

## Book Review

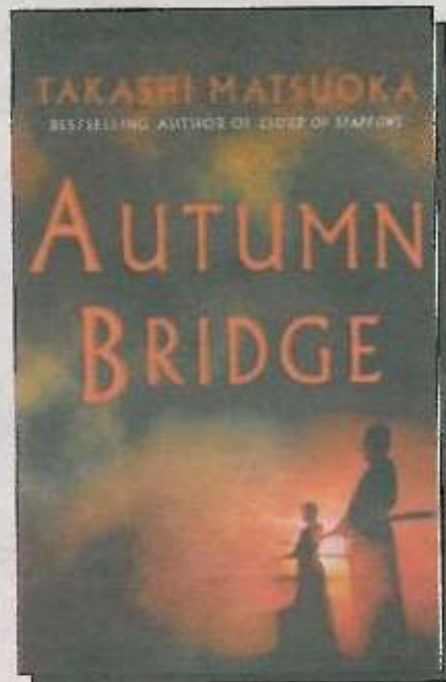
### Autumn Bridge

By Takashi Matsuoka  
(Random House)

Straddling a 500-year timeline between Japan's samurai-dominated 14th century and 'opening' of its empire to westerners five centuries on, Autumn Bridge centres on two characters: Lady Shizuka, a feudal-age sorceress who endows her descendants (the Okumichi clan) with prophetic abilities; and Emily, an American missionary of the Victorian age living with the now-progressive Okumichis (the clan discover Shizuka's writings in their 'secret' history).

The surreal visions of the Okumichis – coupled with the unfulfilled love between Emily and Okumichi clan leader Genji – make for a plot that doesn't hold much water. Nevertheless, when actually reading the story, it's easy to suspend your disbelief – maybe because of Matsuoka's ability to get inside characters' heads, both American and Japanese.

Although there are some amusing moments, this is not a mere 'clash of cultures' tale but a play-by-play of motivations, as samurai, household servants and American soldiers all attempt to act in a manner reflecting their convictions and traditions. By explaining the



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thought processes behind seemingly innocuous actions, the author presents a more nuanced insight into the mindset of feudal Japanese culture.

Perhaps one of the main themes of the book is that things – and people – are not always as they seem. Cursed with prophetic abilities, Lady Shizuka is initially deemed insane and locked away in a Buddhist abbey, while Charles Smith, a wealthy businessman from the southern States, vents his spleen over the American Civil War at every opportunity and turns out to be an abolitionist.

Meanwhile, the revered Abbess Jintoku (one of Matsuoka's best creations) starts out as a fraud, and Emily – the missionary who convinces Genji to build a Christian chapel – is in fact neither prudish nor proselytising. Matsuoka makes it easy to empathise with most of the cast, and cannot be accused of falling back on stereotypes.

So while it may not be worthy of literature's grand hall of fame, Autumn Bridge is still a cut above most novels.



Roslyn Fuller is the author of political thriller ISAK. More information about the Canadian, her work and the Irish Writers' Exchange can be found at [www.irishwriters-exchange.com](http://www.irishwriters-exchange.com)