


Yasunari
Kawabata

the
M *Master*
of g o



with an introduction by
Liza Dalby,
author of Geisha

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About the Book

Go is a game of strategy in which two players attempt to surround each other's black or white stones. Simple in its fundamentals, infinitely complex in its execution, it is an essential expression of the Japanese sensibility. And in his fictional chronicle of a match played between a revered and invincible Master and a younger, more progressive challenger, Yasunari Kawabata captured the moment in which the immutable traditions of imperial Japan met the onslaught of the twentieth century.

The competition between the Master of Go and his opponent, Otaké, is waged over several months and layered in ceremony. But beneath the game's decorum lie tensions that consume not only the players themselves but their families and friends - tensions that turn this particular contest into a duel that can only end in one man's death. Luminous in its detail, both suspenseful and serene, *The Master of Go* is an elegy for an entire society, written with the poetic economy and psychological acumen that brought Kawabata the Nobel Prize for Literature.

About the Author

Yasunari Kawabata, winner of the 1968 Nobel Prize for Literature, was one of Japan's most distinguished novelists. Born in Osaka in 1899, he published his first stories while he was still in high school. Among his major novels published across the world are *Snow Country* (1937), *Thousand Cranes* (1949), *The Sound of the Mountain* (1949), and *Beauty and Sadness* (1965). Kawabata was found dead, by his own hand, in 1972.

A Note About the Translator

Edward George Seidensticker was born in Castle Rock, Colorado, in 1921. He received his B.A. from the University of Colorado, his M.A. from Columbia University, and has done graduate work at Harvard University and Tokyo University. He is currently professor of Japanese at the University of Michigan.

Among the important contemporary Japanese novels Mr Seidensticker has translated are *The Makioka Sisters* by Junichiro Tanizaki and *Snow Country, Thousand Cranes*, and *The Sound of the Mountain* by Yasunari Kawabata. For his translation of *The Sound of the Mountain* Mr Seidensticker received the National Book Award.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Izu Dancer
Snow Country
Thousand Cranes
The Sound of the Mountain
Beauty and Sadness

THE MASTER OF GO

Yasunari Kawabata

TRANSLATED FROM THE JAPANESE BY
Edward G. Seidensticker

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
Liza Dalby



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Introduction

Go may well be the oldest board game in the world. Played on a grid-marked board with smooth disks of black (stone) and white (shell), the rules of the game have remained unchanged for millennia. Most likely originating in central Asia, the game was introduced to Japan via China in the eighth century. And it was in Japan where Go reached its apotheosis. Initially played by courtiers, it was taken up by educated men, Buddhist monks and samurai. In the seventeenth century, the feudal government recognized four family-based schools of Go. These schools engaged in fierce rivalry, constantly upping the standard of play. A ranking system was devised, classifying professional players into nine grades. Of these, the highest was *meijin* meaning expert or master. It was awarded to the one player who defeated every contemporary rival. *Meijin* is the Japanese title of this novel by Yasunari Kawabata, rendered in English as *The Master of Go*.

To play, two opponents start with an empty board and take turns placing their pieces on the intersections of the grid. Once set out, stones are not moved unless they are surrounded. Go is territorial. Players aim to stake out areas, either by enclosing blank space or capturing the opponent's stones. At the end of the game, when all stones have been played, points are awarded for each vacant intersection in one's own territory plus captured pieces. Although the principle of Go is simple, the strategic and tactical possibilities are endless.

An aggressive player may aim to gain territory by ruthlessly capturing his opponent's stones, but, at more

refined levels of play, this may not be a winning strategy. The game reflects the personalities and skills of the players in the manner in which they balance attack and defense, their flexibility in response to changing patterns, their timing, and their effective analysis of the opponent's strengths and weaknesses. As individuals mature and grow, so does their style of play.

In Japan, one of the Go schools in particular, the Honnimbō School, produced more *meijin* than all the other families together. The last great Honnimbō Master, Shūsai, ceded his title in 1938 when he lost his final tournament in a game that took place over a period of six months. This is the game, and these are the two protagonists, at the center of Kawabata's story. In real life, Kawabata was a reporter who covered the progress of this match for two newspapers. Four years later, after the death of the Master, and throughout the course of the war, Kawabata began to fashion his reportage into a work that appeared serially in a magazine. Eventually, in 1954, the whole thing came out in book form as *Meijin*.

Kawabata himself counted this work as one of his favorites. Originally translated into English in 1972, *The Master of Go* has had a more limited exposure than some of his other novels such as *Snow Country*, *Thousand Cranes*, or *The Sound of the Mountain*. No doubt this is due to the specialized and rather arcane nature of the subject. There are none of his exotic heroines – no geisha, no dancing girl, no mole-deformed mistress, no erotic daughter-in-law. Go was (and remains in Japan) largely a world of men.

Kawabata was thirty-nine years old when he reported on this tournament between the last of the old-school great Masters of the game and his modern challenger. He was already an acclaimed writer, with his initial popular novella *The Izu Dancer* (1926) followed by several serialized works including *Snow Country* in 1937. That work, Kawabata's film-inspiring blockbuster novel, is the immediate

predecessor to *The Master of Go*. The two are utterly different in tone, and the reader almost senses Kawabata's recoiling from the feckless protagonist of his earlier *Snow Country* – Shimamura, the 'expert' on ballet (which he studies from books but has never seen performed). He is a man who lives in a dreamy state, unwilling or unable to connect with life or the woman who loves him. He is a dilettante, desiring to partake of the world through its beauty, but ultimately detached.

Shūsai, the Master of Go, is the polar opposite of a dilettante. He is obsessive. When he is not pondering his next move at the board, he is cajoling hangers-on into all-night games of chess, billiards, or mahjong. He loses himself in games. The story is told through the eyes of the reporter, who packs up and follows the players to the inns where, during sessions, they sequester themselves for days at a time. One move may take hours, one day may see as few as four moves. The pace of the game is glacial. They adjourn for lengthy recesses. The Master has a heart condition, the challenger has a nervous bowel. The reporter has to figure out how to make his coverage engaging for the fans who follow the newspaper.

But we become interested. The Master and the challenger, replete with their foibles, idiosyncrasies and interminable ponderings, are engaged in something more than a game of Go. The challenger is a modern rationalist, insisting on the meticulous observance of the rules. He 'conducted the battle only to win, and there was no margin for remembering the dignity and the fragrance of Go as an art.' The Master is a relic from an earlier era. From the outset we know the result, that this match is the Master's last, and that he will lose. Kawabata is not coy, he exposes the end matter-of-factly in the first chapter. The book opens with the Master's death. This is not a suspense novel. There is no need to rush to the end to see who wins. Kawabata takes care of that. Instead, gradually we become

engaged in the personalities of the players at the center of this protracted and subtle drama. They are playing a game of Go. It brings to mind another literary game.

During the same period that Kawabata was reworking *The Master of Go*, in Germany Herman Hesse was writing *Magister Ludi - The Glass Bead Game* (1943). In that novel, his protagonist Joseph Knecht reaches the understanding that:

'[...]in the language, or at any rate in the spirit of the Glass Bead Game, everything actually was all-meaningful, that every symbol and combination of symbol led not hither and yon, not to single examples, experiments, and proofs, but into the center, the mystery and innermost heart of the world, into primal knowledge. Every transition from major to minor in a sonata, every transformation of a myth or a religious cult, every classical or artistic formulation was, I realized in that flashing moment, if seen with truly a meditative mind, nothing but a direct route into the interior of the cosmic mystery, where in the alternation between inhaling and exhaling, between heaven and earth, between Yin and Yang holiness is forever being created.'

In 1946 Hesse received the Nobel Prize for literature. Prior to Hesse's acceptance speech (which was read in his absence due to ill health) the president of the Royal Academy of Sciences remarked:

'[Hesse] shouts to all of us the motto of young Joseph Knecht in *Das Glasperlenspiel - "Transzendieren!"* Advance, mount higher, conquer yourself! For to be human is to suffer an incurable duality, to be drawn towards both good and evil. And we can achieve harmony and peace only when we have killed the selfishness within us. This is Hesse's message to the people of a ravaged age, resounding with screams of self-vindication from East and West. It is principally as a profound philosopher and bold critic of the contemporary period in his stories that Hesse deserves the Nobel Prize.'

In 1968, Yasunari Kawabata also received the Nobel Prize for literature. In his Nobel lecture he stated:

'I have two specimens of Ikkyu's calligraphy. One of them is the line, "It is easy to enter the world of the Buddha, it is hard to enter the world of the devil." Drawn to these words, I frequently use them when asked for

a specimen of my own calligraphy. They can be read in any number of ways, as difficult as one chooses. But the idea of the world of the devil joined to the world of the Buddha brings the Zen of Ikkyu home to me with great immediacy. For an artist, seeking truth, goodness, and beauty, the fact is that fear and a prayer-like petition is in those words about the world of the devil. Whether apparent or hidden, it has the inevitability of fate. There can be no world of the Buddha without the world of the devil. And the world of the devil is the world difficult of entry. It is not for the faint of heart.'

Despite the different tenor of their rhetoric - Hesse's exhortative, Kawabata's elegiac - both were responding to a ravaged world through the image of a game that transcended the political, social, and spiritual morass of war. Neither the Glass Bead Game nor Go is for the faint of heart.

Liza Dalby, 2006

Introduction to the First Edition

Mr Kawabata has described *The Master of Go* as 'a faithful chronicle-novel.' The word used, of course, is not 'novel' but *shōsetsu*, a rather more flexible and generous and catholic term than 'novel.' Frequently what would seem to the Western reader a piece of autobiography or a set of memoirs, somewhat embroidered and colored but essentially nonfiction all the same, is placed by the Japanese reader in the realm of the *shōsetsu*.

So it is with *The Master of Go*. It contains elements of fiction, but it is rather more chronicle than novel, a sad, elegant piece of reportage, based upon a 1939 Go match, the course of which was precisely as described in this 'chronicle-novel,' and upon which Mr Kawabata reported for the twin Osaka and Tokyo newspapers that today both bear the name *Mainichi*.

Certain elements of fiction are obvious. Mr Kawabata gives himself a fictitious name, Uragami, and apparently, though the matter could be a small failure of memory, assigns himself a different age from that which is actually his. The Master is known by his own name, or rather his professional name, but, as if to emphasize that the Master is the protagonist, always at the center of things, Mr Kawabata also assigns the adversary, in real life Mr Kitani Minoru, a fictitious name. The complex treatment of time, with the action beginning and ending at the same point, and the delicate, impressionistic descriptions of setting and season are further justification for the expression 'chronicle-novel.'

But the most complex element of fiction probably is in the delineation of the Master himself. Persons who knew him in real life have told us that in addition to being almost grotesquely diminutive, he gave an impression of deviousness and even of a certain foxlike slyness. He had, at least to the casual observer, little of the nobility with which Mr Kawabata has endowed him. Mr Kawabata's achievement thus transcends faithful chronicling and becomes fictional characterization of a virtuoso order.

Shūsai the Master becomes a sad and noble symbol. In what is perhaps the most famous of all his pronouncements, Mr Kawabata said shortly after the war that henceforward he would be able to write only elegies. The defeat of 1945 was, along with the loss of all his immediate relatives in childhood, one of the great events molding the Kawabata sensibility. He began reworking his chronicle of the 1938 Go match during the war, and did not complete it until nearly a decade after the end of the war. The symbolic reality breathed into its central character makes *The Master of Go* the most beautiful of his elegies.

'The invincible Master' lost his final championship match, and at Mr Kawabata's hands the defeat becomes the defeat of a tradition. It is the aristocratic tradition which, until 1945, was the grounding for morals and ethics in Japan, and for the arts as well. Just as Mr Kawabata would have nothing of jingoistic wartime hysteria, so he would have nothing of the platitudinous 'democracy' and 'liberalism' of the postwar years. He was not prepared to turn his back on what was for him the essence of Japan. One was puzzled to know why the flamboyant Mishima Yukio and the quiet, austere Kawabata should have felt so close to each other. Perhaps a part of the secret lies in the aristocratic tendencies the two men shared.

The game of Go is simple in its fundamentals and infinitely complex in the execution of them. It is not what might be called a game of moves, as chess and checkers.

Though captured stones may be taken from the board, a stone is never moved to a second position after it has been placed upon one of the three hundred sixty-one points to which play is confined. The object is to build up positions which are invulnerable to enemy attack, meanwhile surrounding and capturing enemy stones.

A moment's deliberation upon the chart of the completed game should serve to establish that Black controls major territories at the lower left and the upper right of the board, and that White is strong at the lower right. Black controls a lesser area at the upper left and White at the left center. The upper central regions of the board are delicately divided between the two, and the center and the regions immediately below are neutral. The counting of points is extremely complicated. It is significant that at the end of the match not even the Master himself has the precise count. A very special sort of visual faculty seems required for the final summing up, and, one might say, a sort of kinetic faculty too. Persons who know Go well have been able to give me a reasonably clear account of the 1938 game only by lining the stones up one by one as they were in fact played.

When, in 1954, *The Master of Go* first appeared in book form, it was somewhat longer than the version translated here. The shorter version is Mr Kawabata's own favorite, for it is the one included in the most recent edition of his 'complete works.' The portions excised from the 1954 version fall between the end of the match and the Master's death.

I am very greatly in debt to Miss Ibuki Kazuko and Mr Yanagita Kunio, both of the Chūō Kōron Publishing Company in Tokyo. Out of sheer kindness, they were more help in solving the mysteries of the text and the game than a platoon of paid researchers could have been.

E.G.S.
January 1972

The Master of Go

