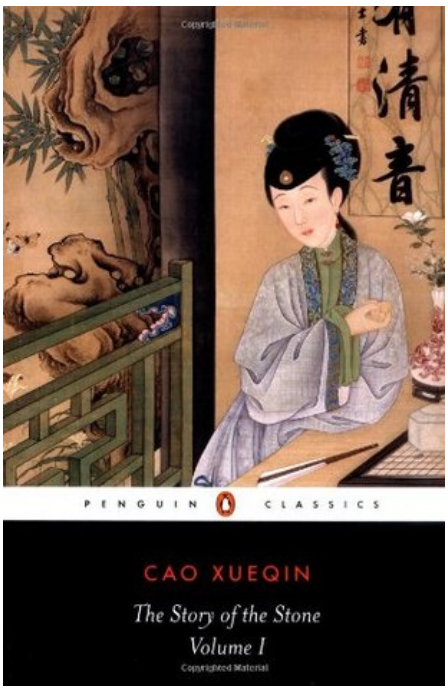

The Golden Days

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"The Story of the Stone" (c. 1760) is one of the greatest novels of Chinese literature. The first part of the story, The Golden Days, begins the tale of Bao-yu, a gentle young boy who prefers girls to Confucian studies, and his two cousins: Bao-chai, his parents' choice of a wife for him, and the ethereal beauty Dai-yu. Through the changing fortunes of the Jia family, this rich, magical work sets worldly events - love affairs, sibling rivalries, political intrigues, even murder - within the context of the Buddhist understanding that earthly existence is an illusion and karma determines the shape of our lives.

The Golden Days Details

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ISBN	:	9780140442939
Author	:	Cao Xueqin , David Hawkes (Translator)
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From Reader Review The Golden Days for online ebook

Caroline says

> ’Jing-qing, old fellow! It’s me! it’s Bao-yu!’ - he called him several times, but Qin Zhong [formal name for Jing-qing] seemed unaware of his presence. Again he called:
>
> ‘It’s Bao-yu!’
>
> In point of fact Qin Zhong’s soul had already left his body and the few faint gasps of breath in his failing lungs were the only life that now remained in it. The ministers of the underworld, armed with a warrant and chains to bind him with, were at that very moment confronting him; but his soul was refusing to go quietly. Remembering that he left no one behind him to look after his family’s affairs...But the infernal visitants had no ear for his entreaties and silenced him with an angry rebuke...

Qin Zhong finally hears Bao-yu and begs the spirits to allow him just a moment back in the living world with his friend--the spirits learn the friend is Bao-yu, full of mischief and vibrancy, and who, to boot, is a descendant of the Duke of Rong-guo.

> ‘*What?*’ screamed the officer in charge of the party in great alarm. He turned angrily on his demon minions.
> ‘I *told* you we ought to let him go back for a bit, but you wouldn’t listen. Now look what’s happened! He’s gone and called up a person full of life and health to come here right in our midst! This is terrible!’

This isn’t a typical quote from *Stone*, but one that reminds the reader of the mythological/mystical foundation for the embedded story with no particular dynasty or events to ground it in time. It’s also just fun, which is a critical element of the novel. Woven throughout is the continuing conflict between the lively teenager Bao-yu and his Confucian father, Jia Zheng.

Since this is only the first of five volumes, I’m going to comment on a few things that struck me, and mention a couple of strategies I’m using to survive a 2500 page novel with hundreds of characters set hundreds of years ago in a foreign culture.

Since I’m also working intermittently on *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, the *Stone*’s similarity to that well-to do family saga is immediately at hand. One important difference is that the wealth in *Plum* is from trade, while the Jias in *Stone* are hereditary nobility, but in both the focus on the novel is on life inside the compound, and on the women of the extended family. In both a self-indulgent man whiles away his days with these women, creating and surviving the petty jealousies this attitude creates. Yet, at least so far, Bao-yu’s escapades in *Stone* are meant to be relatively innocent.

The other common thread that is so different from western novels is the active role played by the servants in

the houses. Rarely is one conscious of a servant in European novels, especially serious ones. Sam Weller and Sancho Panza are conspicuous in their uniqueness. But here, the sexual roles of both male and female servants, and their actions in advancing the plots, are quite visible. This was true of *Plum* as well.

Strategy. The Hawkes translation (Penguin) includes an excellent introduction to the history of the text, and brief family trees of three familes in the back. But after 100 pages I was totally awash in the names and relationships. So I went back and reread, while drawing my own version of the family trees with notations about character and age. I salso drew the two family compounds at a very rough level to understand how a woman had to get a palanquin, go out an interior gate, an exterior gate, be carried/hauled 300 feet to the neighboring compound of her cousin, and go in through two gates and more gardens, galleries and halls to see said cousin or brother. This helped immensely to get the major characters fixed in my mind. I didn't do enough of it; one should also note which maid belongs to which family member, and which part of the garden which cousin is later assigned to.

I also located a book which I recommend to anyone attempting this. *Approaches to Teaching The Story of the Stone (Dream of the Red Chamber* edited by Andrew Schonebaum and Tina Lu, is very promising. I've just finished the first 33 pages, which help immensely with understanding the naming conventions and the literal meaning of the characters names, as well as the temporal and physical setting. Main lesson: be content with ambiguity. Very helpful: names carry a lot of meaning. For example, Bao-yu's name connotes truth, his father's falsity. After this initial contextual background come about twenty essays on various aspects of the novel, such as education, gardens, material culture, religion, etc.

One of the essays is on intertextuality, which is the focus on another used book I picked up a few weeks ago at Alexander Book Store in San Francisco. [Alexander is a terrific resource, with excellent displays of literature in translation. Stock is almost exclusively new, although there is a textbook floor I've never been to; I dont' know how this used book crept into the mythology section.) The work I found is titled *The Story of Stone: Intertextuality, Ancient Chinese Stone Lore, and the Stone Symbolism of Dream of the red Chamber, Water Margin, and The Journey to the West* by Jing Wang. It opens with quotes from the opening scenes of these three classics, emphasizing the presence of an essential stone in each. I've only read the first few pages, but just knowing this about the connection between the books will be useful. In fact, since the other two are on my list and precede the *Stone* in composition date, I'm tempted to detour through them so the intertextuality I find will be in sequential order. Wang's work is pretty academic, so perhaps I'll do more dipping in that reading straight through.

To close, a poem from near the end of volume one. Bao-Chai, the solid, virtuous girl cousin, is telling the story about the Fifth Patriarch , who is old and looking for a worthy successor. He orders a contest to compose the best *gatha*. One contender offers:

Our body like the Bo-tree is
Our mind's a mirror bright.
Then keep it clean and free from dust,
So it reflects the light.

But the winner refutes him with:

No real Bo-tree the body is,
The mind no mirror-bright.
Since of the pair none's really there,
On what could dust alight?

Clif Hostetler says

This book is first of a five volume English translation of a Chinese classic, *Dream of the Red Chamber* (a.k.a. *The Story of the Stone*) composed by Cao Xueqin. It generally considered as one of China's Four Great Classical Novels. It was written sometime in the middle of the 18th century during the Qing Dynasty, and the setting of the story is early in the 18th century.

This book was selected by Great Books KC group as our exposure to non-western literature for the year 2016. At the time *Dream of the Red Chamber* was selected for our schedule we didn't realize how long the complete work is. *The Story of the Stone* (1973–1980), the first eighty chapters translated by Hawkes and last forty by John Minford, consists of five volumes and 2,339 pages of actual core text (not including Prefaces, Introductions and Appendices). Total page count is 2,572. Our group decided to limit our discussion to the first volume as a more manageable reading assignment. I have no intention of completing the other four volumes any time in the foreseeable future.

It's my understanding that the complete story is about the beginning grandeur and eventual decline of the aristocratic Jia family clan. As indicated by its title, *The Golden Days*, this first volume is focused on the beginning prosperous years. The book provides a detailed insight into wealthy Chinese cultural life of the time and the story's narrative includes frequent use of poetry.

But this novel lays out a sprawling story line with numerous characters with names impossible for western readers to remember or pronounce. This is combined with excruciating details which at times can be beautiful, but overall becomes a heavy forest of words for the reader to slog through. Frankly, I didn't appreciate the experience very much. If I feel this way after the first volume I hate to imagine how I would feel should I manage to complete all five volumes.

The following link lists four books that need to be read to understand modern day China: https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/0...

Crito says

If I'm going to evangelize about this then right away I want to break any notions about the accessibility of a single volume in an intimidatingly large novel. I notice the common experience with Proust is people reading the first volume without necessarily committing to the rest, and indeed it does provide a general sketch of the ideas that the subsequent volumes play with. I'd invite a similar treatment of this book. Roughly the first 150 pages of this volume give you a general albeit somewhat masked schema from which to understand the other five (view spoiler).

Chapter one establishes the mythic allegory behind the novel. A goddess makes the mistake of a single superfluous stone, meant for an edifice to hold up the sky, then becomes a blessed leftover, and this is our titular stone. Water drips off the stone, which nurtures and grows a beautiful flower. The Stone tells its story. We pass through the threshold to the Land of Illusion, where *"Truth becomes fiction when the fiction's true"* and *"Real becomes not-real where the unreal's real."*
We then wake up in a realist novel, which already offers an interesting tension. The realism is a peculiar

device because it means we're to take seriously a dream or illusion of ordinary people, and conversely the cosmic significance of what we ordinarily take to be mundane. Bao-yu is born with the jade stone in his mouth, and we start following him from adolescence. Chapter three has him meeting Dai-yu and he immediately gets upset, cursing the stone. Being born with the stone, he feels has given him an undue privilege which is wasted on him, who just wants to neglect work and read poetry. He's concerned particularly with the girls of the house who are are all uniquely interesting, intelligent, competent, and refined, yet will never garner the ounce of respect he gets for just having been born lucky.
In chapter five he falls asleep and has a dream of the Land of Illusion. The Fairy of Disenchantment leads him to a register, which in vague poetic form outlines all the fates of everyone he knows. She then tells a poem outlining the story in similar poetic detail. If it wasn't obvious, it is clear Bao-yu is the stone and Dai-yu the flower, and due to the centuries the stone spent watering the flower, the flower owes him a debt of tears. Furthermore, Disenchantment warns him about his lust. Lust, she says, is the fundament of relations no matter how understated the sexuality, and Bao-yu is particularly sensitive and susceptible. She warns him it's a destructive impulse in every form, when it's more vital he study and cultivate his virtue. To innoculate him against lust, in prime Ovidian fashion he has him learn sex. He wakes up with wet pants remembering nothing, but he instantly starts noticing his sexual chemistry with his maid Aroma.

Thus, the novel. In 150 pages we know to look for the relations of love and sexuality, of transcendence, of social roles and structures, of Family dynamics, of fate and karma, of the blurred lines of myth, fiction, and reality, of literature, of the notion of space, of the specific relations of very distinct characters, and the riddle of plot points which we're to see unfold over the next 2350 pages. You'd be forgiven if you miss that in the dreamlike presentation, but as you see you might very well read the bare minimum of this volume and still get a sense and appreciation of what it's doing. I mentioned I previously read excerpts, and even the parts which stuck strongly with me I managed to get new transformative revelations about on returning, and even further on contemplating.

If that's not already dense and incredible, this novel's place in Chinese literature only enhances it, and I must explain why the particular setting is important. Character since ancient times in China focuses on Exemplary Figures; the master historian Sima Qian's work is very biographical in nature, but only as far as the leaders and captains he describes are worthy of praise or blame. It's great men or bad men all the way down. The Analects is not Confucius's treatise, but rather the Teachings of Master Kong, even dedicating book 10 to show how the Great Person conducts himself in daily affairs. And as the literary tradition progressed there is still the notion of the exceptional person, from the great generals in Three Kingdoms, to the Handsome Monkey King of Journey to the West. The tradition was not devoid of nuance of course, but for the most part it was the exceptional people who get the character development.
The Peach Blossom Fan flattened it entirely. It strove to make a point about realistic affairs and the regimented structure of Chinese society in a way that all its characters were intentionally flat cliches which actively force out the artificiality of the drama, and thus the artificiality of what they represent. It shows the aspects of missing realistic character by burning all nuance and showing the puppets strings and pointing out the unreality.
Does that not strike a cord with the Land of Illusion mantra above? Cao Xueqin makes a similar point but instead by intuitively focusing on mundane matters and the forgotten sidelined people in a large aristocratic structure. Instead of the tragedy of PBF's non people working out artificial drama, The Dream of the Red Chamber has the tragedy of well thought out fleshed out individuals who nonetheless are forced by circumstance. He makes the point with the cosmic myth that there IS significance and necessity to what these seemingly inconsequential people do, and it has nothing to do with the illusory cultural structures which they find themselves needing to navigate. In a way this is an account of Exemplary Figures, but they're the ones nobody (except Bao-yu) sees as such.

I've so far only given a rough sketch, and it's increasingly clear why (view spoiler) there is a literary field dedicated to this one novel. David Hawkes is a hero in how well this is rendered and reads in English, and this is indeed the edition to get. My hope in evangelizing even just this one part is partially to motivate an idea of just what people see in the story, and also with the hope that people actually don't stop at the first volume after having seen what's going on. Tricked you, but I'm playing a useful illusion here. Strong recommendation.

Helmut says

Die chinesischen Buddenbrooks

Sehr interessant und auch überraschend kurzweilig wird das Alltagsleben einer großen chinesischen Adelsfamilie beschrieben. Der Band ist mit "The Golden Days" untertitelt, und diesen Eindruck hat man beim Lesen auch: Der Überfluss und die Dekadenz, die Ritualfixierung des Alltagslebens und der ständige Ennui bei gleichzeitiger dauernder Unruhe dieser privilegierten Schicht wird sehr plastisch geschildert. Diese Kapitel des Romans wirken unbeschwert und leicht; vom späteren Niedergang ist noch nichts spürbar.

Der Leser, der moderne Romane gewohnt ist, wird sich auf ein paar Eigenheiten der klassischen chinesischen Romane einstellen müssen. Auch wenn das vorliegende Werk das Erbe der mündlichen Weitergabe schon deutlich hinter sich lässt, sind immer noch typische Merkmale, wie die Einleitungsgedichte, die Kapitelschlussformulierung und die in Gedichtform eingestreuten Umgebungsbeschreibungen vorhanden. Auch der für chinesische Romane typische Überfluss an Personen kann etwas einschüchternd wirken, gerade zu Beginn; die ersten 5 Kapitel sind nicht leicht zu lesen, danach wird es deutlich besser verständlich, wenn die wichtigsten Figuren eingeführt sind.

Man darf natürlich bei diesem Werk auch keine sprachliche Ausgefeiltheit wie bei Mann oder eine Charakterisierung wie bei Dostojewskij erwarten, dazu ist die Gattung bei diesem Roman noch nicht weit fortgeschritten genug. Trotzdem bietet sich dem Leser ein Familiendrama, das einen schnell in seinen Bann zieht.

Der hier vorliegende Band 1 enthält die Kapitel 1 bis 26 (von 120), man muss sich also auch die anderen 4 Bände zulegen, um die Geschichte ganz zu lesen. Eine gelungene Einführung und äußerst hilfreiche Familienstammbäume runden das Werk ab. Die Übersetzung von David Hawkes ist sehr gelungen und hat neben einigen leseerleichternden Kunstkniffen (Namensübersetzung von Nebenpersonen) auch einen sehr angenehmen Fluss zu bieten, in dem weder die (homo-)sexuellen Anspielungen noch die teilweise deftige Sprache untergehen.

Wem dieses Werk gefällt, kann sich auch "Die Gelehrten" (Rulin Waishi, The Scholars) ansehen, da sowohl Thematik als auch Stil recht ähnlich sind.

Jonfaith says

All these different lines and verses combined into a single overpowering impression, riving her soul with a pang of such keen anguish that the tears started from her eyes.

The first volume of Cao Xuequin's The Story of the Stone is appropriately titled The Golden Days, one thinks of robust innocence. While on one level the novel is the story of an affluent family in the Manchu China of the 18th Century, on another it is a philosophical examination into both the personal/existential as well as those issues of cultural heritage. Questions of social justice hover about. There are many allusions cast in the first novel that the family in question is on the verge of ruin. This doesn't diminish their present spending. That said, the supernatural asserts its primacy despite the two main characters. Bao-yu and Dai-yu may have been the Edward and Bella of their particular time, an editorial note alludes to the heated arguments and violence which arose debating the merits of the characters in courtly circles.

The subconscious reigns here in this world or tradition and lavish expenditure. Hexes and lustful fairies follow the protagonists back into the waking world. All the while the focus remains with the pair of teens adjusting to the breaking dawn of adult expectations (sorry for that).

Eadweard says

Amazingly engrossing book/volume. The semi-autobiographical story of an upper class family in 1700's Qing China. The list of characters reaches War and Peace proportions.

Hadrian says

Artist: Sun Wen (1814-1904)

At the far south-east end
Pavilions nestled in artificial mountains.
On the near north-west side
Verandas brooded on circumjacent waters.
Music of little organs playing in the summer-house
Increased the melancholy in the air.
-Poetry, David Hawkes translation

The Dream of the Red Chamber or the Story of the Stone is one of the greatest products of world literature and almost entirely unknown in the West. In its native China, it is an institution. Since its printed publication in 1792, the book has sold in the hundreds of millions of copies. It has spawned at least two TV series, an interpretive dance performance, one black and white film, a computer game and at least six operas (This is only from a glance at Chinese Wikipedia - there's certainly more).

What is it? At its center, this is a story of 18th century aristocratic China. A young man, Jia Baoyu, is sent to live with his relatives in the Rongguo palace complex in Beijing. A crux of the story is his relationship with his two female cousins, Lin Daiyu - a melancholic poet, and the prudent and graceful Xue Baochai. But this is only one thread woven into a broader network of families.

Four family trees describing most of the main characters.

The four families described here make up an entire world. Their lives, their relatives, their chains of influence and command dominate the background of this novel. It is a world which is only partly familiar to us - partly because of the expected ties between parents and children, ties between siblings - but only that much due to the wholly different social customs of the time. This novel fully represents a moment of history.

The detail is almost overwhelming. Take the family and their maids. For a family of barely a dozen aristocrats, their domestic staff number in the hundreds. Even some of the maids have their own maids. They attend to every function, from cooking to gardening and even music. Some maids just hold spittoons and others have a higher social status than some family members themselves.

That brings us to another topic - the structure of Chinese feudalism and the aristocracy. At first glance, this is a world of wealth and leisure. It is also a world of structure, with defined hierarchies, forms of address, clothing, accepted behaviors, bows, hair pieces, poetry, utensils, tea, gifts, social demands, religious rituals. It is a system which at first appears free from the basic gnawing demands of hunger and labor and daily monotony. But it is a beautiful illusion, a temporary image, almost like the flower petals which Daiyu buries and mourns. The system is top-heavy and nearing economic collapse. One must absolutely not give offense to anyone else above you in the system.

Yet within the strict limitations of this system, the characters have their distinct personalities. It's not enough to have dozens of major characters, but also to have their motivations and personalities complex and changing. moral complexity. Take Wang Xifeng, a noblewoman with comparatively little education who has risen to run the household's finances and daily affairs. She is capable of great finesse and diplomacy - yet also terrible spite. (view spoiler) Though hers is one of the most remarkable stories in the book, it is astonishing to see how Xueqin has constructed so many 'real' characters and how they all collide with each other.

These details are only a little cutting of the depth of this book's history and its study. The book itself is the subject of an entire academic discipline in China - Hongxue (??), literally 'Redology'. Early readers of the book attempted to 'match' the fictional characters with known historical characters, comparing known anecdotes and their personalities. There was also an extensive struggle over even identifying the author of the then-anonymous manuscript copies - that was only identified by the philosopher-politician Hu Shi in the early 20th century.

The book is of obvious value as a repository of social history, and that has its many forms. It is a history of Qing customs, economics, political management, of music, poetry competitions, religious philosophy, even diet and clothing. The book also has a majority cast of women - something only too rare even today - and gives a valuable insight into the lives of women then, where they are too often ignored.

But even though the book itself could be held up as a triumph of realistic psychology and naturalism, there is still something greater. There are framing references to religion, magic, and curses. A main introduction takes place in a dream where Baoyu visits The Hall of Illusion and speaks with the Fairy named Disenchantment. Their prophecies of forthcoming doom seem to be quaint non-sequiturs, but that is doubly false. Partly because of the slow tragedy which unfolds in the remaining chapters, but also Cao Xueqin's sly awareness that this story is not 'real'. Two of the most prominent Redologists, Hu Shi and Yu Pingbo, claim that the work is at core a tragedy, but also a nostalgia of what was lost, a recognition of why it was lost. It is a reassembly of distant memories, they claim, from fragments of Cao Xueqin's youth.

Dream of a Red Chamber is a world unto itself. It is a world of eating delicately, reciting poetry, and silk clothes. It is a world long past, but where many still return.

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nostalgebraist says

Not quite like anything I've ever read before, and I'm not sure what to make of it, or whether or not to say I "liked" it. Something like 3 stars for enjoyment, bumped up to four for novelty and for my curiosity about where this is all going. In any case, I'll definitely be continuing to the second volume (of five).

The Story of the Stone, more commonly (I think?) known as The Dream of the Red Chamber, is one of the "four great classical novels" of Chinese literature, and often said to be the greatest of the four. Sometime last year I become curious about Chinese literature, about which I knew nothing at all, and figured this would be as good a place to start as any.

I feel a bit hesitant about focusing in this review on how unusual this novel is to someone not familiar with Chinese literature. I don't want to overstate its distance from "Western literature" -- which after all is a giant category that includes many disparate and odd things -- or present it merely as some sort of exotic curiosity to be gawked at rather than a work to be judged on its merits like any other. However, having read only a small part of the whole work at this point, I don't really feel qualified to judge it or even say much about its artistic qualities at all. All I have are some preliminary impressions that amount to, "well, that was different." So here we go.

The two main things that struck me as "odd" or "different" about this book were the tone and the narrative structure. The tone is a mixture I haven't encountered before. On the one hand, much of the story is lighthearted and whimsical in a way that reminds me of nothing more than Western children's literature. This feeling is bolstered by the fact that the central characters are young adolescents, and that the protagonist, Bao-Yu, is cosmically "special" (being the incarnation of a magic piece of jade) in the way many children's fantasy protagonists are. The young characters are depicted as realistically childish, and there is a great deal of teasing, awkward juvenile flirtation, and the like, none of which would be out of place in, say, one of the earlier Harry Potter books.

However, the story as a whole is emphatically not a "children's story" -- there are intermittent bursts of shocking violence, morbid cruelty, explicit sexuality (among the older characters), and so forth. As well, the childish antics take place within a large aristocratic clan and a great number of pages are given over to the day-to-day business, minor power struggles, and the like that take place among the older family members and among the numerous servants.

So if I could try to describe the overall "feel" of the book by comparison to Western literature, the closest thing I could come up with is something like "a cross between one of the first few Harry Potter books and some 19th-century chronicle of an aristocratic family, with recurring flashes of gothic horror and metafiction." Though even that isn't really very accurate.

As for the structure, it's highly episodic and lacks a "through-line" of narrative tension. Highly tense or dangerous situations arise quite suddenly from time to time, but are typically resolved within the same chapter that introduces them (or, if not, in the following chapter), and tend to make few obvious marks on the

story as a whole. Many chapters have nearly no tension and simply recount some episode of minor clan politics (among the adult or servant characters) or juvenile antics (among the child characters). Most of this is pleasant, in a low-key way, but creates little feeling that the story is "going somewhere" or building progressively, which is odd in conjunction with the portentous way it begins (Bao-Yu is incarnated from a magic piece of jade, and one expects his life to be somehow special or unique in consequence).

Much as it contains many discrete episodes whose significance to the whole is not always made clear to the reader, the book also contains a very large number of characters (hundreds, I think), and it makes little effort to indicate directly which of these characters are most central or important. As a result, it was quite difficult to get my bearings in the early chapters, as I was confronted with a flurry of names, some of which recurred from chapter to chapter and some of which didn't. (Of course it was harder to keep track of the characters because I'm not used to Chinese names; what's more, many of the characters are related and have the same family names. Thankfully, this edition has an appendix of characters.) After a while, it became clear that certain people were major characters and I began to recognize them as distinct entities, but it took a few hundred pages for me to really feel comfortable, and even after 500 pages I still resigned myself to thinking "who's (s)he? oh well, probably doesn't matter" pretty frequently.

The characterization even of the main characters takes place in this distinctive atmosphere, one in which scores of people continually disappear and reappear from view and the reader is expected to cheerfully keep track of it all as though every one were a dear friend. The relationships between Bao-Yu and various other characters, for instance, are rarely "introduced" to the reader in a distinct way, but instead become gradually apparent as one watches him interact with people he has already formed pre-existing ties to. There is a constant feeling of coming into something complicated in medias res and trying to get a sense of it without clear signposts.

The back cover of my edition, for instance, informs me that the story centers around a sort of love triangle between Bao-Yu and two other characters, Dai-Yu and Bao-Chai. But this is not introduced to the reader in a set of clear-cut dramatic set-pieces; instead these three characters appear incidentally in various episodes, sometimes individually, sometimes apart, and if their relations to one another are especially important, it is left for the reader to "pick up" on this signal coursing through a much larger sea of (realistically?) profuse details. It wasn't until the last third of this volume, for instance, that I had any sense of Dai-Yu's personality -- Dai-Yu being, like all the other characters, a figure who pops up from time to time rather than a player in some consistent, progressively developed dramatic narrative -- and Bao-Chai is still largely a mystery to me (I hope and expect she will be more thoroughly characterized in later volumes).

Much of what I've said may just reflect the fact that I have only read a small part of a larger whole. It's possible, for instance, that the "dramatic through-line" I found lacking simply hasn't developed yet. But it nonetheless seems significant that such a through-line hasn't emerged in 500 pages of incident. All in all, I'm not sure how I feel about this style of storytelling, or about the book as a whole, and am hesitant to say any more until I've read further. But my curiosity is piqued, though I'm not sure how much of that is due to Xueqin's skill and how much of it is due to the simple novelty of such an unfamiliar literary form.

(As always with translations, I also wonder what I'm missing by not reading it in the original. David Hawkes' translation is apparently well thought of, and it reads pleasantly and maintains a impish, whimsical tone [which I imagine is consistent with the original?], but it's rarely excellent, as opposed to merely serviceable, by the standards of English prose.)

Bbrown says

Having finished this first volume of The Story of the Stone, I'm doubtful that I'll continue on through the rest of this Dream of Red Mansions. It's a great book for getting a feeling of what aristocratic life consisted of in China during the Qing dynasty, and it certainly has many features that distinguish it from similar western fare likewise concerning the aristocracy, but unfortunately these intriguing facets of the book serve no larger narrative purpose, nor do they aid in an exploration of the characters. Perhaps reading all five volumes would reveal an overarching story, but the fact that these first 500 pages didn't make me invest in any of the characters, lacked any dramatic tension, and featured sluggish momentum means that I'm disinclined to slog through another 2,000 pages.

The first few pages of The Golden Days depict a magical stone being given the chance to live a human life by a Buddhist and a Taoist monk. The narrative never returns to that framing story in this volume, though the two monks have a brief cameo near the end of the volume. The rest of the book concerns two aristocratic families, and the text largely consists of whatever happens to occur to either of those two families. Illnesses, loaning money, deaths, construction projects, birthdays, and whatever else is going on in their lives makes up the majority of the activity in this book. As previously mentioned, these events are almost completely void of any dramatic tension, as the characters are the wealthy who have few problems to begin with, and the writing style makes the narrative feel detached from the characters. Even when something apparently important happens, like when a prank indirectly leads to a man dying in "a large, wet, icy patch of recently ejaculated semen" the narrative doesn't ascribe much significance to it. The woman who played a key role in the prank goes on to do some event planning three pages later and the deceased is never mentioned again. Don't go into this book expecting any psychological exploration of the characters. One event flows into the next, and by the end of the volume nothing much seems to have happened and no one seems to have changed.

This style of book can work, as demonstrated by Proust's In Search of Lost Time, but while that work and this one both have the same meandering style of narrative, The Story of the Stone lacks the distinctive voice Proust gives to his narrator, and it likewise lacks the sublime writing that made Proust the finest prose stylist to ever put pen to paper. Without either of those qualities, The Golden Age left me bored far more often than engaged, something that certainly could not be said of Proust.

Instead of the characters or events depicted, the things that I will likely remember from this book are the features you are unlikely to find in western novels. The Story of the Stone frequently inserts snippets of poetry into the narrative to describe a person or scene, and there are numerous poetry contests throughout the text. Furthermore the book spends a significant amount of time discussing matters that would be glossed over in a western story, like characters talking about medical treatments and medicinal recipes, gifts exchanged, courtesies performed, and a very lengthy segment spent discussing the construction of an imperial pavilion. The Story of the Stone also is replete with Buddhist and Taoist teachings, with trips to and objects from the Land of Illusion making appearances throughout the story. I have heard that a large portion of the text can be interpreted as relating to Buddhist and Taoist philosophy, but not being an expert on those things I'm sure I missed everything except the blatant references.

These distinguishing features made the book intellectually interesting for me, but these aspects alone couldn't make the experience of reading the book particularly enjoyable where the narrative, characters, and writing all failed to engage. I'm judging only a single portion of a much larger work, to be fair, but I think I gave The Story of the Stone a fair shake and I've decided that it isn't worth my time to continue with it. Perhaps you'll enjoy it more than I did, but in my opinion you're far better off reading Proust.

Mizuki says

The Story of the Stone, also known as *Dreams In the Red Chamber*, is probably one of the greatest, if not *the* greatest, Chinese classical novels of all time.

The best way to describe the book is probably to address it as a 'family saga'. As the story progresses, we can follow the main characters and look into the daily life of a (fictional) Chinese noble family, there are romances, tragedies, family dramas, rivalries, conflicts and so much more in the book, all of them richly written by the author, Cao Xueqin, who also came from a decayed noble family in the 1700s.

The heart and soul of The Story of the Stone is its well developed, vividly described characters, especially the young ladies and girls (with nobles, commoners, servants, slaves among them). Through his writing, Cao breathed life into his female characters with so much fondness, respect and sadness, giving them remarkable and different personalities. By the way, the author made it no secret that he spent more than 20 years to write The Story of the Stone in order to immortalize all the lovely, highly talented ladies he had met in his life. Although these female characters in the book, lovely that they certainly are, are not without flaws in personalities and behaviors, which makes them so much more realistic and believable.

There're a lot of joy and sadness; love and lust, dreams and reality, comedies as much as tragedies in the book. It can be read as a coming of age story whilst it can also be read as a fable or a myth with lot of insight about life and death, fate and emptiness, in between the events and human dramas.

Last but not least, The Story of the Stone is also filled with great poetry and awesome writing. Reading this book is the same like stepping into a carefully and masterfully crafted unique world, which allows us to have a look at the world of a bygone ancient China and know the people who resident in this unique world.

However, I am NOT saying it's a book for everyone. To many readers, the pace might appear to be too slow, and the naturism undertone means hardly anything and anyone in the book is plainly black and white, sometime the events become too complicated and too difficult to follow. I dare say many people would also think the main character, Jia Bao-yu (an anti-hero!?) is too passive and nothing-doing for a male lead. So I think it's all up to your own taste. ^_^;;;

Also, I must give thank to the translator for undertaking such a hard work, I can even imagine him vomiting blood while translating this masterpiece into English. What a task it must be!

Morgan says

Like the introduction suggest, this book is similar to Proust. However, reading the first two volumes of Proust this book is very different as well. In some ways this is an easier read, but in others it's hard to follow. Overall, I enjoyed this book. I'm not sure what else to say about the story in particular because this is only the first of five volumes.

The main reason I'm reading this book, I guess, is because it's considered one of the four Classic Chinese Novels (which is an actual thing). Having read an abridged version of the Three Kingdoms, I've made a goal

to read the others. I have to say I think I'm going to like this book slightly better because it's not all focused on war, but I think I'll like the Three Kingdom characters better. This one seems a little easier to follow as well.

My only two complaints are the amount of characters and the way each chapter ends. I don't mind too many characters in books, but the names in this seem similar at times. Thankfully this edition has a who's who and geology charts at the end. The chapters all end the say way with cliffhangers too. I'm not sure if it's the translator or how it was actually written, but they all end with sentences like this: "If you wish to know what further calamity this portended, you will have t read the following chapter" (p. 66). I don't mind it that much because it makes for a great page turner, but it gets a little annoying at times.

Sometime soon, I think, I'm going to read the next volume. I'm going to take a break though. I just hope I remember most of the plot. I'm just glad I found this hidden gem of a book. Now, like reading Proust, the question is when will I finish the whole thing?

Sara says

This book was unlike anything I have read before and I loved it. It starts with the story of goddess Nu-wa repairing the heavens with various stones, and there is one that is left unused and so it tossed down to earth. This stone can speak, write poetry, turns itself into jade, and places itself in the mouth of the baby Bao-yu who is born into the prestigious Wang family of the Jia clan. This novel covers the comings and goings of the Wang, Ning-guo, and Rong-guo houses of the Jia clan and most of the story takes place within the clan compound when Jia Bao-yu is between the ages of 11 and 13.

Some of the most fascinating things about this book were the ‘insider info’ it provided into the lives of Chinese upper class citizens (those literally one or two steps below the emperor). I’ve read a lot of novels about western aristocrats of the same time period (1700s) and drawing comparisons between the rich of the east and the rich of the west was entirely too much fun. Chinese aristocrats had far more servants, slaves etc, but the biggest difference was the way in which they were treated. Concubines who bore sons were elevated to the status of second, third etc wives and should the sons of the first wife not make it to adulthood, those of the concubines could inherit and rule the families. Servants and slaves were not just there to provide labor (as in the west) but they participated actively in family affairs, shared meals, spent hours reciting poetry to each other, making up riddles, throwing parties, practicing calligraphy, staging plays, and playing various games to pass the time. Because of the importance of the ‘help,’ this provided one of the richest casts of characters that I’ve seen since Tolstoy’s War and Peace, but it also meant that since this was my first foray into Chinese literature the names of the over 200+ characters in this book took a lot of getting used to… (for instance: Jia Cheng, Jia Cong, Jia Dai-ru, Jia Huan, Jia Jing, Jia Jun, Jia Lan, Jia Lian and so on and so forth for at least 40 more Jias, and then come the Fengs, the Qins, the Rongs, the Wangs, and the Zhous). It is well worth the time spent flipping back to the list of characters provided in the appendix and the family trees until you know them well enough, otherwise I imagine this book being too confusing to read.

The best part of the story occurred around page 130 when Bao-yu is visited, while dreaming, by the Fairy of Disenchantment and is allowed to look into the registers at the Department of the Ill-Fated Fair, where he reads riddles that forecast the fate of each of the female members of his household. I thoroughly enjoyed spending the rest of the novel trying to figure out who might have been meant by each riddle…for example: When power is lost, rank matters not a jot; when families fall, kinship must not be forgot. Through a chance kindness to a country wife, deliverance came for your afflicted life…

Honestly, this book has it all. Sex, lies, murder, revenge, love, fortune, lost identities, family drama, kidnappings, fate, - everything you could want from what is called in China ‘the most popular book ever written.’ And this was just volume one! I can’t wait to read the other five and see what is in store for these hilarious, lovable, and devious characters (especially the meddling Grandmother Jia who continually enjoys too much rice wine and likes to get her grandchildren as drunk as she is in order for them to spill their secrets!)

Stephen Durrant says

So, how can one give one of the world's greatest classics only four stars? The more I have read this novel over the years, the more I have come to have reservations about David Hawkes' translation. There is no doubt that his English is exceedingly rich, well-suited to capture the richness of the original Chinese. But Hawkes has a way of over-translating, particularly at critical points. For example, when one of the servant's describes Xi-feng (Phoenix) as ???? "sour-faced and hard-hearted," Hawkes says "a sour-faced, hard-hearted bitch" (p271). This adds a slight sexual innuendo that is not only absent in the original but is quite inappropriate, at least when applied to Xi-feng. Often Hawkes additions, like this one, change the tone of the original or even disambiguate it in ways that are not justified. Now, this is only the first volume of a five-volume novel. I have read and taught all five volumes of the Hawkes/Minford volume before, but I think this time, in my more leisurely reading, I will turn to the newly reprinted Bencroft Joly translation, which seems a more literal translation of the original than Hawkes much-praised volumes.

Mel says

??? is my favorite novel, one of the reasons I'm learning Chinese is so that I can read it in the original. This translation however is not my favorite. The translator does some annoying things, writing for an audience that doesn't know Chinese culture he tends to remove or change a lot of the cultural references, which I find really annoying. One of the things I liked about the Yangs translation so much when I read this book the first time was all the things I learned about Chinese culture and history. Here Hawkes takes English or Japanese words and uses them a little too liberally, "The Lord" and "Yama" being two examples that spring to mind right away. He also makes the poetry rhyme, and it virtually becomes unreadable. What I can say for this book is that he does stick quite closely to the original text. Having read passages from this volume, I had no trouble locating and reading the passages in my Chinese edition. Vol. 1 contains the background of the stone, the Taoist and Buddhist monk, the building of the garden, Granny Liu's first visit, BaoYu and Xifeng being possessed by demon's and going insane, the cute gay boys at school, dreams set in the world of the immortals, and a lot of Xifeng being very capable.

Matthias says

Filled with favours bathed in blessings

If you would have asked me a couple of weeks ago what I think a time machine looks like, I would have described a greyish blue metallic construction with a little blinking light for every button and a button for every wire that sparks within the machine's smooth frame. Maybe little bleeps and sounds too, and definitely

a smoke generator because no time travel is complete without that puff of smoke signifying take-off to another time. Teams of scientists would be peering over this equipment armed with notes and calculations, trying to make sense of the complicated affair.

If you ask me what a time machine looks like now, I'll give you a little smirk and tell you there's no need for wires, DeLoreans or electricity and definitely no use for a smoke generator. All you need is ink and paper and a well-written story of another time and place.

This particular contraption brought me to 18th century China. An enriching, illuminating and profoundly moving trip I'll never forget and look forward to continuing later on.

When faced with a work of an epic magnitude (this book of more than 500 pages is merely the first part of five and is left without any kind of conclusion), when confronted with a story that made a journey through time and space in order to find itself from the desk of a Chinese nobleman with a lot of spare time, a man bestowed with the affection of the Imperial Master himself, all the way to the hands of a policy adviser on international environmental affairs in Brussels a couple of centuries later, I can't help but feel that I'm in no position to grant this piece of magic something as mundane as a rating. I feel so small next to it. It's like reviewing the Great Wall of China on an architectural website. Of course I'm going to give it five stars, but that's not telling the whole story.

The five stars don't mean I've always thoroughly enjoyed this book, regardless of the awe I feel for it. People who have followed my updates on this book may remember a garden. There is an entire chapter devoted to its description of around thirty pages, but even later on in the book the author couldn't stop himself from occasionally losing himself again in the midst of its abundance of flowers, rivers and shrubs. I'm no horticulturist so maybe that's why most of it went over my head but I can't imagine there being a whole lot of horticulturists here so that's not really the point. It's just an example of what this book does: it's very description heavy when it comes to the surroundings people find themselves in. If a room has curtains, the embroidery that's on them will be explained in detail, cultural significance and all. And let me tell you the Rong-Guo Mansions have lots of rooms, *kangs* and curtains to describe. This makes this story a bit more heavy for the casual reader but immensely valuable for those who want to know as much as possible about the time and place these characters (and the author) lived in. This shouldn't be read as a criticism towards the book but as a heads-up to casual readers who prefer plot over setting. Like I said: this is a time machine and the descriptions are the wiring that make it all work. Don't worry though, lights will start blinking soon and there will be plenty of buttons for you to push.

There are a lot of characters in this book. A LOT. There are helpful family trees in the back for easy reference and a character index that's even more complete, covering all the family, extended family, maids and servants and servants' cousins and distant friends. In the beginning it takes a bit of getting used to, also because the names sound very similar in some instances, especially to a Western reader's ear. Jia Lan, Jia Lian, Yuan-chun, Ying-chun and Tan-chun, Aunt Zhao and Aunt Zhou, Mister Xeng and Cousin Zheng and Jia Zheng, all of that times twenty. Sometimes one character is referred to with two or three different names,so that when you're following the peregrinations of Wang Xi-feng you shouldn't be surprised at Ms. Lian suddenly popping up, because they're both the same person. This may seem daunting at first but believe me: you'll be quite alright. Some people get introduced into the story only to die a sentence later, others return enough or get a chapter devoted to them to give you ample time to familiarize yourself with them. Jia Lian becomes the sex addict and Jia Lan an adorable little child and soon you no longer see the names but the rich characters they refer to.

Though there are many characters getting a lot of attention, it's safe to say that Bao-yu is the main one. It is

believed he is based on Cao Xueqin, this book's author, making this a semi-autobioghraphical book. *The Story of the Stone* follows his movements within the compounds of two wealthy families and shows the everyday life of the elite and their servants. Bao-yu is a bit different from the others. He spends most of his time with the females, resulting in this story talking mostly about their lives, while the uncles and fathers are busy with their business, conducted outside of this story's area. Bao-yu is very intense in his friendly relations and often very sexual. Little Chinese school children lose all their innocence with the description of a fight in the classroom and its causes. On top of this sometimes raw realism, there is also a big touch of magic in this tale. This boy was born with a special jade in his mouth, a stone that contains mystical powers. The story starts with the backstory of this Stone, which is at once the narrator and the protagonist of this tale, because all signs point to Bao-yu being the human incarnation of this godly Stone. There is witchcraft and mystery, but it's introduced in a very subtle way and rarely the overpowering element. There is an early chapter describing one of Bao-yu's dreams, filled with riddles, poems and songs foreshadowing what is to come, meriting years of study and speculation and raising the appetite enough to make you want to devour this book, all five parts of it.

There are tales of early love, of death, of Imperial visits, of funerals and doctor's visits, of a boy's first wet dream and of a whole lot of etiquette. The importance of formalities is brought home really well here and sometimes in a most touching way. There is something moving about the deference shown to those higher and lower in the all-important hierarchy, wherein sincere warmth still has its place. But there is also viciousness in some characters who seemed angelic before and the result is a rich tapestry, not of caricatures, but of people that truly come alive.

This first volume is also referred to as "The Golden Days" and it shows these rich families at the peak of their success, but what is most powerful is the melancholy of a loss that is yet to come pervading the text. It makes you nostalgic about the present that is described and makes one appreciate it all the more. Or as the author himself puts it:

> *The flower's aroma breathes of hotter days.*

A final word goes out to the translator, David Hawkes, who did a truly astounding job here, making an ancient text in a foreign language perfectly readable to the modern English reader without losing any of its authenticity. There is a lot of poetry that can't have been easy to translate, but pretty much each and every poem (and there are many) carry a great force and beauty in them. Those who know me know I'm not big on poetry, but this book here opened my eyes in that regard. There are contests on how to poetically describe everyday objects (in the form of riddles) and the poems show a richness of thinking, a uniqueness of perspective in looking at the world that I want to cultivate within myself as a direct result of this book. Sometimes the air while reading this book gets very thick with all that poetry, making me feel like I was in a jungle with hot humid air that was never intended for breathing. The flowers sweetening the air with their scents were nonetheless beautiful, even though I'm the kind of guy who prefers a single flower over a whole bouquet.

This book comes with an introduction by this translator whose passion for this work shines through every word, an introduction that is a story about the story, on how "The Story of the Stone" came to be and how it found its way into David Hawkes' hands. It's just as interesting as the book itself and I highly advise reading it. As a person who tends to skip introductions or only reads them halfheartedly afterwards, I felt I had to add this advice.

I will definitely read further into this series, though I need a little break. It's very intense. This is said to be one of the most important novels in Chinese history and I don't want to miss out on the rest of it. You shouldn't, either. The dust covering up this little universe of days gone by will be blown away, and so will you.
