

Inside the kingdom

Schwartz imagines the interior lives of Japan's royal family

BY LACEY GALBRAITH

For author John Burnham Schwartz, it was the bittersweet sense “of what might have been,” that first sparked his imagination and spurred him to write his new novel, *The Commoner*. Set to be released later this month, the book is the story of Haruko, a fictional Empress of Japan who is the first non-aristocratic woman to marry into the Japanese monarchy. Because she and the rest of the royal family will “never get to speak for themselves in any fashion,” says Schwartz, it’s the novelist’s job to give voice to the voiceless, to “get in there and imagine what it might be like to be in those circumstances.”

Schwartz is the author of three previous novels, the critically lauded *Claire Marvel*, *Bicycle Days* and *Reservation Road*, which was adapted into a film released last fall. In *The Commoner*, certain characters bear a striking resemblance to today’s real-life Japanese royal family, but Schwartz’s “empathetic imagin[ings]” are all his own. They had to be, for the society portrayed is one of the most secretive monarchies in the world. Everything within is tightly controlled, and in the novel, when Haruko marries the Crown Prince, the accompanying rigidity and suspicion are such a cruel shock to her that she eventually suffers both a nervous breakdown and the loss of her voice. Says the author, “However bad it may seem in the novel, it’s worse in real life.”

Schwartz claims to have been haunted by the work. “I kept thinking about the story,” he says. There was “this idea that you have a normal childhood of some kind. You have parents and you have friends and you have all of the things we go through. But then, at a certain age, you cross over and it’s as though you enter into a world that is many things, but it’s not life. . . . It doesn’t even resemble life. Every single thing is controlled for you. You’re not allowed to visit your parents. You’re not allowed to make phone calls or write letters on the spur of the moment. Every single thing is monitored and every single thing has a protocol. It’s as though you’ve been walking along and suddenly fallen down a well that’s 5,000 feet deep.”

And for those at the bottom of the well, Schwartz says, the past is their only connection to the real world. “All you have of your own identity is what you brought with you: your memories, your feelings, whatever it is that made you who you were at the moment you crossed over.”

In the novel, Haruko’s own memories of life outside the monarchy are what help sustain her, and once she becomes Em-

press, they play a decided influence in the difficult decision she must make regarding her son, the Crown Prince, and Keiko, the woman he is desperate to marry.

Schwartz’s renderings of the royal family—a group so completely and totally cut off from the world—are not only believable but absorbing. The reader is drawn in, mesmerized by the grace and subtlety of his writing. Small truths appear on every page.

Speaking from his home in Brooklyn, where he lives with his wife and their son, Schwartz makes it clear that he takes the job of storyteller seriously. “I tend to throw out 400 or 500 pages a novel,” he says. “This has been true for every book.” Though he wishes he “could find a more direct way,” it’s this time and care that make his work what it is.

His novels have been translated into more than 15 languages and he’s written for such publications as *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*. Recently, he tried his hand at screenwriting, translating his 1998 novel *Reservation Road* into a script that attracted acting heavyweights Joaquin Phoenix, Jennifer Connelly and Mark Ruffalo.

Filmmaking proved to be a learning experience for Schwartz. “It’s a very, very different form of writing,” he says. “I sort of enjoy it. It’s a different part of the brain. It’s not as much in any way about the language. It’s about solving certain structural problems. I’m a novelist; if you’re writing a novel, you’re lucky if you solve three big problems a year.”

Problems arising from writing in a voice so foreign from his own are never an issue in *The Commoner*. Schwartz conducted an “immense amount of research,” and once he began to write, he went through

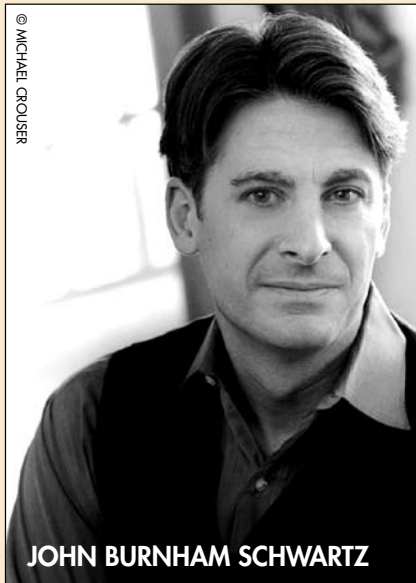
seven drafts before he felt the book was ready. Such dedicated efforts were rewarded, for *The Commoner* is a well nuanced and tightly executed dance between “trying to make the things that are not said have as much resonance and tension as some of those things that are.”

As Schwartz explains, “One of the things I had to develop from the start was a relationship with reticence. So many of the decisions I made in the book during the writing have to do with when to stop, when to let a certain silence be and when to go on. It’s a balance, because you don’t want the story itself to be reticent. It is this difference between seeking a dramatic reticence as opposed to a reticent drama.”

In *The Commoner*, every character trait, every descriptive detail in every sentence, matters. Schwartz invokes the image of a Zen garden, something that “is absolutely a part of Japanese culture. The whole point is that each thing carries more weight because the things around it have been stripped down.”

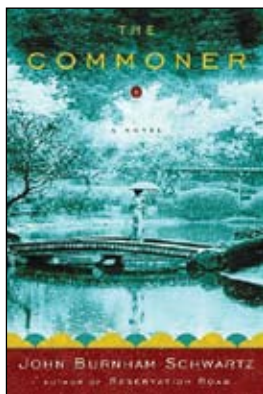
A moving portrait of women living the most interior of lives, *The Commoner* offers resolution tinged with a glimmer of hope. Schwartz says it’s here that “fiction and history radically depart. In this case, history seems not just cruel, but impoverished.” For him, the answer to what should happen to his characters was clear. “That’s part of the reward,” he says. “You get to write a history that seems organically possible. It changes their horizons.” ♥

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JOHN BURNHAM SCHWARTZ

*From the author of
Reservation Road
comes a mesmerizing
portrait of a strangely
secretive world.*



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By John Burnham Schwartz

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