

Centuries from now, when archaeologists go through the ruins they'll be able to date this easily: modern glass box with vista, circa 2007. I'm in the Gardiner Museum, lunching in the third floor restaurant. Glass and stainless steel bracket the central staircase. Men in ponytails and women of a certain age: the art world. Chef Jamie Kennedy struts past our table in shoulder length pageboy and spotless white apron, perfectly trussed. A true celebrity.

My editor orders something complicated.

I save complications for the novel. I tell her it isn't so fictional. I tell her about Hokusai, the ten thousand works which couldn't possibly have been created by one man. I talk about his daughter, Oi, slagged in her time as unkempt, a drinker, unfeminine, and a bad housekeeper. Painted well, though.

Iris wonders if any women wrote about her.

I doubt it. A thousand years earlier the country led the world in literary women with Lady Murasaki and her contemporary Sei Shonogan, of Pillow Book fame. From feudal Japan, however, no women's voices remain.

"Surely women were literate; they read and they must have been sent to school."

I tell her about the special script that women could read because it didn't take long to learn. They couldn't handle the hundreds of characters men read: they had no leisure.

"They read but didn't write?"

"Maybe they wrote. But they were so unhappy that their writing was suppressed as subversive." I did once locate a few lines penned by a courtesan: she was lamenting her slavery, which made it hard to repay her debt. "Tiresome woman," is the response recorded.

"Somewhere there is a woman's account," insists Iris.

"I would need a Buddhist nun for that."

"Well is there one?" Ever practical, these people.

"Oh, plenty," I say, poking my fork into my placemat. "But they didn't--"

"Didn't write? Or didn't know Oi?"

“Not in reality...”

That is an Edo expression. The writers gave a character a name -- let's say Bonsai -- and prefaced it with a note saying that “in reality” Bonsai was the historical ruler Hideyoshi, about whom they were forbidden to write. It was a transparent fudge. More would be revealed about Hideyoshi under his false name than ever under his own name. In disguise one spoke freely. But all disguises were see-through. Sometimes this meant trouble. The writer Kyoden was interrogated on the White Sands for an “immoral” book that he insisted was based in the distant past, not in the licensed quarter of his day. “If that is so,” said the inquisitor, “why do we recognize the fish tank at the end of the road?”

Thereby revealing that he knew the terrain.

I stare out the window, across Queen's Park to where the Royal Ontario Museum's alarming glass growth is winking in the sun.

“But I suppose I could get one.” I say. “A Buddhist nun, I mean.”

“So it is fiction,” grins Iris.

“Except what I have to say about making it up.”

Iris is cool as a cuke, even while coping with the complex folds of her lotus-inspired lunch. “You're going to show your hand.”

“What do you think?”

“I think it's brave.”

“Brave” sounds risky. I prefer “frank”. I will wear the garment inside-out so the seams show, as courtesans wore theirs. The end result is the same; the difference is merely manners. In the stories we adopt, we prefer the seams to be on the inside. Because who wants to know? Who wants to examine how today's compelling legends are put together, by what bunch of assumptions? About the Airbus scandal, or who killed Princess Di, or Belinda's right nipple. Those assumptions might not withstand the light of day.

“Can you imagine a through thread?” Iris is saying.

This lunch has turned us into tailors.