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Totto-Chan: The Little Girl At The Window



Synopsis

This engaging series of childhood recollections tells about an ideal school in Tokyo during World War II that combined learning with fun, freedom, and love. This unusual school had old railroad cars for classrooms, and it was run by an extraordinary man--its founder and headmaster, Sosaku Kobayashi--who was a firm believer in freedom of expression and activity. In real life, the Totto-chan of the book has become one of Japan's most popular television personalities--Tetsuko Kuroyanagi. She attributes her success in life to this wonderful school and its headmaster. The charm of this account has won the hearts of millions of people of all ages and made this book a runaway bestseller in Japan, with sales hitting the 4.5 million mark in its first year.

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Customer Reviews

"[Totto-chan] is a quiet indictment of sterile education." â "New York Times" "Sensitively written, delicately illustrated, poetically translated, Totto-chan is, like a haiku, filled with aesthetic and philosophical depth." â "Library Journal" "[Totto-chan] has reminded millions of Japanese what children think education should be." â "International Herald Tribune" "Totto-chan can be expected to attract American educators, parents, and perhaps some children who appreciate the international view beyond their own first-floor window." â "Christian Science Monitor"

TETSUKO KUROYANAGI, daughter of the celebrated violinist, was voted Japan's most popular television personality fourteen times. She studied to become an opera singer but then became an

actress instead, winning a prestigious award for her work in radio and television. She spent 1972 in New York studying acting, and was critically acclaimed in Japan for her leading role in works by Albee and Shaffer and in Melchior Lengyel's "Ninotchka." Her daily television talk show, "Tetsuko's Room," is still going strong after more than twenty years. Japan's first such program, it was recently awarded television's highest prize. This and the other shows on which she regularly appears all enjoy top viewer ratings. Devoted to welfare and conservation, Kuroyanagi is Asia's first UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador (see Totto-chan's Children and serves on the board of the Worldwide Fund for Nature. The Totto Foundationâ "financed with her book royaltiesâ "provides professional training to deaf actors, with whom Kuroyanagi often appears. Kuroyanagi has twice brought America's National Theater of the Deaf to Japan, acting with them in sign language. She is the author of ten books. Translator DOROTHY BRITTON, author, poet, and composer, was born in Japan and educated in the United States and England. A pupil of Darius Milhaud, she is well known for her popular Capitol Records album "Japanese Sketches," in which Tetsuko Kuroyanagi's father is violin soloist. Her distinguished translation of Basho's Narrow Road to a Far Province is a classic. She is author of The Japanese Crane: Bird of Happiness and co-author of National Parks of Japan. Her most recent work includes a translation of Princess Chichibu's autobiography, The Silver Drum and Kuroyanagi's Totto-chan's Children.

What a wonderful book! Iâve never read anything quite like it, although it reminded me quite a bit of various Hayao Miyazaki animated films Iâve seen in the past.

âTotto-chanâ is a memoir in the guise of a novel. The author's childhood self is the main character and the events described actually took place while she attended a creative school called Tomoe Gakuen in pre-war Tokyo. This proves to be an interesting narrative device because the story is told from the emotional and experiential point of view of a child, but with the knowingness and articulateness of an adult. The obvious fondness or at least understanding of the author toward her younger self serves to enhance the overall sensation of empathy the story engenders, for that is the primary theme of the school and what the children were learning there. Led by the visionary headmaster, Sosaku Kobayashi, the Tomoe school's philosophy is built on trusting children to be themselves, âlet nature leadâ as Kobayashi put it. The story is filled with anecdotes of Totto-chan and her classmates being entrusted to figure things out for themselves, with adults and authority figures like the headmaster and parents simply listening and providing confidence that the children will succeed in coming up with workable solutions as they learn to navigate the world around them. Mistakes and slipups (such as Totto-chan falling into the

school's cesspool) are treated with dignity and patience. Instruction and structure come in the form of simple guidelines (for lunch, students were asked to bring something from the hills and something from the sea) with the belief that the children will be motivated to find their own solution with a limited amount of information. The effect on the children is a unique sensation of freedom and capability, of openness and consideration of themselves and the needs of others. Seemingly without encouragement, the school spontaneously forms a meaningful, interested sense of community and ownership by the students toward their school grounds, neighborhood and classmates. Left to pursue their studies and interests at their own pace, some students excel through deep study and careful focus of a particular subject while others enjoy sampling disparate bits of knowledge and experience without a plan. All students appear happy and enthusiastic about their lives, even those students who come to the school with severe developmental handicaps. As the author says, this liberty allowed a lot of children who were misfits in the standard schooling regime to find a sense of ease and belonging and to go on to live productive, independent and connected lives as adults. The story gives the reader a glimpse of an educational philosophy and pedagogical approach that is at once intuitive and mysterious: why shouldn't every school demonstrate such empathy and concern for its students; and how DOES Mr. Kobayashi manage to have such patience and a sunny disposition toward the antics of small children that are considered so obnoxious by nearly everybody else? The epilogue of the story summarizes some of the research travel Kobayashi performed in Europe for several years leading up to the founding of the Tomoe school and it becomes clear that there is a dedicated, principled purposefulness to every single event in the story, which the author as an adult reflects upon in the present with a "Oh, so THAT must have been what Mr. Koboyashi was trying to teach us there." To a cynical mind it may seem almost exploitative to be so cunning in one's schemes, but if the ultimate goal of the approach is to develop in the students the maxim "Trust yourself", how nefarious could this stratagem actually be? The school seems like a very social place and less like an academy—numerous field trips, sports days, music and exercise classes and camping overnights pepper the plot and while there is a library and scenes of students doing self-directed physics studies with alcohol burners and beakers, they always take place in Tomoe's disused railroad cars-cum-classrooms. It's a challenge only to those readers with a constricted view of what education and learning necessarily mean. For Kobayashi and his students, every experience brings teachable moments and the question begged and answered is why reading about flora and fauna in a textbook is a superior approach when one can go outside for a walk and study the variety of life up

close. From the view of paranoid American parenting, the children disrobing with their teachers and swimming naked together in the school's small pool will seem like a perfect opportunity for secret child abusers amongst the faculty to get their jollies. But the lesson here seems to be that every choice in life brings with it risks and if bathing suit-less swim time is a useful means for helping the children (especially the physically handicapped) to appreciate and accept their differences and similarities such that they can have confidence about who they are and act with kindness towards everyone else, the risk of something monstrous or mean-spirited in such an environment might be a better risk to take than watching certain individuals grow up feeling alienated from themselves and others for lack of such experiences. Indeed, those same paranoid parents would be wondering how a child could ever develop a moral sense without correction and punishment from adults. It is enjoyable, then, to witness the many moments when Totto-chan attempts to do something underhanded or less than honest (with herself, her parents or her friends) but recognizes the moral inconsistency of her actions on her own and eventually makes amends and moves on. It makes you think that children are capable of so much more than they are given credit for, typically, and that maybe the moral failings of children reflect not their immaturity, but the perverse incentives of the adults who guide them. This is a humorous book, as well. There were many moments when I couldn't help but laugh out loud and recount a passage to someone nearby, they're just too good not to share. And thankfully, there are moments of profound tragedy and despair. I say thankfully, because it is in these recollections that we are truly reminded of how precious life is and what a wonderful gift a school like Tomoe is. One of those tragedies is that the Tomoe school burned to the ground near the finale of the Pacific War as Tokyo came under increased firebombing by the US Air Force. It's a stark reminder of the injudiciousness and unfairness of war, even though it is recounted without particular frustration or anger on the part of the author (a testament to the empathetic spirit of the school itself!) But there is also a lesson in the resilience of the creative spirit, as Kobayashi's only response is to ask, "What kind of school shall we build next?" The good news is that we don't have to suffer war or burn our schools down to ask that question ourselves. I think this book can be enjoyed by children, parents, families, teachers and social theorists and anyone concerned with building a more empathetic society built upon respect for the individual and the instinct of trusting oneself. 5/5

A delightful look into a different manner of education, so unlike what is common today. In addition to this fresh view of enjoyable learning, the book also allows a gentle peak into the world of a young Japanese girl during WW II. Don't skip the wonderful musings of the author in the Epilogue which

sheds further light on the historical significance of this book, as well as lets the reader in on "Whatever happened to..." A worthwhile and enjoyable read for the young to the oldest.

This book is the only book that I will recommend for anyone to read and re-read all over again. From time to time, perception towards something changes us. Whenever that happened and I will re-read it again, I find myself understand the child's mind even better. It is astonishing to realize such unique child education structure exists in Japan back in World War II. It is an impressive system to allow the child to grow without constraining their development and over conditions them. This book allow you to walk through a journey from the eye of a child. The overview concept of education system and why each child is unique of their own. Anyone should read this regardless if you're a new parent, an early childhood educator or someone who just enjoy having new perspective.

Every time that I think I am finished with the topic of World War II (depressing, done to death), another book of movie comes along. This is the story of a young girl in Japan who attends an alternative school until it is forced to close due to the war. This is a children's chapter book, therefore an easy read for an adult, yet quite touching. Although it describes the war, it is appropriate for young readers. I would not have known about this book if someone in my book club had not chosen it. One thing I did not know until the end is that this book is based on the author's real experience. Teachers will like this book. It brings up an interesting point about education. Totto-chan is unsuccessful in her first school and is expelled. She thrives at the alternative school; I would surmise that schools such as this one were and are very rare in Japan. Totto-chan most certainly would be diagnosed as ADHD if she were to enroll in an American school today, yet she is delightful.

I purchased this book at the suggestion of some reading list. I found the story inspiring because in my former life I was a substitute teacher and that experience taught me that I have no business being around kids and two every kid learns differently and have passions about a subject that unfortunately the local public school I used to sub at doesn't allow freedom like that. It's a miracle if they even get decent books. But it opened my eyes and made me think about the state of education and how some kids just don't conform to standards. Well I don't have much to add but please purchase this book.

Excellent gift for a young girl. It was my daughter's favorite when she was little, so I bought it for

HER daughter.

Tetsuko is famous in Japan for her television shows. A couple of weeks ago I saw her on an old Johnny Carson rerun. She was very interesting and funny. She mentioned the book. I was happy to find it on .The book is a story about a little girl in the first grade in Japan. The little girl is actually Tetsuko herself and these are her memories.

This is a great book! I have used it for many years in classrooms from k-12 and college-a great way to open up questions s about education and learning. Also chapters are 1-3 pages long, so it's a great young reader! The stories are endearing g and true, and give great illustrations of Inclusion, which we in the US schools struggle with.

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