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Ayako



Synopsis

Long considered as one of Osamu Tezuka's most political narratives, Ayako is also considered to be one of his most challenging as it defies the conventions of his manga by utilizing a completely original cast and relying solely on historical drama to drive the plot. Ayako, pulls no punches, and does not allow for gimmicks as science-fiction or fantasy may. Instead Tezuka weaves together a tale which its core simply focuses on a single family, a family that could be considered a metaphor for a rapidly developing superpower. Overflowing with imagery of the cold war seen through Japan's eyes, Ayako is firmly set in realism taking inspiration from a number of historical events that occurred over the American occupation and the cultural-revolution which soon followed.

Believed to be Tezuka's answer to the gekiga (dramatic comics) movement of the 60's, Ayako should be considered one of the better early examples of a seinen (young adult) narrative to be published. Initially set in the aftermath of World War II, Ayako focuses its attention on the Tenge clan, a once powerful family of landowners living in a rural community in northern Japan. From the moment readers are introduced to the extended family, it is apparent that the war and American occupation have begun to erode the fabric that binds them all together. The increasing influence of political, economic and social change begins to tear into the many Tenge siblings, while a strange marriage agreement creates resentment between the eldest son and his sire. And when the family seems to have completely fallen apart, they decide to turn their collective rage on what they believe to be the source of their troubles: "the newest member of the Tenge family, the youngest sister Ayako.

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Customer Reviews

"Ayako" by Osamu Tezuka is a masterpiece. On the surface, it is a startling story of events in post-WW2 Japan. However, within those pages, it challenges how we think about life, death, family, and country. I thought "Buddha" was his opus until I read "Ayako." "Ayako" is the story of a girl who is the daughter in the Tenge clan, a family in the Japanese countryside, coming to grips with the land reform that threatens to upend their way of life. More sinister and damaging yet is the degenerate patriarch of the family. I will not spoil the book for you, but some of his actions are reprehensible. It is a testament to the freedom of press in Japan that Tezuka was able to publish this book at all. Jiro Tenge, a son who comes home from the war, instead of dying valiantly for his country, is another main character. This masterpiece is a thrilling way to understand both Japanese culture, especially during their own "cultural revolution" after losing WW2. If you have ever wondered what life is like in a country that loses a war, this work will let you understand some of the long-term damage it inflicts. In many ways, the Tenge clan's evildoing and horrible fate is a metaphor for Japan in its involvement in WW2. It is no secret that Tezuka is a pacifist, but in this work, he elegantly, violently, shows the high cost of WW2 to Japan. No one in the Tenge clan is spared; even the youngest, most idealistic, clever son is ultimately corrupted. That leaves Ayako. I will not spoil the plot for you, but I will say that the brutal treatment of Ayako is metaphoric as well, perhaps on several levels. Is she Japan itself? Is she the natural world? Is she a metaphor for the old, ordered feudalistic society of Japan pre-WW2?

Ayako weighs in at exactly 700 pages, making it a book to be reckoned with. It is in fact a Book, beautiful and well-published (but probably too big to carry around casually; an e-reader edition would have been awesome, but alas). Perhaps because of the way it has been published, in a tasteful, hardcover, single-volume edition, its ad copy attempts to market it as a Novel, stating, "Ayako looms as a pinnacle of Naturalist literature in Japan with few peers even in prose, the striking heroine a potent emblem of things left unseen by the war." I read the publicity, got really excited, and had ship it to me on the day it came out. If people were comparing Ayako to Faulkner and Tolstoy, why shouldn't I read it immediately? Unfortunately, although Ayako is certainly a major accomplishment in the field of graphic novels, I am going to have to put my foot down and declare that it is not in fact on par with the best of Japanese prose. Far from it. As literature, Ayako is riddled with problems. Let's start with the storytelling. The plot is highly improbable from beginning to end, and its developments often don't make much sense if the reader begins to question them. The ending, which reeks of poetic justice, feels especially heavy handed. If one simply accepts the story

as it unfolds, it's not so far-fetched that it's ridiculous, but "a pinnacle of Naturalist literature" it is not. The pacing is also highly uneven; certain key plot points happen way too quickly. This refusal to let the reader slow down and figure out what's happening is especially bad at the beginning and end of the book, which are obviously the worst places for a hastily drawn story.

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