

David Mitchell - The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet

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It is always best, I find, to judge a book by its cover or by its title. David Mitchell's book has a rather tinselly illustration on its cover; but - what a grand title! And the contents more than rewarded my reprehensible superficiality.

This is a rich tale of events in Nagasaki in 1800, a meeting of two cultures, each deeply suspicious of the other. On an artificial island cut off from the town, a young Dutchman is anxious to make his fortune without being tainted by the endemic corruption in the East India Company; in the town, a young Japanese woman wishes to learn more of western midwifery practices. Jacob's attempts to build a relationship with Orito are soon shattered by political, economic and social machinations far beyond his control or imagining.

Mitchell spins an irresistible tale of love without lovers, treachery without traitors, ignorance without stupidity. It deals with best intentions and principles, with intrigues, abduction and murder. His book is populated by a memorable cast of characters both European and Japanese.

But what makes this more than just an Oriental adventure-story is Mitchell's insight into the experience of a sensitive stranger in a strange land - becoming foreign to one's compatriots, while remaining always foreign to the foreigner.

Andy Drummond