

AUTUMN
PRINCESS,
DRAGON
CHILD



THE
TALE OF
SHIKANOKO

Book 2

LIAN
HEARN

The best-selling author of the "Tales Of The Otori" adventures has another winner in "The Tale Of Shikanoko." Call it a Japanese "Game Of Thrones" and you'll get a good idea of the fun on tap here. While George R.R. Martin's cycle draws upon the epic fantasy of Tolkein, writer Lian Hearn harkens back to the classical models of Japanese works like "Revenge Of The Soga Brothers." Martin is looser, rawer and more sprawling. Hearn is more formal and rooted in the ethos of honor familiar to fans of movies by Akira Kurosawa, Yasujirō Ozu and the like. And here's the really good news for "GoT" fans: Hearn has already written a complete 1000+ page epic, it's been split into four parts and they come out one after another, with Volume 1 arriving now, Volume 2 in June, Volume 3 in August and Volume 4 in September. So, no waiting. Believe me, I've read the first two and once you start you'll think once every two months is not soon enough. In the first two books -- "Emperor Of The Eight Islands" and "Autumn Princess, Dragon Child" -- our story begins with a lord who (Lear-like) creates turmoil by splitting apart his family and demanding the eldest son take the wife of the second-born son, sending the latter off to a rival clan. He's determined the family will survive a coming civil war one way or another so each son is thus paired with a rival clan. Needless to say, this proves disastrous. The vivid characters come tumbling out, especially our hero Shikanoko, who tumbles from one home to another, first targeted by a jealous uncle, then coming under the sway of a mountain sorcerer, later learning the wily ways of a thief and finally becoming the servant of yet another master. Taking center stage at one point or another are royalty, commoners, men of magic and women of cunning, monkeys, demons, and the young but wise true Emperor, who must go into hiding when a usurper takes the throne. It's tremendous fun, with Hearn taking the point of view of a particular character for each chapter. To her credit, the people who seem like villains (and sometimes truly are), then become complex, full-bodied people we have empathy for even when they do terrible things. You know you're in good hands when a chapter begins with a certain character (such as the resourceful young girl Hina or the perennially frustrated second son Masachika) and think, "Oh good!" because you were wondering about them. And when the next chapter picks up the tale of someone else, you're eager to hear about them. There's magic here, from an enchanted mask made from a stag to imp demons who love to fulfill the unspoken dark desires of our hero. (He really should have killed them at birth as the old sorcerer warned, I fear.) Fans of action but not fantasy needn't worry too much: just as "GoT" is mostly a realistic spin on the War of the Roses, this story has the engrossing feel of a Japanese legend. I loved the movie "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" and remain frustrated the series of works that movie drew upon has never been translated into English. Indeed, even most of the classic tales Hearn references in this book are available only in dry academic versions, if at all. (Just as we await a truly thrilling English language translation of the Chinese Monkey King stories.) With meticulous attention to detail for the period, along with a bone-deep appreciation of Japanese culture, Hearn's homage to those masterpieces is as close as we're going to get for the moment and tremendously entertaining in its own right. "The Tale Of Shikanoko" has romance, intrigue, fantasy, passion, betrayal, sacrifice and the old-fashioned pleasure of truly having no idea what will happen next. Now where the heck are Volumes 3 and 4? -- Michael Giltz