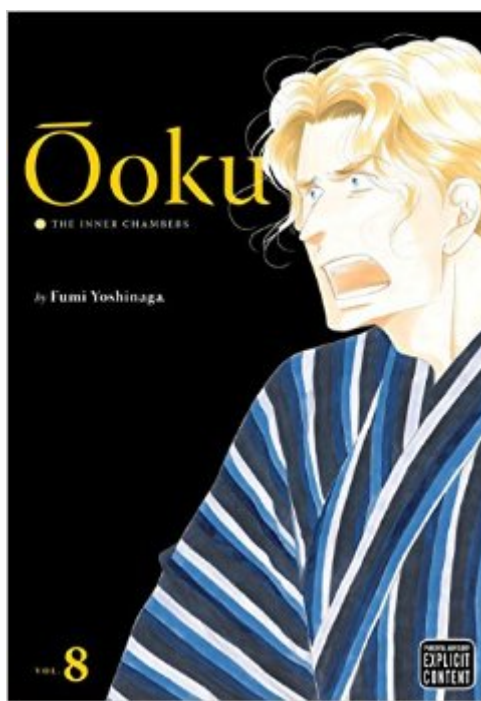


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Ōoku: The Inner Chambers, Vol. 8



Synopsis

In this 17th Century Japan the Shogun is a woman...and the harem is full of men. In Edo period Japan, a strange new disease called the Redface Pox has begun to prey on the country's men. Within eighty years of the first outbreak, the male population has fallen by seventy-five percent. Women have taken on all the roles traditionally granted to men, even that of the shogun. The men, precious providers of life, are carefully protected. And the most beautiful of the men are sent to serve in the shogun's Inner Chamber... Yoshimune has secured her place in history as a cunning and capable ruler, but the time has come for her to officially declare an heir. Many in her court hope she will pass over her oafish older daughter Ieshige in favor of the urbane Munetake. Yoshimune has never been one to bow to convention, but this time the future of her country is at stake! Reads R to L (Japanese Style) for mature audiences.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The premise "an alternate history of Japan in which most of the men have died, causing the women to take over leading the country" can be complicated for most readers, who don't have any knowledge of Japanese history. Yet it's so well done! I adore Fumi Yoshinaga's art, with its thin-line detail and expressive characters. She builds a rich, full world, transporting us to another place and time where courtesy could be life-threatening (if the wrong person is accidentally insulted). And of course, she illustrates the gorgeous kimono fashion that was such an important marker of one's place in the hierarchy. It has been a while since I read the series, but Book 8 was a great refresher, since it contains shorter stories focusing on specific individuals trying to

navigate this changed world. First, there's the problem of succession to the shogun, as her oldest daughter is disabled. She can't speak or move properly, although later events reveal that she's not stupid, just handicapped by a body that won't obey her. The challenge of such a condition in a world without modern medical care or understanding isn't one that had previously occurred to me, and Yoshinaga makes her story quite affecting. Next comes a question of discrimination. Zenjiro is an accomplished chef, but many guests at the inn where he cooks don't want a man in the kitchen. Some of his coworkers similarly find his presence an annoyance. So he enters the inner chambers, where he finds that he's at the bottom of the hierarchy, there for the other men to play tricks on and haze until he demonstrates his skill. Given Yoshinaga's love of food, I wasn't surprised to see discussion of a recipe in this section. Zenjiro has a more important role to play, though.

Viz's Signature Line Series Ooku, the Inner Chambers, continues with Volume 8 (the publishing company suggests this will be about 10 volumes total). As with the previous volumes, we are given chapter-length vignettes which explore a character's history - and that then tie into the overall history of an alternate universe Japan. Fumi Yoshinaga's work is definitely known for its attention to detail and underlying pathos rather than straightforward linear storytelling. The story in Volume 8: Shogun Yoshimune has ruled Japan effectively and efficiently. But she is in her twilight years and needs to choose a successor. Her two eldest, Ieshige and Munetake, are her strongest candidates. But Ieshige suffers from a birth defect that affects her ability to control her body (but not necessarily her mind). Meanwhile, Munetake is gracious, intelligent, and accomplished - an attractive candidate over her older sister. As in the real history of Japan, Yoshimune's choice of Ieshige as his heir created considerable controversy within the shogunate. Tokugawa Munetake appeared to be far more suitable candidate. Yoshimune continued to insist on his decision, favoring the Confucian principle of primogeniture; and Ieshige continued in the role of formal head of the shogunate. In the book, mangaka Fumi Yoshinaga comes up with a novel way of showing why Yoshimune chose the debilitated older child as heir. Meanwhile, inn cook Zenjiro is chafing at not being able to pursue his culinary talents - all because he is a man and that avenue is not allowed to males. He takes a job in the Inner Chamber as an apprentice cook - but is soon attached to entice an Ooku harem, prisoner Sir O-kou, to eat again.

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