

interview

BY CATHERINE ELCIK

**A CONVERSATION WITH ARTHUR GOLDEN**

With the 1997 publication of *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Arthur Golden launched the kind of career young writers dream of: an international bestseller, acclaim, and a phone call from Steven Spielberg. But long before the novel was ready for its eager readers, Arthur wrote and threw away not one, but two 700-page drafts. It was only as he began the third draft that he decided to let his fictional character Sayuri narrate her own story about the loves and losses she experienced as a geisha in 1930s Japan. The movie version is being produced by Spielberg, directed by Rob Marshall, and stars Ziya Zhang; it's scheduled for release in December.



Arthur Golden

**GS: Did you have any desire to write the screenplay for *Memoirs of a Geisha*?**

AG: I wasn't dying to, no. Writing a novel and writing a screenplay are such different crafts. If you're writing a novel, when it reads flat you have to fix it. In a screenplay, a moment that's supposed to be a crescendo can read very flat, but it turns out the crescendo comes because of the acting, the camera work, the music—all things that aren't on the page. That's a very difficult thing to accept or understand because I think it still ought to read well, but Rob said, "Arthur, you've got to trust me on this" (laughs). It's probably just as well they got somebody who understands the making of a movie to do the screenplay.

**GS: Your second novel is about an Amsterdam businessman in the 1860s—what else can you tell us about it?**

AG: I finished it last May (2004) and then I read it over and decided that although I was very happy with the characters and the setting and the events, I just wasn't happy with the way I moved the readers

through that world, so I decided to redo it. It's a big job, but I'd rather turn out the novel I meant to write. I've done this before, God knows; I threw out *Memoirs of a Geisha* twice.

**GS: So you're using the same revision process with the new book?**

AG: Not really. With *Memoirs of a Geisha*, I wrote a draft and found out the facts were wrong. I was very excited about the way the new facts changed the story, and I sat down to write a completely different draft. The second time I redid it, I decided I'd taken the wrong approach—I hadn't written about her childhood, and I had written it in the third person; I wanted to change both those things, so I really, truly, threw the draft out again and started over.

With the new novel, I'm not changing the approach, the characters, or the world. The changes are more about why the characters are doing the things they're doing and what they care about. But because character motivation determines how the story is laid out and explained to the reader, it's not possible to go through and just tweak it a little bit.

**GS: How far along are you in the rewrite?**

AG: Every time I decide I know how close I am to the end it turns out I'm wrong, so let me just say that it's going pretty well. One of these days I'll get it finished.

**GS: How did you research the historical details of the new novel?**

AG: I wasn't in a position to interview a Dutch guy working in a furniture shop in the 1860s, though I wish I had been (laughs), but I did go to a furniture shop and ask the people who worked there what it would be like to work without power tools and how the shop would be organized, and I talked to historians in the Netherlands to find out about the culture and the conditions of Amsterdam in the 1860s, which was really kind of a lousy time to be in Amsterdam.

**GS: Any words of encouragement for writers who are ready to give up?**

AG: Just stick with it. There will come a moment where you think you're done and you show the work to people who think you're nowhere close to done. Almost nobody gets it right the first time, but there's a place out there in bookstores for people who are tenacious enough to stick with it. ☺

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