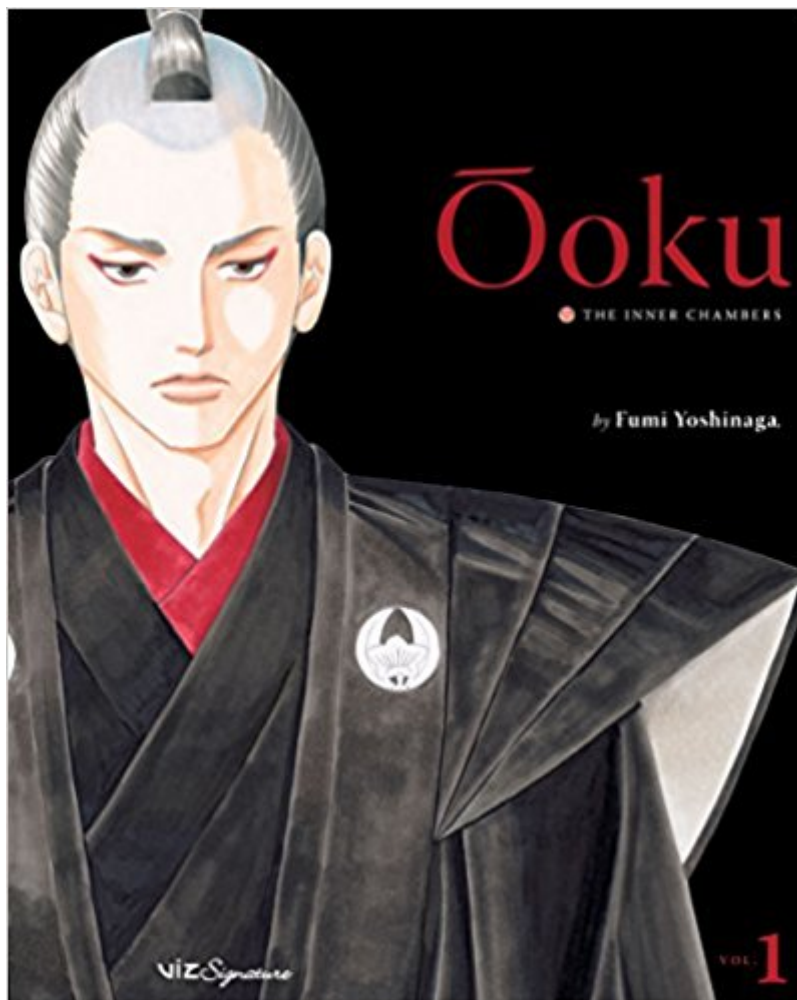


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# Ōoku: The Inner Chambers, Vol. 1



## Synopsis

R to L (Japanese Style). In Edo period Japan, a strange new disease called the Red Pox has begun to prey on the country's men. Within eighty years of the first outbreak, the male population has fallen by seventy-five percent. Women have taken on all the roles traditionally granted to men, even that of the Shogun. The men, precious providers of life, are carefully protected. And the most beautiful of the men are sent to serve in the Shogun's Inner Chamber...

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. The Edo period of an alternate Japan is ruled entirely by women in this manga. A mysterious plague has killed three out of four boys for generations, so men are carefully guarded and sheltered, while women go about the business of daily life. The Ooku was an area of Edo Castle reserved for the shogun's concubines and female relatives; here the shogun is a woman and the Ooku is entirely male. One of the few serious works of alternate history in contemporary manga, Ooku explores the relationship between gender and culture in subtle and unexpected ways. It begins tightly focused on a single heroic character and slowly pans out from there, embracing first the court intrigue of the Ooku, then the new Shogun and Japan as a whole and finally the outside world, unaware and free of the plague. Yoshinaga is the acclaimed creator of Antique Bakery, which has been made into both a Japanese television series and a smash hit Korean movie. Not as visually busy as many historical works, Ooku's art has a spare, elegant aesthetic that shines with carefully chosen detail. Yoshinaga's work is wry and stately by turns, doing full justice to the book's rich tapestry of stories. (Aug.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier

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Drawing on themes found in such diverse works as Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* (1985), Brian K. Vaughan's *Y: The Last Man* comic-book series, and James Clavell's *Shogun* (1975), *Ōoku* envisions an alternate history in which a plague decimates the male population of eighteenth-century Japan. Mizuno is a healthy young man who grants his seed to the poor women of his village, who would never be able to afford the courtesans that provide such a favor. But he must leave his good deeds and his true love behind when he is inducted into the Inner Chamber, the female shogun's private harem of healthy men. Fending off the aggressive advances of the other concubines and proving his intelligence and fencing skills, Mizuno is maneuvered into the position of the secret swain, whose duty to the new and contemptuous shogun is both a sacred and deadly one. Opting for slow-building intrigue and character development, *Ōoku* explores themes of commoditization and gender with intelligence, and the graceful, uncluttered art creates an elegant world of privilege and duty. An exceptionally strong beginning to a very intriguing manga series. --Jesse Karp

Bottom Line First: Fumi Yoshinaga's *Ōoku*, the first installment of a *Magna* series is an interesting variation; a Japanese Samurai era, post-apocalyptic world where most, but not all of the male population has died off. It is beautiful to look at but the characters are stiff and the dialogue too formal. The emphasis is on the manners and styles of court life but no one ever seems to unbend. The response of the Japanese Empire to the sudden loss of males for leadership position creates some interesting role reversals as men are now mostly bought and sold for procreation and have taken over many female roles without completely losing their male characteristic. Yoshinaga deserves credit for creating a believable world and leaving the reader to grasp the philosophical implications of what could have been a hectoring tone on the unfair roles of women in modern times. I respect her artistry. I do not care about these characters. I do not plan to get more books in this series. If you want to know who we are, We are gentlemen of Japan: On many a vase and jar  
On many a screen and fan, We figure in lively paint: Our attitude's queer and quaint  
You're wrong if you think it ain't Ooooh! From *The Mikado*, Gilbert and Sullivan Each page in *Ooku* contains one or more beautiful, finely detailed images of courtly life in the Japanese feudalistic times. As is common in Japanese manga, smaller cartoonish drawings are used to denote characters over reacting or being childish. Usually this convention is just part of the experience for these books, but I found the convention jarring and disruptive of the aesthetic experience. This was the more

unfortunate the characters were never that interesting. Yunoshin is quickly established as our hero. Handsome, noble in heart, a skilled swordsman and kindly about sharing his bed with women who had neither the looks nor the money to otherwise have a chance at child bearing. His goal is to become one of the Men of the Inner Chamber (the Ooku) of Edo castle, the center of Japanese government. Once there he will be at the bottom of a pecking order and exposed to the usual jealousies, hazing and the rest. He will of course catch the eye of the new and not bound by traditions, Shogun/Empress. And so it goes. There is much intelligence applied to this world tilted against male dominance and yet not free of it. There are some sly insinuations about what is wrong or unfair in our world regarding male and female roles. There is much about this beautiful book that bespeaks a talented writer. The whole is not greater than the parts. Characters are too remote and conversation was too stylized. I never developed any interest in these people. Authentic or not, I enjoyed looking but not reading.

I came to like Fumi Yoshinaga's stories due to her excellent story-telling abilities and yaoi content. But her art is typically considered so-so by many readers. However, the art in this book came as an unexpected delight. Her artwork in this book REALLY improved as compared to all her earlier works I'm aware of (The Moon and the Sandals, Antique Bakery, Truly Kindly, Gerard and Jacques, etc). It is more refined, less "stylized", not sketchy at all, and most of her men look genuinely pretty and pleasing to an eye. Yet, it's still a distinct "Fumi Yoshinaga", just more carefully drawn and aesthetic. The quality of this English localization is absolutely gorgeous too. This is the first VIZ Signature manga I bought, and three (!) color inserts, well-designed cover with "semi-dust jacket", thick paper, careful lettering and inking... well, that was all very surprising, so much unlike DMP, Kitty, Go! Comi or Tokyopop, or any other US manga publisher I know of, and at a such reasonable price! Archaic English used throughout the book is somewhat annoying, at least at first. But give it a try, after the first 20 pages or so, I got used to it, and it didn't bother me that much. This is NOT YAOI, and really not even a BL/shounen-ai, though there are some mild BL scenes (e.g., one of the main male characters is kissing another young man, there's an attempted man/man rape scene, and implied male same-sex relationship between some of the Inner Chambers' inhabitants (though nothing is shown on that)). Surprisingly, no lesbian pairings are shown or even implied, which I find somewhat unrealistic: with the population being 75% female, I think such relationships are to be expected. I hope it might be shown in further volumes. There are also a few very non-explicit heterosexual implied-sex scenes between a female shogun and her harem men. The book got its mature / 18+ ratings not because of "sexual situations" as the publisher claims, but probably because of its

mature themes that would appeal to more grown-up audiences. It's NOT a sword-battling fantasy / adventure full of dragons, angels or world saviors (though there are some interesting sword fights between samurai shown), but a thought-provoking, groundbreaking and possibly quite philosophical work. All traditional Japanese shogunate era (or just traditional overall) female/male roles are reversed in the story. Because males are so rare (see product description above, most died off because of a mysterious epidemic), they are treated as frail and beautiful "flowers", to be guarded and protected by strong and stern women. However, women are still truly feminine in the book, just a lot of societal stereotypes of how women \*should\* behave were removed: women are often warriors, or skillful and wise politicians in that alternative-history Edo Japan, but still loving and respectful towards their husbands, eager to bear and have children. While reading this book, I was amazed how realistic it all felt: that's how Edo Japan could have possibly been if such male/female imbalance had indeed happened. The character of the female shogun is interesting and intriguing. Just as a wise male shogun with samurai spirit and principles would behave, she doesn't like any excesses, doesn't care about appearances, yet quite "lustful" and eager to have "surprise" and rough sex with her male concubines. As any wise and highly principled ruler (i.e., unattainable ideal of that era), she does not go for young and good-looking (they are too expensive to up-keep, male concubines just love dressing up in all those bright "peacock" colors and expensive silks...and our shogun cares a lot about saving state money), besides, she's "virile" and "potent" enough to have a "quickie" with not-so-good-looking and older males ("a man is a man" philosophy, just the reverse of "any female would do" stereotype common for the image of a truly "virile" man...) Of course, when men are doing that type of thing in this book, it's often done for money or connections, and they're often viewed as "shameful" or "whores" by others / themselves...do you see any similarities? Yep, the true history, just with gender roles reversed...I'm very looking forward to *Ooku: The Inner Chambers*, Volume 2, scheduled to appear in December this year. Four volumes have been already published in Japan, and it seems that the series is still on-going. This is the book that could have been written and fully appreciated / understood only in the 21st century, after all the gender equality achievements and reconsideration of women's role in society. The story is most likely to appeal to mature female readers, though my hope is that some male readers read and like it too. It's unique and so beyond regular manga fare. Probably, a book of the year for me, and highly recommended!

I didn't know much when I started, but just from one volume, I can tell this manga is truly magnificent.

This is a very, very good manga series. I'm an avid comic reader and sometime manga reader. I'm not a manga fan-boy by any stretch but I've read enough and done enough research to get an idea of the range out there. I'd rank this one up there with Tezuka's best. Very entertaining and interesting story from a dramatic and historic perspective. You get Japanese Edo period culture and history, a very good story and an abnormal level of "class" that you usually don't get in manga. That is to say, in an ongoing story that could have very easily turned to gratuitous sex or nudity, homophobia or homophobic stereotypes, there is none of that. To be sure, gender issues are explored but in an even-handed, non-exploitative way. Also, there are very instances of the goofy "cutesy" manga/anime tropes are here. This isn't gekiga (alternative, art-house manga) but nearly. The art may not be up there with the very best of manga but it's certainly very good. About the worst thing you could say about this manga--maybe it's only real typical manga-exploitative aspect--is that it's a more than \$100 investment with at least 10 volumes expected. Anyway, if you're curious about manga, start here.

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