



Potter's Boy

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Editorial Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

Tony Mitton prefaces his novel with a message to his readers: 'Since my childhood in 1950s Hong Kong I've been influenced by Buddhism and the arts of China and Japan. Now, towards the end of my life, I wanted to pass on some of what I know about these things.' His story, he says, tells how a boy acquires wisdom through recognising 'the difference between what he seeks and what he finds....[it's] about understanding that gap and about accepting what IS'. Such a message may seem to promise reflection rather than action, and young readers' anticipations on reading Mitton's message may well vary.

Our narrator is also an older man looking back. He's modestly apologetic about his 'old-fashioned' style, though he believes his story 'may still be relevant to those living now, and even those who come to be living in future times'. He introduces us to Ryo, the twelve-year-old son of a skilled potter living in what we infer is a medieval Japanese village. One day, into that village walks the Stranger, who asks for refreshment. As he sips a bowl of wheat tea, three heavily armed brigands swagger into the settlement, demanding money, valuables and food. Or else. Silence, until 'No....!' and the Stranger, carrying no weapon, steps forward. Within moments, the brigands are shamed and defeated, not only through the Stranger's superior fighting skills, but by a 'quality of mind, spirit, heart, feeling' which Ryo sees in the man's movement and bearing. The Stranger stays for no thanks, but Ryo, entranced, races after him up the hill track. 'Teach me to be like you,' he begs.

So Ryo's long journey begins. With some reluctance, the Stranger directs Ryo to Cold Mountain where he seeks out Unzen, an old man following a solitary and self-sufficient way of life. Here, over some fifty pages and a year, we watch Unzen's patient training of Ryo, sometimes in the disciplines of fighting, sometimes in those of the mind; all are connected. Every task requires full attention: 'Unzen used the word 'mindful' to describe this way of doing things... not doing it in a dreamy way while thinking of other things'. Absolute concentration in the moment. With only two characters to work with, and with learning taking its own time, the story's pace is measured. Some readers will feel drawn ever closer into what Ryo is discovering, while others might find their own concentration tested. Perhaps Mitton is passing on his life experiences through the manner, as well as the content, of his telling. The novel becomes a spiritual tract.

The tempo abruptly changes when Unzen tells Ryo he has taught him what he can and leads him to a remote Hill Camp,

home of the 'Hidden Ones', a community which Unzen had founded years ago, now led by Aiko, the Stranger. Here, Ryo's duties range from repeated drills in martial arts to working in the fields. Despite the different personalities of his fellow students ' male and female ' no disharmony interrupts the purposeful rhythm of their lives. Soon the long practised fighting skills of Ryo and three of his youthful friends are tested as they are sent to confront a party of brigands, much as Aiko had done in Ryo's village. The combat is described with graphic precision. Before long, the Hidden Ones move in strength to support the Emperor, who they believe is introducing constructive reforms. Things do not go well, but from what seems to be the loss of everything Ryo has learned to value, he finds ' to his surprise ' a new, more creative pathway than he had ever envisaged.

Potter's Boy will be extremely rewarding for an open-minded, thoughtful reader, a novel 'for the right reader at the right time?. Indeed, it could be unforgettable, a book in which you find yourself, as Mitton hopes. For another, not ready for it through maturity or inclination as a reader, involvement might be more difficult. In **BfK** terms however, it's a 5 star experience for the first reader.

Tony Mitton was the subject of [BfK Authorgraph](#) [4] 208 .

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