

## BOOKS

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The author of *Reservation Road* takes on the mysteries of the Japanese royal family.

a bottle of Coke appears on the bamboo table, and beside it a round glass tumbler no

bigger than a billiard ball. Were they expecting a pair of hobbits for lunch at the fabulously expensive Midtown Manhattan restaurant Sushi Yasuda? Instead, grinning at this spectacle from the seat opposite mine is novelist John Burnham Schwartz, best known as the author of *Reservation Road* (now a "major motion picture," in book-jacket blabber). What better location to discuss his latest, **The Commoner** (Nan A. Talese/Doubleday), a work of fiction heavily lacquered with fact and purporting to be the story of Japan's most celebrated desperate housewives—its current empress and crown princess.

By now, Schwartz is something of an authority on the Japanese and their quasi-Martian mores—the numb obeisance paid to unforgiving protocols, particularly. A schoolboyish 42, he still resembles the East Asian studies major he was at Harvard, a flop of golden brown hair grazing his forehead.

## RISING SON

The novelist and screenwriter John Burnham Schwartz at his house in Brooklyn. Burberry London jacket. TSE sweater. Earnest Sewn jeans.

His first novel, 1989's *Bicycle Days*, grew out of his thesis, a roman à clef about working in Tokyo that wound up scuttling his once certain future as an investment banker. In Japan, he found no shortage of material: There was that time he shackled up at a pricey hotel with an escort he didn't realize was an escort. "It's in the book. Sort of. I didn't know what was happening." Well, up to a point. "One does the best one can. And that's all I have to say."



Let the chef choose what to send out, Schwartz decides, with some caveats: No abalone, and if there is mackerel, let it be Spanish. Saltwater and freshwater eel are confusing near homophones in translation—and while Schwartz wants no part of the former (anago), he will certainly entertain some of the latter (unagi).

In Japan, such fine intra-order distinctions may be made even within the exalted royal family itself. In August 1946, Emperor Hirohito announced over the radio that Japan had surrendered to the Allies, also revealing to his people—by safe deduction, since Japan had now lost its first war ever—that he was not, as lore would have it, a god after all. More than a decade after this abdication from divinity came news that Hirohito's son Akihito had elected to take a commoner as his wife. In 1993, Akihito's son Naruhito did the same.

But marriage to a Japanese crown prince can have no fairy-tale ending. In Schwartz's novel, the future empress, whom he calls Haruko, is the tennis-champion daughter of a soy magnate; she eventually loses the ability to speak from the stress of not being able to see her own family again and the constant supervision of her disapproving higher-born dragon-ladies-in-waiting.

Japan's real-life current crown princess, Masako, was the most dynamic career woman of her generation and rumored to be the next head of the foreign ministry. She was a couple of years ahead of Schwartz at Harvard. "I never saw her, but we were probably in Yen-ching Library at the same time," he allows. After failing to birth a male heir, Masako has virtually vanished from the pet-shop window of public scrutiny. As for her husband, Prince Naruhito, "I gather he's a really decent and totally uncharismatic person," Schwartz says. The prince, too, shuffles along in chrysanthemum chains. "Naruhito can never, you know, just pop into a restaurant," Schwartz observes.

There was research—to a degree. Schwartz finagled lunch at the Imperial Hotel near the palace with the Grand Chamberlain, who heads up Japan's 1,100-person Imperial Household Agency and knows the empress and crown princess intimately. Behind gilded screens, it's these courtiers who boss around the world's oldest continuous monarchy—and not vice versa. Heads bobbed respectfully, Schwartz remembers, and polite smiles were exchanged, but there would be no debriefing on life inside the silk-lined birdcage that is Japan's Imperial Palace.

Schwartz concedes the great freedom he experienced playing ventriloquist to the voiceless. When he was writing *Reservation Road*, with its *Rashomon*-like portfolio of viewpoints, Schwartz conspicuously veered into the third

person every time it was the wife's turn to speak. "Well, I was 27 when I started *Reservation Road* and I'm 42 now," Schwartz explains. "I probably didn't feel quite confident to write a woman's point of view, let alone a Japanese empress in her seventies. I clearly hadn't sniffed quite as much glue back then!"

Schwartz's wife of 10 years, Aleksandra Crapanzano, is a screenwriter who recently adapted the international best seller *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. "This one may be her first to get made," he says with gleaming pride. Both work in what others might deem claustrophobic proximity on the top floor of their Brooklyn town house. Shouldn't it gall her that Schwartz's first stab at a screenplay became a film starring Joaquin Phoenix and Jennifer Connelly?

"She's been fantastic about it. She's handled it much better than I would have," he insists. In the meantime, Schwartz has just finished a script for Denzel Washington: "I'm glad the movie stuff has happened to me now and not when I was 28. I'm a novelist, and that's the animal I am. But if you're a novelist, you have to pay for your nasty habit."

Like *Reservation Road*, *The Commoner* maps the fault lines and occasional seismic events of marriage. In the past, Schwartz has written about his parents' divorce and how infertility once impacted his own marriage (Schwartz and

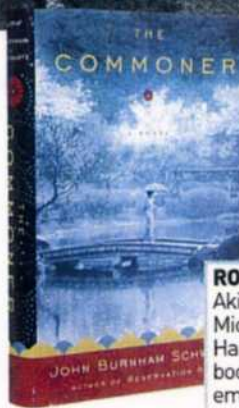
Crapanzano's son, Garrick, is now three). "The marriages I've known that last, the people who've been married, let's say, 40 years, in almost every single case there are maybe once, twice, or even three times when for a year or two they stopped speaking to one another," Schwartz says. "Or something happened and they literally couldn't stand each other. Or one of them moved out and moved back in. And they made it through that," he adds, concluding, "I think that's quite remarkable."

*The Commoner's* empress ultimately manages to commit a small but surprising act of radical violence upon this institution that has remained otherwise untouched by her. "For me, it's a happy ending because I'm Mr. Depressing," Schwartz says, sipping green tea and ordering some fruit, observing (correctly, it must be noted) that Japanese dessert remains an oxymoron.

We are the last lingering table at Sushi Yasuda. And we have lingered too long. A waiter yanks dessert away while we are still clearly picking, because it is time for the table to be cleaned in time-consuming traditional fashion with nuka—a pure, unprocessed rice bran. These are the house rules, and, as in *The Commoner*, they must be observed.

—PHOEBE EATON

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**ROYAL WE**  
Akihito and Michiko (called Haruko in the book), the future emperor and empress of Japan, with their son, Naruhito, take a stroll on New Year's Day, 1964.