I'm not a bot

Silk (1996) is a novella by Italian author Alessandro Baricco, translated into English by Guido Waldman in 1997, and by Ann Goldstein in 2006. Set in the 19th century, the novella follows French merchant Hervé Joncour as he falls in love with the wife or concubine of a Japanese nobleman. The novella was adapted as a 2007 film of the same title starring Keira Knightley.The novel opens as a silkworm disease eradicates the species all over Europe and North Africa. Hervé's town depends on the silk trade, and local magnate Balbadiou, who owns the town's silk mills, dispatches Hervé to Japan to buy silkworm eggs there. The task is dangerous. Japan is still all but closed to foreigners, and Japanese law forbids the export of silkworms. Furthermore, the journey to Japan takes months. Hervé must cross the entire latitude of Europe and Asia to get there.Hervé's beloved wife, Hélène, is reluctant to see him go for so long, but husband and wife both know that without the silkworm eggs, their community will perish. Bringing some eggs back, however, will make Hervé rich.Hervé finally reaches Japan by sailing from the coast of Siberia on a smugglers' ship. He travels on foot, avoiding major roads, until he reaches a rendezvous point where he is blindfolded and taken to a small village.There Hervé is granted an audience with a local aristocrat, Hara Kei, who agrees to sell him some silkworm eggs. During the audience, however, Hervé is distracted by a woman in Hara Kei's retinue—a wife or a mistress—who does not have oriental eyes. The woman notices Hervé's attention, and the two exchange wordless glances and gestures that ignite a fierce passion in the French merchant. However, Hervé has no way to see her and to be caught trying would entail a death sentence.Hervé returns to France, lovelorn for the mysterious woman. Balbadiou pays him handsomely for the silkworm eggs, and he purchases the house of his and Hélène's dreams. He still loves Hélène, but theirs feels increasingly like a domestic affection, with none of the exotic and forbidden romance of his Japanese affair.When Balbadiou needs more eggs the following year, Hervé is only too glad to return to Japan. Hara Kei befriends him and shows him his aviary of exotic birds. Meanwhile, Hervé seizes an opportunity to conceal one of his gloves in a pile of clothes, for his beloved to find. She responds with a note, handwritten in Japanese.Hervé returns home, desperate to find out what the note says. He locates a brothel in Lyon whose owner is a Japanese woman, known as Madame Blanche. She tells him that the note reads: "Come back or I shall die." She warns Hervé against pursuing the author of the note.Hervé and Hélène want to have a child, and they take a holiday in the Riviera, hoping to ignite passion in their relationship. However, they do not conceive. When the time comes for Hervé to return once more to Japan, Hélène is heartbroken. She knows that each time Hervé travels, he comes back more distant from her than before.While Hervé is staying with Hara Kei, his beloved releases the birds in the aviary, making Hara Kei angry. She sends a servant girl to Hervé, whom Hervé sleeps with in her place. When it is time for the silkworm transaction, Hara Kei does not appear in person, instead, sending an intermediary. When Hervé leaves, Hara Kei does not appear to wish him goodbye.This time, upon his return to France, Hervé is utterly forlorn, longing to return to his beloved in Japan. However, civil war has broken out there, and when it is time to collect more silkworm eggs, Balbadiou wants Hervé to go to China instead. Hervé refuses and insists on going to Japan.When he arrives, he finds Hara Kei's house and village abandoned. As he wanders around, a young boy approaches him and gives him the glove he left for his beloved. The boy leads him to a campsite, inhabited by Hara Kei and the people of his village.Hara Kei denies Hervé entry to the camp. Hervé refuses to leave. The next morning Hara Kei has the boy executed for bringing Hervé to the camp.Hervé manages to procure silkworm eggs in another Japanese town, but he has taken too long. The eggs hatch on the way to France, and all the worms die. The mills of his town have nothing to mill. The people endure great hardship, but Hervé hardly notices. All he can think of is his beloved in Japan.One day, he receives a letter written in Japanese. He hurries to Madame Blanche. The letter is a powerfully erotic confession of love, which concludes by saying goodbye and wishing Hervé a happy life. Madame Blanche gives Hervé some of the blue flowers which she wears in her clothes.Hervé continues to pine. He retires from trade and spends all his time constructing a park with an aviary modeled on Hara Kei's. He thinks of it as a monument to his lost love, to the "yearning for something you'll never experience."Hélène, still only in her 30s, contracts a fever and dies. Despite his continuing obsession with his Japanese beloved, Hervé mourns his wife deeply. One day, Hervé notes that someone has left blue flowers on her grave. He goes to Madame Blanche to ask what connection she had to his wife.Madame Blanche reveals that Hélène was the author of the erotic love-letter. She asked Madame Blanche to translate it and send it to Hervé. She had known Hervé was in love with a Japanese woman and wanted to ease his pain. Madame Blanche tells him that Hélène had wanted to be the woman he loved.Hervé realizes that Hélène was his true love. He has the word "hélas" ("Alas") carved on her gravestone. Translated from Italian and told over a scant 91 pages, Silk is the tale of 19th century French silk merchant Hervé Joncour. When a blight threatens the European and African silk worms, Joncour is sent further afield to source new worms to sustain not only his livelihood but that of his home town. Leaving behind a loving wife, it is to Japan that he travels; a country mysterious through it's policy of self-isolation but renowned for their quality of silk. On this first trip he successfully negotiates and obtains silk cocoons from a Japanese baron amidst much secrecy; Joncour is led blindfolded to the village. It is on this first trip that he first encounters the Baron's concubine and a mutual fascination develops. Joncour returns to Japan less than a handful of times. On all these occasions, time spent with this woman is no less fleeting but the emotions at play are also no less intense or passionate but remain unfulfilled. After each trip, he returns to a wife not completely unaware of the change Japan has wrought on her husband. When civil war in Japan destroys the village and any chance at a more permanent and ongoing relationship with the concubine, Joncour's tale becomes that of longing "…to die of nostalgia for something you will never live." Silk is physically brief – if 91 pages is not short enough, most of the pages were only half filled. I mention this only because I am still amazed at how much of a complete story is told, how much emotion is conveyed, how much there is to take a away from this novella. There are historical facts here; a little about the silk worm industry; Japan and their self-imposed isolation; Joncour's journey is mapped quite thoroughly and is able to traced. But alongside the historical aspects, there is a complete and satisfying story. I'm not against books that leave things a bit open ended, allowing the reader to draw conclusions or imagine how they would like the characters to move on after the written part of their journey ends. In some circumstances I actually prefer it and with novellas I expect it. However, Baricco tells the full story of Joncour, his trips to Japan, his enthrallment with the concubine and the effects on his life in France particularly his marriage. The characters are not able to be fully fleshed out but this does not affect the readers understanding of the motivations or actions of the characters involved. The instant attraction leading to the ongoing obsession, the reasons behind the Joncour's enduring marriage in the face of this, what both Hélene and Hervé do as individuals to see it out. Which leads me to the thing that I enjoyed most about Silk – the writing. Lyrical in feel, Baricco renders this brief tale through the lens of strong imagery and such beautiful prose that it actually felt like I was consuming it; if I could only use one word to describe it, the word would be delicious. The only way to do Baricco any justice would be to provide a quote that struck me; "He had once held between his fingers a veil woven out of Japanese silk thread. It was like grasping in your fingers… nothing." pg. 14 When I first rated this, I gave it a 4/5, Goodreads not allowing me to give it that extra half a star I felt it deserved at the time. After giving it the necessary musings in writing this review, I'm re-thinking my rating. For all the reasons listed above, I thoroughly enjoyed this quick read. But the amount of times that it has popped back into my thoughts since reading it means it really has resonated with me. It is beautiful, sensual, desperate and heart-breakingly sad. And so I'm bumping it up to 5/5. Another reader commented that the length of this story allows you to read it one sitting and this is how I am recommending it. Read it once in one sitting to appreciate the story. Read it again, slowly, to appreciate the writing. Estimated read time: 5 min read"SIlk" by Alessandro Baricco is a captivating and evocative novel that takes the reader on a mesmerizing journey through love, sacrifice, and the pursuit of dreams. Set in the 19th century, the story unfolds against the backdrop of France and Japan, weaving a tale of passion, longing, and the unbreakable human spirit. Through its lyrical prose and vivid imagery, "Silk" immerses readers in a world of forbidden romance, cultural complexities, and the timeless quest for fulfillment.Brief SynopsisPlot OverviewThe novel "Silk" revolves around the life of Hervé Joncour, a French silk merchant, who travels to Japan in search of silkworm eggs. Hervé's journey to Japan becomes a recurring ritual, during which he encounters the enigmatic and captivating Madame Blanche, a woman of profound allure and mystery. Despite the language barrier and cultural disparities, an intense and forbidden love blossoms between Hervé and Madame Blanche, leading to a series of poignant and life-altering decisions.SettingThe narrative unfolds primarily in the scenic countryside of France and the culturally rich and captivating landscapes of Japan. The stark contrast between the two settings serves as a backdrop for the emotional and cultural complexities that drive the characters' actions and decisions.Main CharactersThe novel features a cast of compelling characters, each contributing to the intricacies of the plot and the exploration of themes such as love, desire, and sacrifice.CharacterDescriptionHervé JoncourA French silk merchant whose journey to Japan leads him to a forbidden and transformative love.Madame BlancheAn enigmatic and alluring woman in Japan with whom Hervé becomes entangled in a forbidden love affair.Hara KeiA Japanese local who becomes pivotal in Hervé's dealings and interactions in Japan.BaldabiouHervé's employer and a key figure in the silk trade, influencing Hervé's professional and personal life.Summary of Different Story Points Over ChaptersChapters 1-5Hervé Joncour embarks on his first journey to Japan in pursuit of silkworm eggs, navigating the challenges of cultural differences and language barriers. During this visit, he encounters Madame Blanche, a mysterious and alluring figure, marking the beginning of their fateful connection.Chapters 6-10Hervé's subsequent visits to Japan deepen his relationship with Madame Blanche, leading to clandestine and passionate encounters that test the boundaries of love and commitment. The intensity of their forbidden romance becomes increasingly profound, entwining their destinies in unforeseen ways.Chapters 11-15As Hervé's visits to Japan continue, the complexities of his personal and professional life intertwine with his love for Madame Blanche. The repercussions of their affair reverberate through Hervé's world, leading to moments of introspection, sacrifice, and profound emotional turmoil.Chapters 16-20The culmination of Hervé and Madame Blanche's love story unfolds against the backdrop of unforeseen challenges and life-altering decisions. The novel reaches its poignant and transformative resolution, leaving a lasting impression of love's enduring power and the human capacity for sacrifice.Main EventsHervé's initial journey to Japan in pursuit of silkworm eggsHervé's encounters with Madame Blanche, sparking a forbidden romanceThe deepening of Hervé and Madame Blanche's love amidst cultural complexities and personal sacrificesThe culmination of their love story and the profound impact it has on their lives and destiniesThemes and InsightsThemesForbidden Love: The novel delves into the complexities of forbidden love, exploring the emotional and moral dilemmas that arise from societal constraints.Cultural Clashes: The juxtaposition of French and Japanese cultures serves as a backdrop for the novel's exploration of communication barriers and the complexities of human connection.Sacrifice: The theme of sacrifice is prevalent throughout the story, as characters grapple with the choices they must make in the name of love and personal fulfillment.Longing and Desire: The novel delves into the profound longing and desire that drive the characters, shaping their decisions and altering the course of their lives.Insights"SIlk" offers insights into the depths of human emotion, the enduring power of love, and the transformative impact of life-altering decisions. Through its exploration of cultural nuances and the complexities of human connection, the novel provides a poignant reflection on the universal experiences of love, sacrifice, and the pursuit of fulfillment.Reader's TakeawayReaders of "Silk" are invited to immerse themselves in a world of forbidden romance, cultural intricacies, and the timeless quest for love and fulfillment. The novel's lyrical prose and evocative storytelling offer a captivating and thought-provoking exploration of human emotion, leaving a lasting impression of love's enduring power and the resilience of the human spirit.ConclusionIn conclusion, "Silk" by Alessandro Baricco is a beautifully crafted novel that weaves a mesmerizing tale of forbidden love, sacrifice, and the pursuit of dreams. Set against the backdrop of France and Japan, the novel's evocative prose and compelling characters invite readers on a captivating journey through the intricacies of human emotion and the enduring power of love. Through its exploration of cultural complexities and the transformative impact of life-altering decisions, "Silk" leaves a lasting impression of the universal experiences of longing, desire, and the unbreakable human spirit. By Annie Wyner Upon its release in 1996, Alessandro Baricco's novel Seta (Silk) was an instant commercial hit. A bestseller in his native Italy, it has since been translated into sixteen languages, in addition to a stage adaptation in 2006 and a feature film adaptation in 2007. Baricco cuts an imposing figure in the landscape of Italian literature. A well-respected author known for his sparse, taut prose, he is among a relatively slim number of Italian authors who have found success among Anglophone audiences. Italian scholar Luigi Monga describes his style succinctly as "deliberately simple" with "brief, often elliptical sentences…like a series of Japanese haiku." Set in the mid-19th century, Silk follows the life of French silkworm merchant Hervé Joncour as he develops an obsession with a young concubine whose eyes "did not have an oriental slant (19, italics in the original)" during his travels to Japan. On a surface level, Silk evokes a traditional travel narrative, depicting the roguish Western hero being seduced by the exotic "Other" but always returning home to find comfort and reassurance in his stable Western identity. However, rather than reinforcing Orientalist stereotypes, the novel problematizes them, blurring the lines between self and other. Above all, Silk is a novel that dwells in silences and negative spaces, an examination of unfulfilled desire and all that remains unspoken. Joncour's fixation on the young concubine that captured his imagination remains unrealized, buried beneath clandestine love notes and quick glances. Joncour himself remains evasive throughout the novel, his identity as slippery and difficult to grasp as a swath of silk (back home in France he becomes "the Japanese," not only a reference to his travels, but also a hint at the other hidden inside the self). It is in these empty spaces that this story of desire and identity begins to unfurl, as lush and heady as a children's fable. Silk was originally translated into English by Guido Waldman in 1997, a year after its publication in Italy. A decade later it was retranslated by Ann Goldstein in conjunction with its eponymous 2007 film adaptation (an international co-production directed by François Girard). Waldman and Goldstein offer two immensely different interpretations of the source text, as demonstrated by the opening lines of each translation. Waldman, the prose translator of 16th-century Italian epic poetry, offers an ornate, decadent interpretation: Although his father had pictured for him a brilliant future in the army, Hervé Joncour had ended up earning his crust in an unusual career which, by a singular piece of irony, was not unconnected with a charming side that bestowed upon it a vaguely feminine intonation. (1) Waldman's lush, lyrical prose is deeply immersive, laced with archaisms reminiscent of a 19th-century novel. In a novella such as Silk in which characterization and plot remain quite elusive, Waldman's lyrical approach gives readers something to grasp onto, grounding them in the time and place of the story. Conversely, Ann Goldstein opts for a more stripped back style. Goldstein, who has established her career as a translator of modern and contemporary Italian authors, offers a far more clipped, prosaic style: Although his father had imagined for him a brilliant future in the army, Hervé Joncour ended up earning his living in an unusual profession that, with singular irony, had a feature so sweet as to betray a vaguely feminine intonation. (1) Goldstein's translation offers a subdued interpretation of the source text, paring back the language in order to avoid imposing her own style. While the poetic and lyrical elements of Waldman's translation are lost in this approach, Goldstein's more bare- bones approach allows Baricco's voice to shine through, removing, as it were, the silk veil of Waldman's translation. In both its iterations, Silk straddles the line between domestic and foreign, not unlike Joncour himself. Translation serves as a lens through which Baricco interrogates traditional Western notions of foreignness and domesticity. Joncour, in both Japan and France, is distinctly the other, subverting the trope of the Western "conqueror" and the Eastern "Other." Unable to communicate in Japanese despite the increasingly long stretches of time he spends there, his romance with the young concubine is filtered entirely through translation, with the Japanese brothel owner Madame Blanche an unwilling go-between for Joncour and his would-be lover. That the act of translation falls on the shoulders of Madame Blanche, a Japanese woman living in France, further complicates the ideas of foreignness and domesticity, as her name suggests. Translation serves as a sort of silk screen through which Joncour conducts his affairs—even in his most intimate relationships, he is a mere passenger, unable, or unwilling perhaps, to effectively communicate his desires on his own. He exists in the liminal space between the self and the other, his identity elusive, his desires vague. He is a man defined by lack, his life full of gaps and silences. And the novel's unexpected ending offers a twist on the underlying theme of finding the self in the heart of otherness and conversely, the other–between the lines of the writing, and translating, self. Baricco gifts Hélène, Joncour's otherwise silent wife, with an erotic imagination and a creative voice that at once capture and question the Western trope of Oriental eroticism. Translation is an act of rebirth—with each retranslation, the source text is permanently altered. These two translations of Silk demonstrate the immense richness and complexity packed into the novel's 92 pages. While radically different in their approach, interpretation, and impact, these translations both serve as a proliferation of the source text, injecting the negative spaces with meaning. Alessandro Baricco, Silk. Translated by Ann Goldstein. Canongate, 2019 [2007]. Alessandro Baricco, Silk. Translated by Guido Waldman, Vintage Books, 1998. Annie Wyner studies classics, comparative literature, and literary translation at Oberlin College. A translator of ancient Greek, their interests include Greek lyric poetry, Euripidean tragedy, and the intersections of classical literature and modern pop culture. Works Cited Monga, Luigi. "Seta." World Literature Today, vol. 71, 1997, pp. 368. Gale Literature Resource Center; Gale, . Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially. Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially. The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms. Attribution — You must give appropriate credit , provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made . You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use. 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