



The Hell Screen

I.J. Parker

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Eleventh-century Japan: After a difficult but successful assignment as provisional governor of Eichigo, Akitada Sugawara is finally allowed to return to Heian Kyo. But instead of a triumphant homecoming accompanied by his beautiful wife and young son, Akitada must ride ahead of his entourage to the sickbed of his dying mother. Fading light and a steady downpour interrupt his journey, forcing him to take refuge in a temple where a brilliantly illustrated hell screen and a piercing cry disturb his restless sleep.

Upon his arrival, Akitada finds his mother, sick and bitter, cursing his return, while his youngest sister, Yoshiko, forsakes her own happiness to serve as the old woman's nurse and maid. Only his sister Akiko seems fortunate---married to a wealthy nobleman, Toshikage, and expecting their first child. But appearances prove to be deceptive, for it is not long before Akitada is asked to help clear his brother-in-law's name. In the course of his investigation Akitada learns that his night at the temple was disturbed by more than a terrible scream. A woman has been murdered, and because of his reputation for detective work, Akitada must solve another mystery. Personal and professional interests begin to merge as Akitada becomes ensnared in a tangled web of deceit and malevolence that will, in the end, strike very close to home.

The Hell Screen Details

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Ric says

Twists and turns, a classic form for our heroes. Need to keep up with the characters and if one follows the events, this one you can guess the overall outcome. A good read.

Patricia says

Eleventh Century Japan is brought to life in the pages of The Hell Screen. Sugawara Akitada has received word that his mother is dying. He is on his way home and stops to rest at a mountain temple. A man and a woman arrive at the temple at the same time as Sugawara. Although Sugawara takes notice of the couple it is not until later that he realizes the huge part the two plays in the mystery he is determined to solve. It is at this same temple that Akitada views the Hell Screen.

When Akitada finally arrives at his home he finds that his mother's condition has worsened but her dislike of him hasn't changed. She still hates him. It is hard to imagine a mother feeling so strongly against her only son but there is a mysterious reason behind this hatred.

It is soon revealed that murder has taken place on the very night that Akitada stayed at the mountain temple. The woman that arrived at the temple at the same time as Akitada was found murdered and her brother-in-law arrested for the murder.

Akitada shows himself to be a very good detective and a real diplomat. Although set in 11th century Japan the book is a very fast and interesting read that I would highly recommend. This is not Akitada's first adventure and I want to read the previous books in this series.

Sandra Wagner-Wright says

Heian Japan is little known in the fictional world. I. J. Parker does an excellent job bringing it to life while telling a fantastical mystery. Like many good mysteries, The Hell Screen starts with the mundane. Sugawara Akitada is ahead of his party, rushing to return to Heian and his dying mother's bedside. Forced by weather to stop at a temple, he makes the obligatory visit to the abbot, and seeks his bed. But first his guide takes him to view the temple's new Hell Screen, a work still in progress. Little did Akitada know how that screen and its artist would affect his own life.

During the course of the novel, Akatada's personal and professional lives undergo significant changes. There is danger, deceit, and some pretty good sleuthing. Evil is uncovered; good prevails.

Parker writes deftly with a good sense of history, well-drawn characters, and a tale worth sharing. The Hell Screen is the fifth book in the Akitada series. My only regret is I didn't discover the series sooner

Nancy Oakes says

read July, 2004 (so sorry to bring in the old stuff)

Frankly, all of the action in this book really starts in the last few chapters. Sure, there's a nasty murder in the first chapter, to whet the reader's appetite, and then there's another one a little further on down the road, but the bulk of this book is about Sugawara Akitada's personal life. His mom is dying so he's called home; his sister has married not for love but as an arrangement; his other sister is acting bizarre -- and he's worried about his wife and child.

This is the 2nd in the series, and hopefully the 3rd will be better, but I'm not holding out much hope. The first one, Rashomon Gate, was better than this one, and I didn't like it that much. Way too much detail, way too much setting, and not enough oomph.

Althea Ann says

"A mystery of ancient Japan."

I actually meant to wait to read this book till I'd read the first book in the series, "Rashomon Gate." But then I wound up confusing it with Laura Joh Rowland's "Shinju," and forgot that I hadn't read the novel's predecessor. Turns out -- not a big deal. Like many mysteries in series, this is a fully stand-alone novel. It's also extremely similar to "Shinju" -- it almost might as well be part of the same series. A minor nobleman of Japan with a talent for solving mysteries and a rocky relationship with the local police chief finds himself embroiled in a murder case, after he spends the night at a temple inn -- and the body of a young woman is found horribly mutilated. To complicate matters, the prime suspect in the case is both a commoner -- and his dependent sister's secret love.

Akitada wants to investigate - but his mother is dying, his older sister is pregnant, his brother-in-law is suspected of stealing from the Imperial treasury, his younger sister seems terribly depressed, and his wife and son are on the road and possibly in danger...

A cast of colorful characters surrounds the action -- an acting troupe, a drunken scholar, a sinister but talented artist, a mutilated prostitute, a female martial-arts trainer... etc... as well as our hero Akitada's sidekicks, the sleazy Tora and the ex-Sumo wrestler Genja.

The book's a fun, quick read, unfortunately, there's not much suspense, because it's not much of a secret "whodunit" -- it's mostly just about waiting for the characters to figure it out and hoping they won't come to a bad end before they do...

Toni Osborne says

Book 2, in the Sugawara Akitada series

Some sites will show this book as the 5th in the series.

The Hell Screen, set in eleventh century Japan, features government official Sugawara Akitada and occasional amateur detective. It is a solid multilayered mystery with detailed attention to Ancient Japan, a spec of humour and a tad of horror.

This entertaining and exotic novel sends Akitada to his ancestral home to be at the bedside of his bitter and dying mother and sisters troubled by personal dilemmas. On his way, he seeks shelter at temple whose great treasure is a brilliantly painted hell screen depicting the horrors of hell. That night his sleep is filled with nightmarish images and bloodcurdling screams.

When Akitada finally arrives home he learns that his night at the temple was more than a bad dream, a woman had been murdered. Personal and professional interests begin to merge and soon Akitada becomes ensnared in a tangled web of deceit while he hunts for her killer.

This is a particularly interesting and an excellent whodunit tale, a rich and intriguing combination of history and suspense. Ms. Parker is a fascinating writer an expert in weaving into her plot and sub-plots the mystery of ancient Japan and painting complex and realistic characters for our enjoyment. The plot keeps a steady pace, has all the basics needed to make it an entertaining read: lots of clues, red herrings, weird characters, good and bad guys, a persistent protagonist, emotional punch, subtle dialogue, etc. (I am a huge fan).

Reading this series in sequence is not particularly necessary the author provides enough background to situate us and tease us to read those we have skipped.

Leslie says

I enjoyed the historical fiction aspects of this book more than the mystery. Partly, that is due to the prologue which reveals to the reader that the body is not the woman it will be identified as - a mistake on the author's part in my opinion. The other mystery is actually ignored by Akitada for a large part of the book, but several extremely broad hints are given. Only the inattention of the main character justifies (barely) this guilty party remaining free and unsuspected long enough to (view spoiler) This subplot is a little bit on the gruesome side, so if you are squeamish be warned!

Aidan says

I. J. Parker's series of Japanese murder mysteries featuring Samurai detective Sugawara Akitada has become one of my favorites over the last year and this entry proved particularly interesting.

One of the elements of these novels I enjoy most is the way Parker gives us several different mysteries, each of which seems self-contained but which always end up fitting together in an interesting way. Figuring out quite how the various threads will be brought together at the conclusion is half the challenge!

As with other books in the series, I was impressed with Parker's ability to really convey the period and setting and to mix character drama and development with the mysteries to give the story an emotional punch. This story in particular details some of Akitada's family troubles and also contains a couple of interesting revelations that caught me quite off guard!

If the story does have a weakness, it is that the villain never really made much of an impact on me. The character certainly is unbalanced and dangerous, giving the story an exciting conclusion, but I can't say that I felt I ever got to know them. It's a shame because so many of the other aspects of the book feel so carefully constructed and detailed. Still, while I wished that there was a little more humanity in the villain, I appreciated the building of tension in the novel's action-packed conclusion and the very personal stake the main character is given in his case's outcome.

Brett Bydairk says

#5 in the series about an 11th C. Japanese bureaucrat who solves crimes.

This one has three mysteries, one of which is solved quickly, and two seemingly separate murders.

Sugawara Akitada, said bureaucrat has just returned to the capitol from four years as provisional governor of a distant province. On the journey back, he spends the night in a temple, only to hear a cry in the night. Once home, his brother-in-law admits that he, an official of the Imperial Warehouse, is about to be suspected of stealing several old, valuable pieces. And finally, there is a slasher going around the capitol, cutting up people, removing limbs, and just slashing some.

Add in a grungy-looking temperamental artist, some disrespectful commoners and a few officials and you have another fine stew for Our Hero.

Oh, and his mother dies, and he learns some family history that changes his perspective.

Very good, although it was gairly simple to guess the identity of the slasher.

Kevin says

This is the fifth book in the Sugawara Akitada series, mystery novels set in 11th century Japan. Akitada works in the Ministry of Law and has a deep need to discover the truth behind the crimes he investigates even though his society, and his superiors, are more concerned with maintaining stability and conformity. The author does a good job with the cultural setting -- although I'm not an expert on 11th century Japan and I probably wouldn't catch inaccuracies.

In this novel Akitada is returning to his family's home in the capital as his elderly and sick mother is dying. He encounters three interwoven mysteries -- two murders and a series of thefts that are intended to disgrace a member of Akitada's family. The mysteries were well conceived, but I solved one long before Akitatda and that made the story a little less satisfying.

Still, I enjoyed this book and recommend it.

Scilla says

This mystery by I. J. Parker takes place in 11th century Japan. It is the second book in the series about

Akitada. The book begins with Akitada stopping at a monastery for the night on his way from his assignment in the north to his dying mother. He see the Hell Screen depicting the horrors of hell on his tour of the monastery and a young woman is murdered during the night. Little does he know how these two activities will affect him later. Akitada soon sets out to find the murderer and becomes involved with the painter of the Hell Screen. The book is filled with action and is a very good read.

Chris says

Coincidence abounds in this one. Lots of personal misery and physical agony for Akitada as well with a bombshell of a revelation to boot. Now I've read all of these and all I have to look forward to is her next one. The class interaction and the subtle dialogue in which one is being insulted without a modern day reader realizing it, is both intriguing and perplexing. Akitada breaks the class bonds with his loyal retainers but won't broke any disrespect by coroners or others who don't show respect to his position. Akitada is a remarkable character who is unpredictable, noble-yet down to earth,and by no means perfect. These stories would be a great mini-series.

Eugenia says

Thrilling, detailed but in my opinion a bit too long. Good read

Claire Youmans says

The Akitada series takes place in eleventh century Japan, before the infamous Edo (Shogun) period when much of what we think of as Japanese was set in cultural stone, and much restriction became the norm. This is long before my recent *The Toki-Girl and the Sparrow-Boy*, which takes place in the Meiji period, as the Edo period crumbled and Japan leapt into the modern world.

These are competent and interesting mysteries, especially enjoyable as Sugawara Akitada reveals his own prejudices and beliefs as a minor to midlevel official of his time. Seeing what he simply doesn't see is a genuine cultural revelation. Seeing his culture and times reminds one that the more things change, the more things stay the same.

I read the most recent book in the series, and liked it so much I went back and started with book one. This is the most recent one I have read, and I will read the rest.

I like the way Parker incorporates -- as I do -- folk takes and superstition, although Parker's take on them is vastly different than mine. These are good mysteries! Mystery fans who like some learning with their murders, take note. This is a series to enjoy!

Sarah says

Medieval Japanese mystery series. More engaging than I expected - possibly because there was nothing screamingly medieval about it to someone unfamiliar with Japanese history and technology pre-1900. (It's all swords, horses, and koi until about 1910, as far as I'm concerned.)

