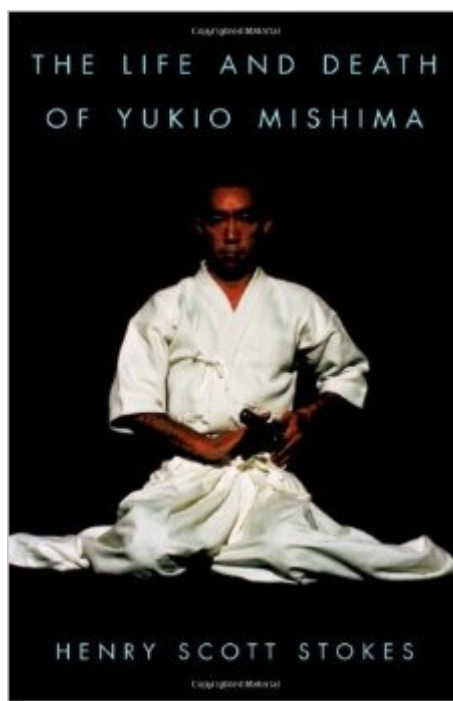


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The Life And Death Of Yukio Mishima



Synopsis

Novelist, playwright, film actor, martial artist, and political commentator, Yukio Mishima (1925-1970) was arguably the most famous person in Japan at the time of his death. Henry Scott Stokes, one of Mishima's closest friends, was the only non-Japanese allowed to attend the trial of the men involved in Mishima's spectacular suicide. In this insightful and empathetic look at the writer, Stokes guides the reader through the milestones of Mishima's meteoric and eclectic career and delves into the artist's major works and themes. This biography skillfully and compassionately illuminates the achievements and disquieting ideas of a brilliant and deeply troubled man, an artist of whom Nobel Laureate Yasunari Kawabata had said, "A writer of Mishima's caliber comes along only once every two or three hundred years."

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Customer Reviews

The major point of discussion for reviewers of this book and of John Nathan's biography of Mishima seems to be "Which one is better?" Personally, I'd say neither. For those who were somewhat dissatisfied with the way Nathan glossed over certain things (like, oh, The Sea of Fertility), Scott-Stokes' book has a greater volume of information and a more consistent analysis of Mishima's literature. For instance, I don't recall Nathan having even mentioned Ba-ra-kei (which I intend to procure sometime in the future, now that I know of its existence) in passing; Scott-Stokes, on the other hand, includes it in the appropriate section of Mishima's life (there are four: Literature, Drama, Body and Action). Scott-Stokes also has the better analysis of Mishima's plays, with more quotes

and a lengthier discussion. However, as a whole I think I liked Nathan's work more. I really did not get why Scott-Stokes included the "dramatization" of the Mishima Incident (as the first scene, no less); it's bewilderingly out of place, though I admit that it does provide a good hook to lead into the rest of the book with. But that's emblematic of a larger problem; Scott-Stokes gives himself much greater license than Nathan did to theorize about Mishima's motivations and inner thoughts, and like all canonical examples of dubious reportage, his theories cite anonymous sources. Nor did I particularly appreciate his cavalier dismissal of a rather large part of Mishima's literature as subpar - in fact, unlike Nathan, he really doesn't even come across as an avid reader of Mishima, which would be fine if not for the fact that he decided to be the man's biographer. If you're interested in Mishima, you're inevitably going to read this, but I recommend reading Nathan's biography first.

Henry Scott Stokes' *THE LIFE AND DEATH OF YUKIO MISHIMA* is one of the few biographies in English of the Japanese novelist, whose 1970 death by seppuku after a failed coup d'état is just as much a part of his legacy as his works. Scott Stokes understands how Mishima's death overshadows all else, and he begins the work with a very detailed description of Mishima's failed coup and suicide, before going back to his birth and beginning his life stories. His book is based on few interviews; Scott Stokes feels that everything is already out there in written form and can be compacted for English readers. The description of Mishima's unsuccessful coup, for example, is based on records of the trial of the survivors. Scott Stokes knew Mishima himself in the late 1960's, and was a keen observer of his political activity. He was even the only journalist to view training exercises of Mishima's private army. Because of this first-hand perspective, the latter portion of Mishima's life is told in great detail. Much less, satisfying, however, is his coverage of Mishima's earlier years, in which a large amount of detail is "reconstructed" from Mishima's semi-autobiographical work *CONFESSIONS OF A MASK*, a dubious approach. For a better view of Mishima's life prior to 1964, I'd recommend John Nathan's *MISHIMA: A BIOGRAPHY*, written by one of his translators who knew him early on, and to which Mishima's family contributed through personal interviews. There is a wealth of information about Mishima's books, especially about his masterpiece "The Sea of Fertility" for which detailed summaries are given.

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