



The Incense Game

Laura Joh Rowland

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Winner of RT Magazine's Reviewers' Choice Award for Best Historical Mystery

In the wake of a terrifying earthquake, Sano Ichiro races to solve a crime that could bring down the shogun's regime

When a massive earthquake devastates Japan in 1703, even the shogun's carefully regulated court is left teetering on the brink of chaos. This is no time for a murder investigation except when a nobleman's daughters are found dead from incense poisoning and their father threatens to topple the regime unless Sano Ichiro tracks down the killer.

As Sano and his wife strive to solve the case in a world that is crumbling around them, Laura Joh Rowland author of one of the "five best historical mystery novels" "(The Wall Street Journal) "brings us her most powerful and evocative thriller set in Feudal Japan yet, "The Incense Game."

The Incense Game Details

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Author : Laura Joh Rowland

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From Reader Review The Incense Game for online ebook

Katherine says

Beginners beware, this is not the place to start this excellent series; you'll spend too much time wondering who is who, and not enough marveling at Rowland's ability to spin a murder mystery in the middle of a tale about recovery from terrible disasters. The story opens with the murder itself, which takes place just prior to the earthquake of 1703, also vividly described. Rowland deftly juxtaposes the small tragedy against the backdrop of the larger one, as people scramble to recover from the disaster that's leveled much of the city. I think one of the strongest testaments to her storytelling power is that even sixteen volumes in, I still remember and care about each of the characters. I think she only needed a sentence to remind me of who they were and the problems they're facing. I often wish these books had a larger fandom and/or could be made into a compelling mini-series; there is so much rich plot and character development in them that they would catch on like wildfire. What an excellent read, and with a plausible but completely surprising twist about three quarters of the way through.

Mieczysław Kasprzyk says

I'm going to keep this short... What the hell has Rowland done? She's taken an interesting series of detective stories set in Seventeenth/Eighteenth Century Japan, with all its political machinations and feudal undertones... and ruined it! She has introduced an element of... FANTASY! Super-hero ninja-type samurai, evil spirits... Excuse me? I know that the Chinese Asian culture fantasises about their ability to tap into some sort of self-discipline which enables them to become amazing super-warriors but we also know that this IS a fantasy, that it belies the truth and has no place in historical fiction.

Beneath this rubbish was a very interesting story. Yes, it continues to have that slightly whining tone as Sano has to kowtow to the whims of the Shogun and get involved in the power game that seems to have permeated Japanese society at the time, but the basic storyline is interesting and, at times gripping, but I feel that this new element Rowland has introduced may well see our relationship come to an end!

Inna says

heavy on the politics and somewhat flat in tone, but has a nice surprising twist.

Nancy Cook Lauer says

An enjoyable little mystery set in feudal Japan. Well plotted, thoroughly researched with a lot of interesting detail about social mores of the time. The writing style is very simplistic, almost as if it were translated from another language, although there is no indication that is true.

Yvet says

3.5 stars would have been a good option.

I think it is very impressive how the writer made her story so believable. You can just imagine it all happening.

I also liked Reiko's character. To my knowledge she was very realistically portrayed. Her character is that of the not so stereotypical wife, but it wasn't overdone. She still only went where a lady would go and left bigger things to her husband. A good character overall.

But yet the story didn't grab me. It didn't blow me away and even though the book wasn't very thick, it felt like a very long book. Everyone had a secret agenda and trying to give all those agendas some attention in the story made it a bit long...

Brooke Banks says

I JUST finished this and I'll be back with a full review, but I wanted to add some notes.

TW: Transphobia, Rape, Pedophilia, Suicide,

--At first I was impressed with how they kept using someone's preferred pronouns. Then the situation took a nasty turn. It was disturbing how the character's started describing them, how all of a sudden their birth sex was apparent and how they'd been fooled! To make matters worse, they were not transgender by choice but were the villain by choice. So again, in a book with a setting where m/m, f/f, and bisexuality is accepted as normal and unremarked upon, the T gets phobia and villainy. Sano doesn't even agree about keeping "the secret" because of respect, but because it threatens his master's regime! UGH.

--While the shogan doesn't have an active harem of boys in this installment, just pages at this time, there are references to his history and I'm sure he won't be celibate for long.

--There is a victim of rape with her brother being the perpetrator. This is referred to as "incest" as if she was a willing participant. The victim blaming is excruciating and society is her adversary to justice and peace. She has PTSD, anxiety, and is the one to commit suicide.

An aside: Apparently in this society, incest is perfectly normal as is it resulting in children.

--I'm always impressed how Rowland keeps things fresh, evolving, and progressing.

--Holy fucking shit, that ending!!

Deanna Drai Turner says

About 5 chapters in, I was fidgeting in my chair and sweat was beading on my upper lip. I thought, oh dear, this is a book about Feudal Japan. I don't really enjoy books on Feudal Japan. Then I looked at the cover again and saw the tagline below the title "A novel of feudal Japan." Oops. I had been so drawn in by the lovely woman on the cover and the title "The Incense Game" that I failed to really pay attention. I wanted,

after all, to know what the heck the incense game was. As it turns out, we hear very very little about the game itself. Still not sure, even after finishing this book that I have any idea what that is...hmmm. I slogged through this book, slow as a sloth. I really struggled with the characters. We had Yanagisawa and Yoshisato and Yoritomo and Yokichika...that just in ONE family. Phew. I suspect that in Japanese these are all very distinct like John, Joe and James...but boyo, they sounded all about the same to me. It was tough. I thought seriously about quitting and then somewhere discovered that i had actually stumbled into a rather good story of intrigue. It was 1703 after a terrible earthquake and tsunami devastated Edo, which we now know as Tokyo. Think big bad Godzilla destroys all cites, and streets kind of destruction. Inside the root of this story we experience a childish and ridiculously selfish despot the Shogun, and the resulting courage or deviousness of those in his service. Three women are mysteriously killed by the freakin' incense game, and it is made to look like it occurred as part of the earthquake. Threats everywhere. Espionage. Covert investigations. Threats of mutiny. Treason. Starving and suffering people everywhere. The dead and sewage and falled down buildings everywhere. We dont know who is lying, who is cheating, who to trust, sympathize with or despise. Lots of depth of relationships, and children, secret magical rituals in the woods, ancient spirits, tattoos, card-sharking, looting, tent jails, horses, coolio mutant ninja warrior outfits, padded cotton coats that make everyone look fat fat fat...And the next thing i knew i could not put it down and could not wait to see how it ended. I was pleased with the cleverness of the murder mystery completion, but groaned when I came to the last 2 paragraphs and realized there would be a sequel. ????...???????? (translate: oh shit, nooooo way.)

GBL says

Another adventure in the career of Sano Ichiro as he attempts to solve a difficult case of murder in the context of an earthquake that has destroyed the city of Edo and the surrounding area. Again Sano and his family are in danger as the political climate around the Shogun becomes volatile in the context of the natural disasters. Yanagisawa, Sano's enemy, makes a dramatic return to the political battlefield after mourning the death of his son and the book ends with the murders solved but the political battle still to be fought.

Kevin Vrieze says

One of the best in the series. Very complex. All the characters played significant parts and there were very few loose ends. The mystic thread of the story fit nicely. The return of Yanagisawa had a great twist. Hard to do a story set in the devastation of a major earthquake, but Rowland did very nicely. The part children played in this one was subtle, but very interesting. The relationships of the children to their parents and to the world around them in their various positions was fascinating. Sano comes through this one superbly. As he observes, the positive results from the various chances and disasters he recounts is remarkable and born out in this book. Well worth the read, and well worth a re-read,or two.

Mary says

Going into this book I was not aware of the others that came before. So much past history that was mentioned as a reference. I loved the murder mystery aspect of this story which had a most satisfactory conclusion. Not sure what to make of the mystical and ghost side of the story.

Mililani says

I've been off of the Rowland bandwagon of novels for several months mostly because I could not find the books I needed to read in the sequence at the library. My remedy to the problem was to change the library I visited and Voila! I found books. This novel has the same major characters and villains with a few more added into the mix. Although Sano -san is high ranking, he cannot get away from his investigation responsibilities. A couple of interesting twists at the end.

Denise says

Another brilliant historical mystery by Laura Joh Rowland, this newest installment in the Sano Ichiro series is set against the backdrop of the devastating 1703 Edo region earthquake. This has been one of my favourite series for a long time, and this book was IMO one of its best. And of course I'm very glad to see Yanagisawa back in business after the events of the last book - noone does scheming and intriguing quite as delightfully as him. Can't wait to see what the next book will have in store!

Jessica L Seay says

Great read

Had me up all night at times wanting to see what happened next! I couldn't put it down! Loved it!

Norish Azman says

plot twist was so unexpected

D. T. says

At sixteen books into this series, Rowland still manages to write an intriguing mystery and set it amidst the historical backdrop of the devastating 1703 earthquake. As always, it's a quick, light read with plenty of political machinations and personal perils that keep the pages turning.

HOWEVER...

My *continuing* irritation with the series is once again Hirata and the increasingly ridiculous mystical, magical martial arts. It adds so very little to the series and detracts too much from the meticulously constructed reality she's created. Worse yet, his subplot in this installment seems like such a perfunctory afterthought that you could edit him out entirely and really only have to alter one scene. It's an annoyance that makes my eyes roll and keeps me from rating it higher. Again, I ask why Rowland has taken such care to craft an immersive,

realistic, and believable world in detail, plot, motives, and explanation, only to muck it up with supernatural and fantastical elements that belong in an entirely different novel. Kill off the character and/or end the subplot, *please*. It drags down an otherwise enjoyable mystery.
