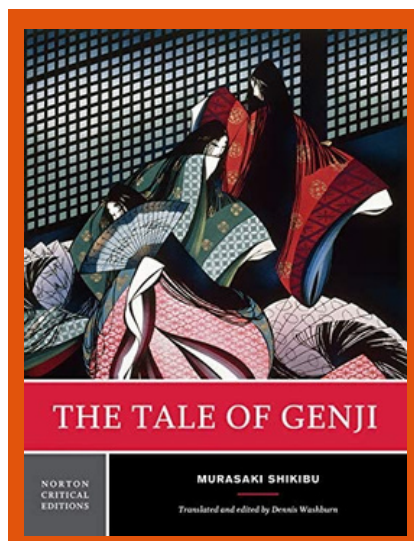


# 2023 BIG BOOK CHALLENGE

## OUR GUIDE TO



*The Tale of Genji*  
by Murasaki Shikibu



*The Priory of the Orange Tree*  
by Samantha Shannon



Adult Summer Reading at  
University City Public Library  
May 24-August 23, 2023  
[www.ucitylibrary.org](http://www.ucitylibrary.org)

# Our Summer of Courtly Intrigue

Welcome to Our Summer of Courtly Intrigue, the 2023 Adult Summer Reading Big Book Challenge! This summer, we're taking on a pair of novels that, while written nearly 1,000 years apart, share themes and elements that show how literature spans the ages and connects us around the world. At close to 2,000 total pages, this is certainly our biggest Big Book Challenge, but we have no doubt that U City's readers can handle it!

*The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu is often referred to as the world's first novel, and was written in the 11th Century by a Japanese lady-in-waiting to be read by her peers in the imperial court. The book recounts the life of Hikaru Genji, the son of the Japanese emperor and a low-ranking concubine, as he navigates both his career as an imperial officer and his numerous romantic escapades through the aristocratic customs of Japan's Heian period.

*The Priory of the Orange Tree* by Samantha Shannon, meanwhile, is an epic fantasy published in 2019, focused alternately on Sabran, an unwed queen who must conceive a daughter to protect her realm; Ead Duryan, Sabran's lady-in-waiting who is also her secret protector; and Tané, a young woman on the other side of the world, whose destiny as a dragonrider is in doubt based on a choice she was forced to make.

Throughout the summer, we'll explore both books, supplemented by a fantastic line-up of lectures and cultural programming. Our program kicks off with a keynote presentation by Elizabeth Eckelkamp, Teaching Professor Emerita in the Department of Language and Cultural Studies at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Eckelkamp will also facilitate our discussions of *The Tale of Genji* throughout the summer. To give context to *The Tale of Genji*, we're excited to present a lineup of cultural programs including demonstrations of taiko drumming and kendo, as well as a trio of Japanese cultural programs offered in partnership with the Japan America Society of St. Louis. We'll also explore the eastern and western history and mythologies that influenced Samantha Shannon as she wrote *The Priory of the Orange Tree*.

Finally, we would be remiss if we didn't add our thanks to the Library Services and Technology Act, which is appropriated by Congress and administered by the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the Missouri Secretary of State, which makes this program possible. We can't wait to read with you!

# About the Authors

## Murasaki Shikibu, circa 973-1061

Murasaki Shikibu was a Japanese writer and lady-in-waiting who was the author of the *Genji monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*), generally considered the greatest work of Japanese literature and thought to be the world's oldest full novel.

The author's real name is unknown; it is conjectured that she acquired the sobriquet of Murasaki from the name of the heroine of her novel, and the name Shikibu reflects her father's position at the Bureau of Rites. She was born into a lesser branch of the noble and highly influential Fujiwara family and was well-educated, having learned Chinese (generally the exclusive sphere of male nobles at that time). She married a much older distant cousin, Fujiwara Nobutaka, and bore him a daughter, but after two years of marriage he died.

Some critics believe that she wrote the entire *Tale of Genji* between 1001 (the year her husband died) and 1005, the year in which she was summoned to serve at court (for reasons unknown). It is more likely that the composition of her extremely long and complex novel extended over a much greater period; her new position within what was then a leading literary center likely enabled her to produce a story that was not finished until about 1010. In any case this work is the main source of knowledge about her life. It possesses considerable interest for the delightful glimpses it affords of life at the court of the empress Jōtō mon'in, whom Murasaki Shikibu served.<sup>1</sup>

## Samantha Shannon, 1991-

Samantha Shannon is a *New York Times* and *Sunday Times* bestselling author. She was born in West London in 1991 and started writing in abundance when she was 12. She studied English Language and Literature at St Anne's College, Oxford, from 2010 to 2013, specializing in the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Principles of Film Criticism.

In 2013, at the age of 21, she published *The Bone Season*, the internationally bestselling first installment in a seven-book series of fantasy novels. Her first book outside the series, *The Priory of the Orange Tree*, was a finalist in the Lambda Literary Awards 2020. Its prequel, *A Day of Fallen Night*, was released in February 2023.<sup>2</sup>



1. Adapted from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Shikibu-Murasaki>

2. Adapted from <http://samantha-shannon.blogspot.com/p/about.html>

# Themes

## **Women & Gender Norms**

Written by a woman of the Heian court, for the entertainment of other court women, *The Tale of Genji* sheds light on both the complete lack of power that the female courtiers experience under the laws and customs of the era, and the manner in which those same women could find some modicum of control over their lives by cultivating the affections of well-placed courtly men. Meanwhile, *The Priory of the Orange Tree* takes many of the roles and fantasy tropes that have traditionally been inhabited by male characters and flips them on their head, with a matriarchal royal dynasty and female protectors. However, several traditional gender constraints, including arranged marriage and producing an heir, remain.

## **Jealousy & Ambition**

In a novel with a primary conflict revolving around love and power, jealousy and ambition necessarily play a role in *The Tale of Genji*, as courtiers vie for the affections of the highest ranking men and women. Such intense jealousy is attributed to one of the primary female characters in *Genji*, going so far as to lead her spirit to possess and kill her romantic rivals. Similarly, with complex political structures, *The Priory of the Orange Tree* features several characters vying for higher ranks in the queen's court in one part of the world, while others thwart rivals and suffer the consequences of their actions in other realms.

## **Coexisting Religions**

With the arrival of Buddhism in Japan in the 6th century, one might expect that the existing native belief systems would be replaced, but there was instead a happy coexistence. During the Heian period, in which *The Tale of Genji* was written and is set, there was “no idea that the acceptance of one set of beliefs (Buddhism) might preclude adherence to another (Shintoism) or that either was incompatible with a mass of complex superstitions deriving both from native tradition and from Chinese folklore.”<sup>3</sup> In *The Priory of the Orange Tree*, however, the differing religious beliefs don't rest together quite so easily, particularly as the dominant religion of Queen Sabran's realm and the titular priory are based on the same basic mythology (inspired by the classic tale of St. George & the Dragon), though with striking key differences.

3. Morris, Ivan, 1925-1976. *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan*. New York: Vintage Books, 2013. p.92

# Tips on reading *The Tale of Genji* & *The Priory of the Orange Tree*

1. Use the supplementary materials in the book(s). The Norton Critical Edition of *The Tale of Genji* (which is what we're using this summer) comes equipped with multiple appendices, including chronologies to help keep track of the passage of time in the book, while *The Priory of the Orange Tree* includes maps, a glossary, and a character guide.
2. Break the reading into small parts. We've broken each book into three sections to discuss each month, but each of those sections amounts to around 20 chapters in *Genji* and an average of 25 chapters in *Priory*. So approach each book a chapter at a time (that's how Murasaki's peers first experienced *Genji*, after all), and you'll be fine!
3. Use mood music. Check out the "Further Reading, Listening, & Viewing" page of this guide for CDs of Japanese music, as well as a link to a Spotify playlist created by Samantha Shannon, to get into the right frame of mind for these big books.
4. Embrace the intrigue. Both books are full of scandalous romance, deception, and ambitious political climbers, so grab some popcorn and watch the drama ensue.
5. Form your own opinion! Regardless of what others have said about the books, don't be afraid to form your own opinion and speak up! Love it? Hate it? Why? Let us know!

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# Further Reading, Listening, & Viewing

## BOOKS

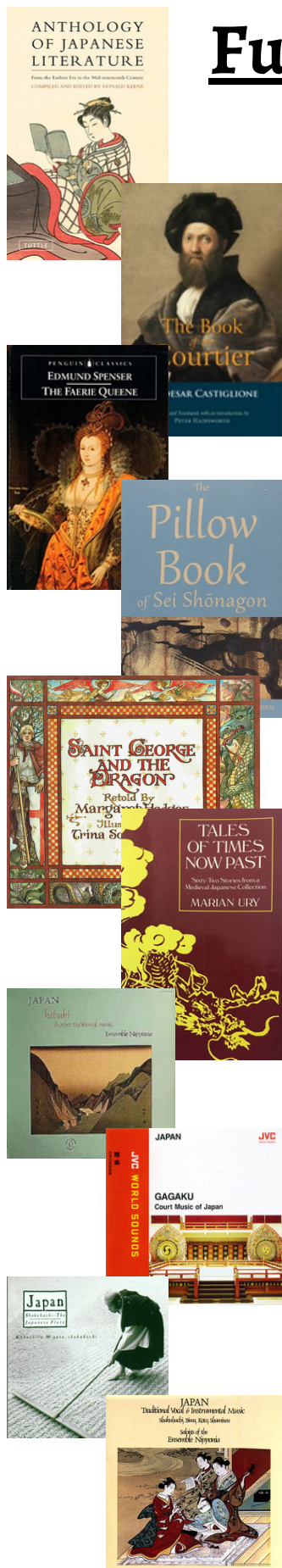
- *Anthology of Japanese Literature* edited by Donald Keene  
Available on Hoopla
- *The Book of the Courtier* by Baldassare Castiglione, conte  
Available on Hoopla
- *The Faerie Queene* by Edmund Spenser 821 SPE
- *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon* 895.6 PIL
- *St. George and the Dragon: A Golden Legend* by Margaret Hodges j398.2 HOD
- *Tales of Times Now Past: 62 Stories from a Medieval Japanese Collection* 895.6 TAL

## MUSIC

- *Gagaku: Court Music of Japan* Music CD FOL JAP 1743521
- *Japan: Kabuki and Other Traditional Music* by Ensemble Nipponia Music CD FOL JAP 1291125
- *Japan: Shakuhachi: The Japanese Flute* Music CD FOL JAP 1743448
- *Japan: Traditional Vocal & Instrumental Music* by Ensemble Nipponia Music CD FOL JAP 4165979
- *Koto Music* Music CD FOL JAP 3556939
- Samantha Shannon's *Priory of the Orange Tree* Playlist on Spotify: <https://tinyurl.com/34b3afm9>

## ONLINE RESOURCES

- Art and the Tale of Genji, Ancient Art Links, Part 1:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5\\_d2ax-DxPg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5_d2ax-DxPg)
- Art and the Tale of Genji, Ancient Art Links, Part 2:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CXW4hHv8ozE>
- Columbia University Asian Topics: Classical Japan:  
[http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/at/cl\\_japan/cj01.html](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/at/cl_japan/cj01.html)
- *The Tale of Genji*-inspired Japanese Manga, Met Collections:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2KnPPkql5y8>



# Schedule of Events

Kickoff Event and Keynote Presentation  
with Elizabeth Eckelkamp  
6 p.m. Wednesday, May 24

Chado (Way of Tea) demonstration  
6:30 p.m. Tuesday, June 6

Book Discussion: *The Priory of the Orange Tree* (part 1)  
7 p.m. Monday, June 12

St. Louis Osuwa Taiko Presentation  
6:30 p.m. Wednesday, June 14

Book Discussion: *The Tale of Genji* (chapters 1-20)  
7 p.m. Wednesday, June 28

Book Discussion: *The Priory of the Orange Tree* (parts 2 & 3)  
7 p.m. Monday, July 10

Kimono: Then & Now  
6:30 p.m. Wednesday, July 12

St. Louis Kendo Demonstration  
7 p.m. Wednesday, July 19

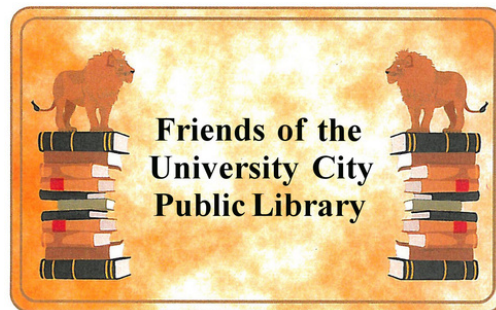
Book Discussion: *The Tale of Genji* (chapters 21-41)  
7 p.m. Wednesday, July 26

Shodo (Way of Writing) workshop  
6:30 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 9

Book Discussion: *The Priory of the Orange Tree* (parts 4-6)  
7 p.m. Monday, Aug. 14

Book Discussion: *The Tale of Genji* (chapter 42-end)  
7 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 23

# Thanks to our supporters and partners!



**JAPAN AMERICA SOCIETY OF ST. LOUIS**

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These programs are supported by the Institute of Museum and Library Services under the provisions of the Library Services and Technology Act as administered by the Missouri State Library, a division of the Office of the Secretary of State.