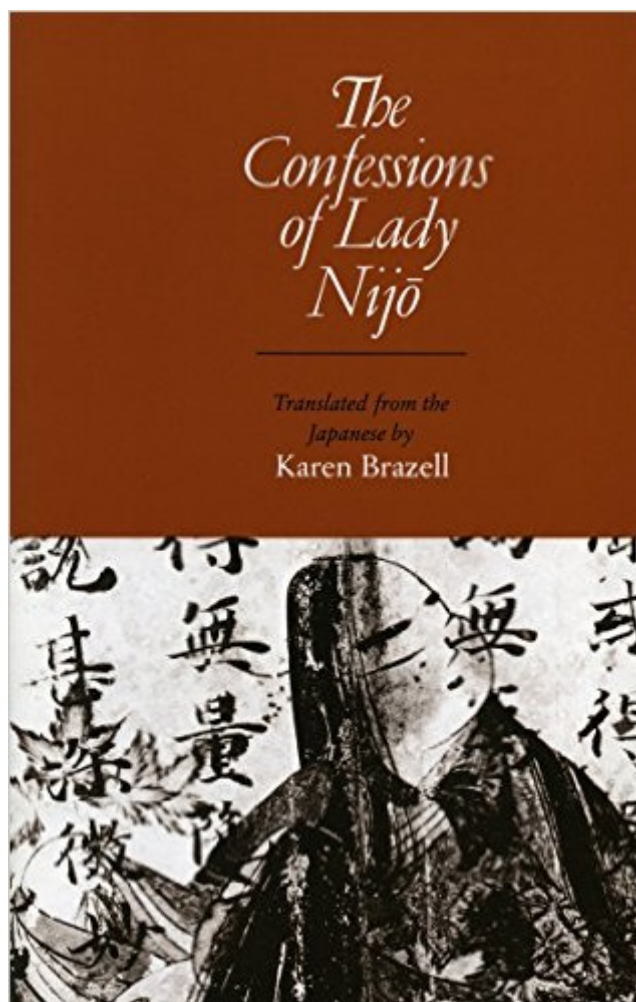


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The Confessions Of Lady Nijo



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 This was finally discovered in 1940, but would not be published until after World War II in 1950.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.

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Customer Reviews

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').

Nijo's autobiography is another wonderful chapter in the literature of Japanese classics. And, like all true classics, it paints a picture very much like some women of today. The book is not organized as a story, or even as a particularly strong description of events. Instead, it's a first-hand description of moments that roused especially strong feelings, positive or negative. Nijo (not her born name, but the only name that has come down to us) wrote this book late in life, so the literal truth of events often seems layered under decades of nostalgia. The first passage, for example, takes pains to draw a teenage girl, tearful during her first nights in the emperor's bedroom. 'The lady doth protest too much' - that is about the last time we see her hesitate in accepting a man's overnight company. After her heyday in court society, Nijo retreats and finally takes vows as a nun. She takes the robes and duties of nun in full, but her thoughts never settle into that role. I don't mean to say that she is insincere. Still, a part of her never lets go of the happy times in court. Although she carries out her religious duties, she keeps coming back for another look at the people and rites she loved. Gradually, the people from her youth move away and pass away. The court was all she knew; in the end she doesn't know even that any more. It's like the woman whose greatest day was being prom queen. Now in her forties, she lives by remembering a time and place that doesn't remember her. Nijo conveys a pervading shallowness. She spends more time describing some outfits than the children she bears. She could have moved closer to the inner imperial circles; the retired emperor publicly acknowledged her first-born as his scion.

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