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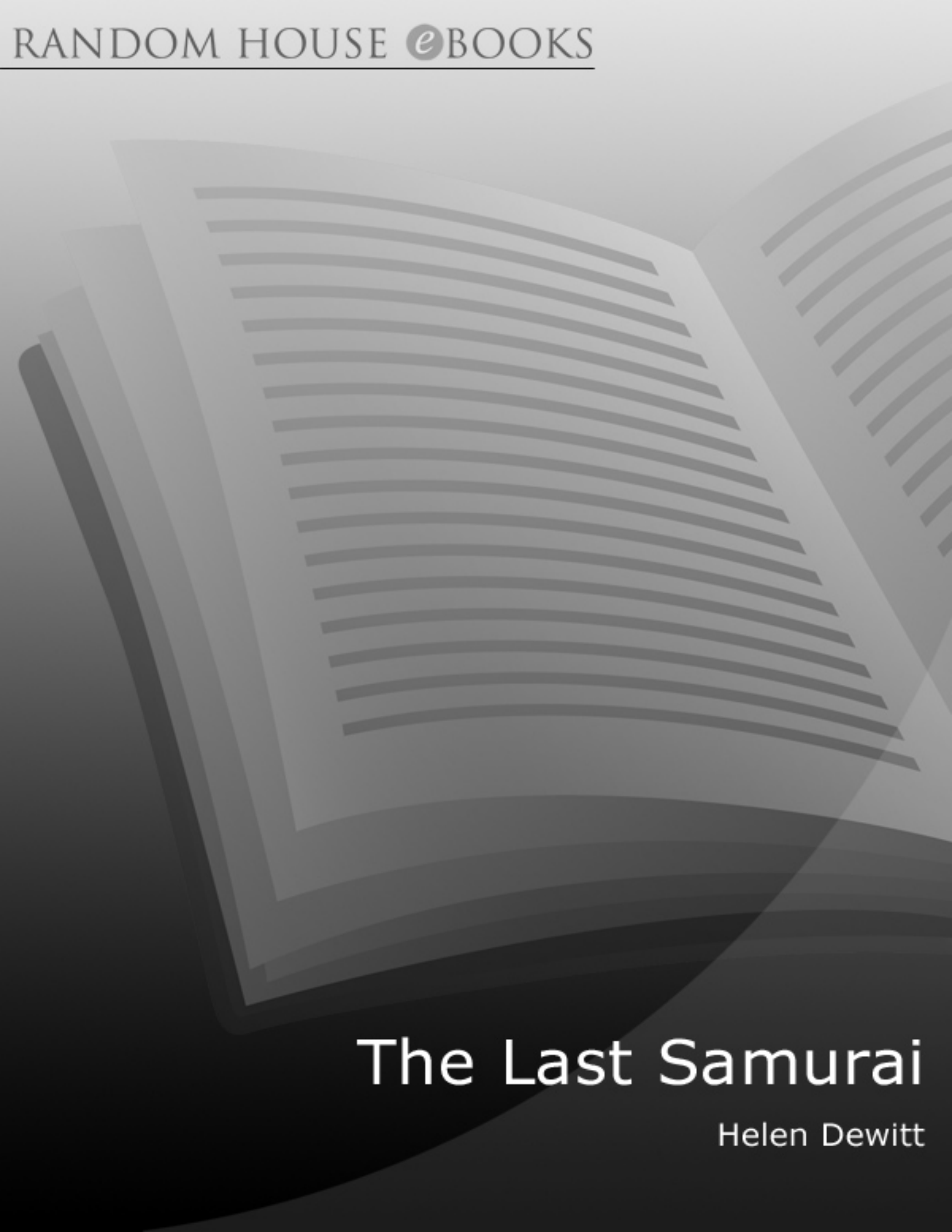

The Last Samurai

Helen Dewitt

About the Book

Sibylla, a single mother from a long line of frustrated talents, has unusual ideas about child-rearing. Yo Yo Ma started piano at the age of two; her son starts at three. J.S. Mill learned Greek at three; Ludo starts at four, reading Homer as they travel round and round the Circle Line. A fatherless boy needs male role models; so she plays the film *Seven Samurai* as a running backdrop to his childhood. While Sibylla types out back copies of *Carpworld* to pay the rent, Ludo, aged five, moves on to Hebrew, Arabic and Japanese, aerodynamics and edible insects of the world – they might come in handy, if he can just persuade his mother he's mature enough to know his father's name …

Helen DeWitt

THE LAST SAMURAI

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To
Ann Cotton

The Last Samurai

Daughter of an American diplomat, Helen DeWitt grew up in Mexico, Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador. She started a degree at Smith College and dropped out twice, the first time to read Proust and Eliot while working as a chambermaid, the second time to take the Oxford entrance exam. She read Literae Humaniores at Lady Margaret Hall, went to Brasenose College to do a doctorate in Greek and Latin literature then spent a year at Somerville College as a junior research fellow. In 1988 she started her first novel. Over the next decade she started work on around 50 other novels while working as a doughnut salesperson, dictionary text tagger, copytaker, fundraiser, management consultant and night secretary for a Wall Street law firm's London office. *The Last Samurai* is her first finished novel; rights to it have been sold in 13 countries. Helen DeWitt lives in London.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In 1991 Ann Cotton went to a school in Mola, a village in a remote rural district of Zimbabwe, with the idea of doing research on girls' education. She ended up talking to two schoolgirls who had come 100 km alone to attend the school. It did not take boarders, so they were living in a hut they had built themselves. They considered themselves lucky because most girls could not go to secondary school, as fees were charged; they dropped out and got married at twelve or thirteen instead. Ann went back to Britain and started raising money for scholarships by selling cakes in Cambridge Market. She founded the Cambridge Female Education Trust in 1993. She persuaded the Body Shop to fund a hostel in Mola. She persuaded other organisations to fund scholarships for more schools, first in Zimbabwe, then in Ghana. She persuaded me to become a Trustee; I could not have finished this book if she had not said 'Of course' each time I said I would do something for CamFed as soon as I had finished my book. Information about CamFed is available from 25 Wordsworth Grove, Newnham, Cambridge CB3 9HH and at http://www.camfed.org.

Professor David Levene has made the book more interesting and less prone to error in too many ways to count; it is impossible to express my debt to his unfailing generosity. I owe more than I can say to my mother, Mary DeWitt Griffin, not only for moral and financial support, but for sharing her remarkable gifts over the course of many years. Tim Schmidt, Maude Chilton and Steve Hutensky

have been extraordinary friends; they know how much I owe them.

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Prologue

My father's father was a Methodist minister. He was a tall, handsome, noble-looking man; he had a deep, beautiful voice. My father was an ardent atheist and admirer of Clarence Darrow. He skipped grades the way other boys skip class, he lectured my grandfather's flock on carbon 14 and the origin of species, and he won a full scholarship to Harvard at the age of 15.

He took the letter from Harvard to his father.

Something looked through my grandfather's beautiful eyes. Something spoke with his beautiful voice, and it said: It's only fair to give the other side a chance.

My father said: What do you mean?

What it meant was that my father should not reject God for secularism just because he won arguments with uneducated people. He should go to a theological college and give the other side a fair chance; if he was still of the same mind at the end he would still be only 19, a perfectly good age to start college.

My father, being an atheist and a Darwinist, had a very delicate sense of honor, and he could not resist this appeal. He applied to various theological seminaries, and all but three rejected him out of hand because he was too young. Three asked him to come for an interview.

The first was a seminary with a fine reputation, and my father because of his youth was interviewed by the head.

The man said: You're very young. Is it possible that you want to be a minister because of your father?

My father said he did not want to be a minister, but he wanted to give the other side a fair chance, and he explained about carbon 14.

The man said: The ministry is a vocation and the training we offer is designed for people who feel called to it. I doubt very much that you would benefit from it.

He said: This offer from Harvard is a remarkable opportunity. Couldn't you give the other side a fair chance by taking a course in theology? I believe the college started out, after all, as a College of Divinity, and I imagine they must still teach the subject.

The man smiled at my father kindly and he offered to give him a list of books to read if he would like to do any more in the way of giving the other side a fair chance. My father drove home (they were living in Sioux City at the time) and all the way he thought that this might give the other side a fair chance.

He spoke to his father. The point was made that one course in theology in a strongly secular environment would probably not make a very considerable impact, but all the same my father must decide for himself.

My father went to the second seminary, which had a good reputation. He was interviewed by the Dean.

The Dean asked him why he wanted to become a minister, and my father explained that he did not want to become a minister, and he explained about carbon 14.

The Dean said he respected my father's intentions, but still there was something whimsical about it, and he pointed out that my father was very young. He recommended that my father go to Harvard first and then if he still wanted to give the other side a fair chance he would be delighted to consider his application.

My father returned to his father. The beautiful voice pointed out that a man with a degree from Harvard would find it hard to resist the temptation of going instantly into a career, but it said that of course my father must decide for himself.

My father drove to the third seminary, which was small and obscure. My father was interviewed by a Deputy Dean.

It was a hot day, and though a small fan was blowing the Deputy Dean, a red fat man, was sweating hard. The Deputy Dean asked why my father wanted to be a minister and my father explained about the fair chance and about carbon 14.

The Deputy Dean said that the church paid the fees of the seminarians who planned to become ministers. He said that as my father did not plan to become a minister they would have to charge $1,500 a year.

My father returned to his father, who said that he supposed my father could earn $750 over the summer at one of the gas stations, and that he would then give him the rest.

So my father went to a theological college. When I say that he went to a theological college I mean that he enrolled at a theological college & went every Saturday to synagogue out of interest because there was no rule to say you couldn't, and spent most of the rest of the time shooting pool at Helene's, the only bar in town that would serve a 16-year-old.

He waited for my grandfather to ask how he was finding it, but my grandfather never asked.

At the synagogue my father met someone ten years older who ran the services and did most of the readings. He looked a lot like Buddy Holly, and in fact people called him Buddy (he preferred it to Werner). At first my father thought this was the rabbi, but the town was too small to support a rabbi: The services were run by local volunteers. Buddy had wanted to be an opera singer, but his father had insisted he train as an accountant, and he had come from Philadelphia to take up a job as an accountant. He too spent a lot of time shooting pool at Helene's.

By the end of three years my father was very good at shooting pool. He had saved up about $500 from his winnings, and he played carelessly so as not to win too

much or too often. He could beat everyone in the bar, but one night a stranger came in.

By some accident the stranger played everyone else first. He played with smooth, economical movements, and it was obvious he was in a different class from anyone my father had played so far. My father wanted to play him; Buddy kept trying to warn him off. He thought there was something not quite right about the stranger; either he would win more than my father could afford to lose, or he would lose and pull a gun. My father thought this was ridiculous, but then the stranger's jacket rode up as he bent over and they saw a gun strapped to his waist.

The game came to an end and my father walked up. He said: My friend here says you're dangerous.

The stranger said: I can be.

My father said grinning broadly: He says you'll kill me if I win.

The stranger said: Are you so sure you'll win?

My father said: There's only one way to find out.

The stranger said: And who might you be?

My father said he was at the seminary.

The stranger expressed surprise at finding a seminarian in the bar.

My father said We are all sinners, brother, in a rather sarcastic tone of voice.

The stranger and my father played a game and five dollars changed hands.

The stranger said: Do you want your revenge?

They played another game which took longer. My father was still playing carelessly; he naturally did not talk while the stranger was playing, but when it was his own turn he answered the stranger's questions with sarcastic stories about the seminary. The stranger was a man of few words, but he seemed amused. My father won in the end with a lucky shot and five dollars changed hands.

The stranger said: Now let's make it interesting.

My father said: How interesting do you want to make it?

The stranger asked how much money my father had in the world and Buddy Holly mouthed the words NO NO Don't tell him you stupid jerk from behind his back and my father said he had $500.

The stranger said he would give any odds against the $500. My father couldn't tell if he was serious.

He said: A hundred bucks. Best of five.

The stranger said in that case he'd like to see the color of his money, because he had to get back on the road and he was not going to hang around for a hundred bucks. He said 5 to 1.

My father had $25 on him. He borrowed $25 from Buddy and the rest in tens and fives from people in the bar who knew he was good for it.

They played two games and the stranger won them both easily. They started the third game and the stranger began to win easily, but then my father's luck turned and he pulled himself together and won. He won the fourth game, though it was a hard fight, and then he won the fifth game and it was silent in the bar. Other people in the bar had seen the gun too.

The stranger reached inside his jacket and everyone froze. Then he took out a wallet. He extracted five $100 bills from a thick stack.

He said: I don't suppose you've had this much money all at one time before.

My father pointed out that he already had $500.

The stranger said: $1,000! That's a lot of money.

He said: I hate to see a man with money who doesn't know what to do with it.

My father said: What do you mean?

The stranger said if you knew something a little ahead of other folks you could sometimes make money if you already had money.

My father said: What do you know?

The stranger said he wouldn’t be surprised if the new highway was built that way.

My father said: If you know that for a fact why don’t you do something about it? Buy some real estate.

The stranger said: I don’t like property. It ties you down. But if I didn’t mind owning property, and I had $1,000, I’d know what to do with the money.

The bar closed and the stranger drove off. It happened that Mrs. Randolph, Buddy’s landlady, wanted to sell her house and move to Florida, but no one was buying. My father pointed out that if the stranger was right they could buy this house and turn it into a motel and make a lot of money.

If, said Buddy.

The fact was that they were both convinced that the stranger knew what he was talking about; the gun lent a mysterious conviction to the story.

My father said he wasn’t going to have time for that though, because once he was through with the seminary he was going to Harvard. He had written to Harvard to take up the earlier offer.

A few weeks went by. A letter came from Harvard explaining that they would like to see what he had been doing for the past few years and asking for his grades and a reference. My father provided these, and a couple of months went by. One day a letter came which must have been hard to write. It said Harvard was prepared to offer him a place based on his earlier record, and it went on to explain that scholarships however were awarded purely on merit, so that it would not be fair to other students to give one to someone with a D average. It said that if he chose to take up the place he would need to pay the normal cost of tuition.

My father went home to Sioux City for Easter. Buddy went home to Philadelphia to celebrate Passover. My father took the letter to his father.

My grandfather looked at the letter from Harvard, and he said that he believed it was God's will that my father should not go to Harvard.

Four years earlier my father had had a brilliant future. Now he faced life with a mediocre degree from an obscure theological college, a qualification absolutely useless to a man incapable of entering the ministry.

My father was struck speechless with disgust. He left the house without a word. He drove a Chevrolet 1,300 miles.

In later years my father sometimes played a game. He'd meet a man on his way to Mexico and he'd say, Here's fifty bucks, do me a favor and buy me some lottery tickets, and he'd give the man his card. Say the odds against winning the jackpot were 20 million to 1 and the odds against the man giving my father the winning ticket another 20 million to 1, you couldn't say my father's life was ruined because there was a 1 in 400 trillion chance that it wasn't.

Or my father might meet a man on his way to Europe and he'd say, Here's fifty bucks, if you happen to go to Monte Carlo do me a favor, go to the roulette table and put this on number 17 and keep it there for 17 spins of the wheel, the man would say he wasn't planning to go to Monte Carlo and my father would say But if you do and he'd give him his card. Because what were the odds that the man would change his plans and go to Monte Carlo, what were the odds that 17 would come up 17 times in a row, what were the odds that if it did the man would send the money on to my father? Whatever they were it was not absolutely impossible but only highly unlikely, and it was not absolutely certain that my grandfather had destroyed him because there was a 1 in 500 trillion trillion trillion chance that he had not.

My father played the game for a long time because he felt he should give my grandfather a sporting chance. I don't know when he played it for the last time, but the first

time was when he left the house without a word and drove 1,300 miles to see Buddy in Philadelphia.

My father parked in front of Buddy's house. A piece of piano music was being played loudly and bitterly in the front room. Doors were slammed. There were loud voices. Somebody screamed. The piano was silent. Somebody started playing the piano loudly and bitterly.

My father found Buddy who explained what was going on.

Buddy had wanted to be an opera singer and was an accountant. His brother Danny had wanted to be a clarinettist and worked in his father's jewelry business. His sister Frieda had wanted to be a violinist and worked as a secretary before marrying and having three children. His sister Barbara had wanted to be a violinist and worked as a secretary before marrying and having two children. His youngest sister, Linda, wanted to be a singer and she had now refused point-blank to go to secretarial college; his father had refused pointblank to let her study music. Linda had gone to the piano and begun to play Chopin's Prelude No. 24 in D minor, a bitter piece of music which gains in tragic intensity when played 40 times in a row.

The fact was that their father was Viennese and had very high standards. The children could all play five or six instruments with flair but they hated to practice: They emerged from each piece either bloody but unbowed or miraculously unscathed, and they had all assumed they would be musicians. Buddy was the first to find they would not. Mr. Konigsberg thought that either you had talent or you did not; none of his children played like a Heifetz or a Casals or a Rubinstein, therefore they did not have the talent to be professionals; therefore they would be better off just enjoying their music, and he explained when Buddy finished high school that he thought he should be an accountant.

Buddy said to my father: You know at the time I didn't want to upset my father, I didn't want to make a big thing of it, I thought who am I to say I could be a singer, but then all the others gave in without an argument. I keep thinking, what if it's my fault? If I'd put my foot down maybe my father would have gotten used to the idea whereas instead they all thought they didn't have a choice, I keep thinking what if it's all my fault?

& he waited hopefully—

& my father said: Of course it's your fault. Why didn't you stand up to him? You let the whole side down. The *least* you can do is make sure it doesn't happen again.

My father knew that he would always hate himself for respecting his own father's wishes, and he now thought that at least someone else could avoid this mistake.

Does she have a place? he asked.

No, said Buddy.

Well she should go for an audition, said my father, and he went into the front room followed by Buddy to argue for this point of view.

In the front room was a 17-year-old girl with fierce black hair, fierce black eyes & ferocious red lipstick. She did not look up because she was halfway through her 41st consecutive rendition of Chopin's Prelude No. 24 in D minor.

My father stood by the piano and he suddenly thought What would be the odds against going to a seminary and going to *synagogue* and learning to play *pool*, just suppose he fell in love with a Jewish girl from Philadelphia and made a fortune in motels and lived happily ever after, say the odds were a billion to one that was still not the same as impossible so it was not actually impossible that his father had not, in fact—

Linda plunged down to the bass and hammered out three bitter low notes. Doom. Doom. Doom.

The piece was over. She looked up before starting again.

Who are you? she said.
Buddy introduced my father.
Oh, the atheist, said my mother.

i

– *Let’s make bamboo spears! Let’s kill all the bandits!*
– *You can’t.*
– *That’s impossible.*

Three farmers (Seven Samurai)

A small village is yearly invaded by bandits and the farmers lose their crops and sometimes their lives. This year the elders decide to do something about it. They have heard of a village which once hired masterless samurai and was saved. They decide to do the same and send some of their number to search for willing samurai. Since there is no pay, merely food, a place to sleep, and the fun of fighting, the farmers are fortunate that they first meet Kambei (Takashi Shimura), a strong and dedicated man who decides to make their cause his own. A young *ronin*, Katsushiro (Ko Kimura) joins him, then he accidentally meets an old friend, Shichiroji (Daisuke Kato). He himself chooses Gorobei (Yoshio Inaba) who in turn chooses Heihachi (Minoru Chiaki). A master swordsman, Kyuzo (Seiji Miyoguchi) joins, and so, eventually, does Kikuchiyo (Toshiro Mifune), a farmer’s son himself, who has been following them around for some time, attracted—as all of them are—by Kambei.

Once in the village they prepare for war. Not waiting for the first attack, they storm the bandits’ fort, burn it and kill a number of the bandits—though Heihachi is also killed. The bandits attack the village and they repulse them, though Gorobei is killed. Then they hit upon the plan of allowing a few in and spearing them to death. In the final battle both Kyuzo and Kikuchiyo are killed—but the bandits are all dead.

It is spring, once more the rice-planting season has come. Of the original seven samurai, only three are left and they soon will go their separate ways.

Donald Richie, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*

1

Do Samurai Speak Penguin Japanese?

There are 60 million people in Britain. There are 200 million in America. (Can that be right?) How many millions of English-speakers other nations might add to the total I cannot even guess. I would be willing to bet, though, that in all those hundreds of millions not more than 50, at the outside, have read A. Roemer, *Aristarchs Athetesen in der Homerkritik* (Leipzig, 1912), a work untranslated from its native German and destined to remain so till the end of time.

I joined the tiny band in 1985. I was 23.

The first sentence of this little-known work runs as follows:

Es ist wirklich Brach- und Neufeld, welches der Verfasser mit der Bearbeitung dieses Themas betreten und durchpflügt hat, so sonderbar auch diese Behauptung im ersten Augenblick klingen mag.

I had taught myself German out of *Teach Yourself German*, and I recognised several words in this sentence at once:

It is truly something and something which the something with the something of this something has something and something, so something also this something might something at first something.

I deciphered the rest of the sentence by looking up the words Brachfeld, Neufeld, Verfasser, Bearbeitung, Themas, betreten, durchpflügt, sonderbar, Behauptung, Augenblick and klingen in Langenscheidt's German-English dictionary.

This would have been embarrassing if I had been reading under the eyes of people I knew, since I should have been on top of German by now; I should not have

frittered away my time at Oxford infiltrating classes on Akkadian, Arabic, Aramaic, Hittite, Pali, Sanskrit and Dialects of the Yemen (not to mention advanced papyrology and intermediate hieroglyphics) instead of advancing the frontiers of human knowledge. The problem is that if you have grown up in the type of place that is excited to be getting its first motel, the type of place that is only dimly (if, indeed, at all) aware of the very *existence* of the Yemen, you want to study dialects of the Yemen if you can because you think you may well not get another chance. I had lied about everything but my height and my weight to get into Oxford (my father, after all, had shown what can happen if you let other people supply your references and your grades) and I wanted to make the most of my time.

The fact that I had completed an undergraduate degree and gone on to get a scholarship to do research just showed how much more appropriate the grades and references were which I had provided myself (straight As, natürlich; lines like ‘Sibylla has wide-ranging interests and an extraordinarily original mind; she is a joy to teach’) than anything anyone I knew would have come up with. The only problem was that now I had to do the research. The only problem was that when a member of the scholarship committee had said, ‘You’re on top of German of course,’ I had said airily, ‘Of course.’ It *could* have been true.

Roemer, anyway, was too obscure to be on the open shelves of the Lower Reading Room with more frequently consulted classical texts. Year after year the book gathered dust in the dark, far below ground. Since it had to be called up from the stacks it could be sent to any reading room in the Bodleian, and I had had it sent to Reserve in the Upper Reading Room of the Radcliffe Camera, a library in a dome of stone in the centre of a square. I could read unobserved.

I sat in the gallery looking out across a bell of air, or at the curving walls crammed with extraordinarily interesting-looking books on non-classical subjects, or out the window

at the pale stone of All Souls, or, of course, at *Aristarchs Athetesen in der Homerkritik* (Leipzig, 1912). There was not a classicist in sight.

I formed the impression that the sentence meant: It is truly a fallow and new field which the author has trod and ploughed through in handling this subject, so especially might this statement sound in the first moment.

This did not really seem worth the trouble it had taken to work it out, but I had to go on so I went on, or rather I was about to go on when I glanced up and I happened to see, on a shelf to my left, a book on the Thirty Years War which looked extraordinarily interesting. I took it down and it really was extraordinarily interesting and I looked up presently and it was time for lunch.

I went to the Covered Market and spent an hour looking at sweaters.

There are people who think contraception is immoral because the object of copulation is procreation. In a similar way there are people who think the only reason to read a book is to write a book; people should call up books from the dust and the dark and write thousands of words to be sent down to the dust and the dark which can be called up so that other people can send further thousands of words to join them in the dust and the dark. Sometimes a book can be called from the dust and the dark to produce a book which can be bought in shops, and perhaps it is interesting, but the people who buy it and read it because it is interesting are not serious people, if they were serious they would not care about the interest they would be writing thousands of words to consign to the dust and the dark.

There are people who think death a fate worse than boredom.

I saw several interesting sweaters in the Market but they seemed to be rather expensive.

I tore myself away at last and returned to the fray.

It is truly a fallow and new field which the author has trod and ploughed through in handling this subject, so especially might this statement sound in the first moment, I reminded myself.

It seemed extraordinarily uninteresting.

I went on to work through the second sentence, ratio of profit to expense as before, and the sentence after that and the one after that. It took five to ten minutes to read a sentence—an hour a page. Slowly the outlines of the argument loomed out of the mist, like Debussy's drowned cathedral sortant peu à peu de la brume.

In La Cathédrale Engloutie chords of melancholy grandeur break out, at last, *ff* !!!! But when, after some 30 hours or so, I began at last to understand—

49 people in the English-speaking world know what lay in wait. No one else knows or cares. And yet how much hangs on this moment of revelation! It is only if we can conceive of the world without Newton, without Einstein, without Mozart, that we can imagine the difference between this world and the world in which I close *Aristarchs Athetesen* after two sentences and take out *Schachnovelle* in cool disregard of the terms of my scholarship. If I had not read Roemer I would not have known I could not be a scholar, I would never have met Liberace (no, not the) and the world would be short a—

I am saying more than I know. One thing at a time. I read Roemer day after day, and after 30 hours or so enlightenment came not in an hour of gold but an hour of lead.

Some 2,300 years ago Alexander the Great set out from Macedonia to conquer everything in his path. He conquered his way down to Egypt and founded the city of Alexandria, then went on to conquer his way east and die, leaving his followers to fight over his conquests. Ptolemy was already governor of Egypt, and kept it. He ruled the country from Alexandria, and it was he who set up one of