



# Color of the Sea

*John Hamamura*

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## **Color of the Sea** John Hamamura

Growing up in a time between wars, Sam Hamada finds that the culture of his native Japan is never far from his heart. Sam is rapidly learning the code of the samurai in the late 1930s on the lush Hawaiian Islands, where he is slowly coming into his own as a son and a man.

But after Sam strikes out for California, where he meets Keiko, the beautiful young woman destined to be the love of his life, he faces crushing disappointment—Keiko's parents take her back to Japan, forcing Keiko to endure their attempts to arrange her marriage. It is a trial complicated by how the Japanese perceive her—as too Americanized to be a proper Japanese wife and mother—and its pain is compounded by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, which ignites the war that instantly taints Sam, Keiko, and their friends and family as enemies of the state.

Sam himself is most caught between cultures when, impressed by his knowledge of Japanese, the U.S. Army drafts and then promotes Sam, sending him on a secret mission into a wartime world of madness where he faces the very real risk of encountering his own brother in combat.

From the tragedies of the camps through to the bombing of Hiroshima, where Sam's mother and siblings live, Sam's very identity both puts his life at risk and provides the only reserve from which he can pull to survive. In this beautifully written historical epic about a boy in search of manhood, a girl in search of truth, and two peoples divided by war, Sam must draw upon his training, his past, and everything he has learned if he's ever to span his two cultures and see Keiko, or his family, again.

## **Color of the Sea Details**

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# From Reader Review Color of the Sea for online ebook

## Noel says

“Color of the Sea” was a pretty great novel. It follows a nine year old as he matures, eventually becoming a sergeant for the US army during WWII. The story follows his love, his learning, his evolution. When he is young, his father takes him away from Japan and the rest of his family to live in Hawaii. Isamu transforms into Sam, his father’s lottery ticket. Making a move to Lodi, California, Sam is determined to study at Berkeley and give his family a better life (and local flavor to the story). There is also inner turmoil on the difference between the love that Sam has with Keiko, and lust, what he feels for Yuriko (not a typical love story but realistic emotions).

The story continues to follow him as he heads to Hiroshima to search for his surviving mother and sister, as he is nearly broken after the war. The author delves into the difficult balance that many people maintain between their loyalties to their home countries and that which they feel after moving to America. Sam is Japanese AND American and slowly discovered that he can be both.

During his martial arts studies, Sam is taught to truly see the world around him, the numerous colors of the sea, not just what’s on the surface, but what we usually are too busy to notice. His observations allowed him a deep understanding of the surrounding world, an understanding that every part of life is a test of the soul.

There was one section of the book that really stood out considering current events. When Keiko’s family returns to the US, after a brief stay in Japan, Genzo asks, “Will Japan go to war against the United States?” The response: “It’s not what the Japanese people want, but the combined American, British and Dutch oil embargo is strangling Japan. What modern nation can survive without petroleum? What would America do if someone cut off her oil supply? Japan feels compelled to strike out against the embargo as an act of self-preservation. I hate to say it, but unless the situation changes, I think war is inevitable.”

Overall, I really enjoyed this read and chose it as my pick for San Jose State's Reading Program book for the Spring 2009 semester, for which it was ultimately selected.

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## Alan Matsumoto says

I loved this book. If you enjoying reading about Japanese culture, Japanese-American culture, WWII, the ways of the samurai, the Japanese-American internment, Hawaii, and even romance; you will like this book. So many great plots in such a small book (321pg). I kept wishing the book would go on and on.....

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## Mike says

The first half is really calm and controlled with utterly great description and excellent prose and character development. However the second half seems like Hamamura got bored with his own story and rushed the ending. Could have easily been another 200 pages but overall I like it.

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## Wanda says

This is a gorgeous book. Not perfect, but this is, after all John Mamamura's first book. I could only wish that my first attempt outside of academe could be this good. I am really, really surprised that *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* is so much better known, because I discovered this gem completely by accident. No book club recommendation here. AND it is a much, much better book.

The story concerns Isamu or Sam as he comes to be called. It begins in Japan prior to WWII when Sam leaves his homeland, mother and siblings to live with his father in Hawaii. His father has become an alcoholic, but is a descendent of a Samurai family. He has enough wherewithal to realize that he is at a dead end, he forces Sam to learn English, and he procures a sensei or teacher to teach him the Samurai ways. John Hamamura is the right man to write this story as he is a Japanese American who was born at the cusp of the end of World War II. He has lived in the Japanese and American worlds.

It is the story of Sam's coming of age, his romance with the beautiful Keiko, a Japanese American, and his conscription as a Japanese person into the war with Japan as a translator for the U.S. army. The disgusting placement of Japanese-Americans into camps is mentioned, but the author does not dwell on it. It is context for the story, but it is not THE story.

From his sensei Sam learns all that he is and all that he can be. The name of the book comes from the old sensei repeatedly asking him what color the sea is. Finally Sam gives the answer the old man is looking for..."I see light blue and dark blue and gray and green and black and white and yellow and orange. I see green. Gray-green, dull green, bright green, yellow-green, blue-green..." Sam has learned to attend, and to attend to details. This story is deeply spiritual and the writing is sublime. Hamamura understands the concept of the wabi-sabi esthetic in which "less is more" when it comes to his craft. He fills the pages of this book with all sorts of wonderful images. In describing Sam's learning of English: "Sam savors words and phrases on his tongue; to him Japanese tastes familiar, aged and subtle, warm and salty. In contrast English seems youthful, sweet, effervescent, surprising him with pockets that snap, releasing ticklish bubbles." I mean how gorgeous is that?

And Keiko when she finds out that Sam has a lover back in Japan: "...a chill starts in Keiko's chest and sweeps through her entire body. All the odd pieces are falling into place. Pieces of ice, forming walls, a box to hold her heart." The book is filled with these images of human experience – the few "sex" scenes are sublime. I usually dispense with those, since I find them gratuitous for the most part. These are so beautifully rendered that you will go back and read them again.

So, what did I not like about this book and why did I not give it 5 stars. Well, frankly Sam is way too perfect. I think Hamamura got a little rushed in the end as well because his prose became less poetic. But what I thought was truly a bit cheesy was the Star War type Obi Wan Kanobi scene toward the end where he encounters the cave full of Japanese soldiers and his sensei appears to him. Hmm. From a guy who could write the kind of images Hamamura did, I wondered where THAT came from. Luckily, there was only the one cheesy section. As I said at the beginning, this is his first book. And, unlike Jamie Ford, John Hamamura has a competent editor.

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## Rekha says

An epic novel centering around the coming-of-age of a young Japanese boy during WW2. The plot covers a lot of ground and although ambitious, it does a good job. I would recommend this book to teens as well as adults. One of the main character's traits is a love for martial arts, which may be very appealing for the right reader, but for me the passages detailing this dragged.

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### **Susan says**

This book is so beautifully written. I would encourage anyone with an appreciation of achingly beautiful prose to read this. Even better, read it aloud.

The story seems to jump around a little, but in the end it all makes sense. Once again, the descriptions throughout the book paint such a vivid picture, you would swear you have been living in the same places alongside the characters.

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### **Marie says**

This is the story of Sam, born in Hawaii, raised in Japan, educated in the U.S., his early samurai training, his falling in love with a beautiful "samurai woman," and how World War II affects both them and those they love.

The story itself is compelling; it wasn't predictable, it was human, and you care about the people. Even better, though, is how the story is written. Hamamura conveys the beauty of the Japanese culture using vivid poetry and imagery. (It is so vivid that I often found myself dreaming in poetry on the nights I read the book.)

I highly recommend this book, even if you don't normally read "historical novels."

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### **Jeph says**

John Hamamura's *Color of the Sea* was a page turner, no doubt about it, and was one of the first books I have been assigned to read that I've really enjoyed. The story follows Isamu a.k.a. Sam, a Japanese-American who was born in Hawaii but raised in Japan, giving him access to both worlds. He is sent to America by his father, as the first U.S. citizen of his family, trained as a samurai in Hawaii and goes to college. His dual lineage is challenged when World War II breaks out and Pearl Harbor is attacked. *Color of the Sea* is a story of true love, life, dreams and cultural conflict amid a war that crosses both oceans, interconnecting and affecting everyone.

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### **JoyfulK says**

This is a touching, beautifully written novel about two American youths of Japanese descent as they deal with the transition into adulthood as well as integrating the culture of their parents and the culture in which they are living. Nevertheless, I had difficulty pursuing it because it's set in the 1930s and 1940s. I knew what was coming, and I resisted reading it because of the historical context and the effects I knew it would have on these people I had come to like. However, the author handles the horrifying events associated with World War II with wrenching honesty, a deft gentleness, and a profound respect for his characters and their

dilemmas. Once the novel actually got to December 1941, and I was into the part I'd worried about, I found it more fascinating than ever, and finished it in one sitting from there. Definitely recommended. A good book group novel, too.

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### **Scot says**

There were parts of this book I liked very much, and I found both the opening and the ending strong, but at times I felt the author was trying to do too much, cover too much, and characters became flattened into stereotypes or two dimensions often as a result. At first it seemed it was going to be primarily a sensei-training-the grasshopper story, but then it wanted to focus mostly on sensual love/romance, then in wanted to be a neo-feminist Asian woman story (in the tradition of MuLan), then a war story, then even a secret agent story! In the process we would increasingly slip away from Sam, the Japanese born American hero of the story who comes of age as World War II coalesces, to follow secondary characters for awhile, and thus go to Japan several times but also to Hawaii, California, Arkansas, Minnesota, Okinawa, and even Europe. Complex ongoing internal struggles (such as bigotry, racism, or one's personal identity) were often dealt with as either/or choices, and broad stroke generalizations of such complexities detracted from the author's ability to foreground how complicated, yet universal such human intricacies really are, which he sometimes did quite well, and which he conveys to us was his true purpose in the very title of the book.

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### **Laura says**

Lyrical "memoir" (based in great part on the experiences of the author's father) of the Japanese-American experience leading up to and during WWII. Perhaps not surprisingly, loyalty and honor are significant themes throughout. Sections of the second half felt rushed and there were questions left unanswered, but beautiful language and could have certainly been a longer book. Would be interested in a sequel / follow-up. Impressive debut novel.

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### **Cathy says**

Powerful book about a Japanese boy growing up around WWII. When he moves to Hawaii to be with his father, get an education and become the family's "great future hope," the son meets a learned master who teaches him much about life, technique, and power.

A beautifully written book for a first novel.

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### **Isabel says**

I enjoyed this book. From time to time it felt a bit melodramatic. Other parts were vivid and felt authentic, though. Individual emotions were described brilliantly, but they lacked the complexity of mixed emotions. I guess in a way, I wanted the author to reveal *all* the "colors" of the human spirit. A character can be bitter, angry, contain hate, and still be loving, nurturing and kind. The scene with the barber and the haircut was

reminiscent of a Hallmark movie, in that the resolution came so fast and easily. While I guess we can accept Isamu's ability to cleanse his spirit and mind of bad feeling, I think it's a bit much to ask that of all of the other characters in the book.

The descriptions of Hiroshima were amazing. I also found the story of Keiko's temporary return to Japan to be vivid, authentic and convincing. I liked the *naginata sensei*, with his commitment to his nation and to his country's children--despite his humiliation, he continued to struggle to be what he felt was expected of him. The theme of being true to a code and tradition that has rejected an individual is an interesting one. I was also interested to learn of the Japanese secret police. It offered perhaps the only evidence of the *niseis'* alienation from not just American, but also Japanese culture.

The author clearly walked a thin line trying to convey the brutality and hatred of war while avoiding blanket statements about one kind of people or another. I feel that he erred on the side of caution a few many times resulting in saccharine, simplistic acts of purity and goodness that were unconvincing in the wake of the atrocities the author explained so explicitly in earlier parts of the book.

Overall, it's a good read, and very entertaining.

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### **Mary says**

I loved this book, which reminded me of Cold Mountain and Snow Falling on Cedars. Hamadu Isamu (Sam) was born in Hawaii, lived for about 9 years in Honura, Japan, and returns to Hawaii to live with his father until after his father's death, when he goes to Lodi, CA. There he meets Keiko, the sister of his cousin Dewey's best friend Al. Sam falls in love with Keiko, but because of his promise to a woman (Yuriko) from Hawaii, he cannot be with Keiko. As WWII approaches and begins, it becomes increasingly apparent that Japan may be involved, when Pearl Harbor is bombed, Keiko's family and Sam's uncle's family are sent to a camp in Arkansas, while Sam, Dewey, and Keiko's brother Al are all drafted into the army. Sam's fluency in Japanese and English, as well as his martial arts training, make him valuable, and he is put to work as a combat instructor - and later a language instructor - before being sent on a secret mission to Okinawa. Shortly after returning to the US, the Americans bomb Hiroshima, where Sam's mother, sister Akemi, and brother Bunji live. Sam struggles with what it means to be a samurai, the importance of honor and promise-keeping and the idea of mu (nothingness) that is necessary to feel ki...

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### **Scott says**

I liked this book a lot more than I thought I would. It deftly handles multiple themes (romance, honor, war's horrors, cultural differences) in a readable, don't want to set it down format. I liked the short chapters - each one a succinct little scene vividly described with interesting imagery and readable prose.

It helps that I'm living in Japan and familiar with much of the Japanese culture described so nicely in the book - I'm not sure I would have liked it as much if I wasn't as familiar with Japanese culture.

