

SAYONARA

Directed by Joshua Logan
Produced by William Goetz
Distributed by Warner Brothers Pictures
Released in 1957

A resolute fearlessness is demanded of cultural pioneers. The mores of a society can change gradually, only in retrospect that change seeming inevitable. But along the way a few brave souls shock their corner of the world. Sometimes contrarians, sometimes idealists, these daring few take risks that three-quarters deplore and one-quarter envy. They are the vanguard of societal evolution. In 1957's *Sayonara*, Marlon Brando's Ace Gruber and Miko Taka's Hana-Ogi summon the courage to marry, overcoming their own prejudices while braving the displeasure of the Japanese people and the American occupiers. Their resolution is both radical (inter-racial) and conservative (marriage). Of the same cautiously liberal manner was the story's creator, author James Michener.

By the 1950s he was developing into a prolific writer of sprawling epics. *Sayonara* was one of his last modest works of fiction. The film matches the story of the novel closely, with some telling digressions. In the novel, though Ace begs Hana-Ogi to marry him, she refuses, primarily because she will not abandon the many girls who admire her as one of the top entertainers in Japan. Nor does she want to live in America. (Additionally, in the novel Hana-Ogi can't speak English, and they move in together.) The book ends with Gruber's promotion and the prospect of marriage to Eileen.

In 1955 Michener married his third wife, a second-generation American of Japanese extraction, Mari Sabusawa. Many of Ace's ruminations of what the social fallout would be of marrying someone of a different race must have been at the fore of Michener's thinking during this time. The novel, with its analysis of the marriages of Eileen's and Ace Gruber's parents, reflects Michener's frustrations and failures with women. He never knew how they should be treated. A vagabond at a young age, James was raised by Mabel Michener, who probably was his mother, but was, at least, his caretaker, as for dozens of other children she sheltered. They were destitute.

James was very bright, developing interests in opera, art, and travel. He attended Swarthmore, outside Philadelphia, and became a teacher. Eventually he got a job as an editor at Macmillan, then served as a naval historian, which led to his first book, the Pulitzer Prize-winning smash *Tales of the South Pacific*.

Like Ace and Joe Kelly, Michener liked to be coddled and served by his women. Abandonment factored into his first two divorces. He just couldn't understand why a woman wouldn't be happy giving him unconditional support while contenting herself with the freedom of a semi-independent existence. (That's emotional isolation with a positive spin). The subservient temperament and flowery femininity of Japanese women pleased him. Mari Michener was loyal through their thirty-nine years of marriage (she died in '94). Unlike the previous two wives, she traveled with James on most of his innumerable research expeditions. She was his bulldog defender and number-one booster.

Considering how much money he had, Michener lived very simply. He was happy with a makeshift desk and whatever writings were necessary for his next project. He never stopped producing, seemed terrified of vacations, and moved dozens of times, with bases of operation in Hawaii, Pennsylvania, Texas, Maryland, and Florida. He claimed the world was his home but really any good library would do. Through his long life (he died aged 90), Michener never discussed, publicly, his marriages, his adultery (before and after Mari), nor the son he'd adopted, whom he lost to his second wife in court, but then sent back to the orphanage after his ex-wife abandoned the boy.

Ace, though we leave him at what will hopefully be a fresh start, similarly bears the weight of poor choices. The book makes clear that, though Japanese women are wonderful, marriages between American servicemen and Japanese subjects are doomed to fail, primarily because the men interested in Japanese girls are a bad sort and can't make it with American girls. They've quit trying and are settling for someone whose own standards are lower. Michener implicitly condones sex with the Japanese but questions marriage. Instead of marriage being a merging of families, Michener sees it as a merging of cultures. The question then becomes, *where's home?*

In what may be a falsehood in an otherwise excellent novel, Hana-Ogi knows their relationship is doomed from the beginning, but willingly embraces sex and cohabitation. She gives herself up to domestic bliss because she's convinced that her fate is to be a dance instructor and she would, otherwise, never know love.

Of course, unmarried people have sex all the time. For people in love, to not do so requires great resolve. In the movie, though Hana-Ogi thinks they're doomed, it's not clear that she gives up her body to Ace. They definitely don't move in together.

A girl's motivations for sex are less physical than emotional. Sometimes she just hopes to keep the man from leaving her. These usual reasons aren't there for the book's Hana-Ogi. And she's no prostitute—she's one of the most respected women in Japan! That she would take such a drastic step, that fast, is unbelievable.

To Michener it would be good to have a soul-wrenching experience such as Ace Gruber's. On the book's last page, Eileen's dad, General Webster, seems to sum up the whole story: "Whatever makes you a better man makes you a better officer." To Michener's thinking, Ace must put all thoughts of Japan out of his mind. Away from Japan, married to Eileen, there will be no consequences. That's what Michener liked—escaping hard truths. He wouldn't face pain and he willed himself to make a fortune so he'd never see poverty again. It was all about control. For him, life was a restaurant and he always picked the buffet; he didn't want to commit.

That's the trouble with the book—it takes more courage to go that last step and get married. There's no compartmentalizing things then. It's a commitment for life. If there's rebuke, it's ongoing. If there's pain, it must be confronted, not ignored.

It may be brave (in the sense of continuing to act as one desires in the face of criticism) for an Air Force officer to live with a Japanese girl in 1952, but it would be positively heroic to marry her. Admittedly, Ace Gruber wanted to, but Michener seems to approve of Hana-Ogi's caution. The book undermines its very message of racial tolerance by portraying the military's discouragement of such marriages as a prudent policy. Ace is the protagonist and the speaker. His tacit approval of things at the end—he won't chase down Hana-Ogi in Tokyo, he's going to stick with the military life—renders the whole episode but a tragic idyll.

The lesson from Joe Kelly's and Katsumi's deaths should not be that society can't be broken, that we must make change from within rather than without. No—the lesson is, *don't commit suicide*. Don't give up on God, on yourself, and your children (Katsumi was pregnant!). Do what is right, to hell with the consequences. That's why the movie is so much better. Ace won't let Hana-Ogi go. They decide to give up their lives for the other. That's sacrifice and that's inspiring.

Sure, in the book Hana-Ogi is foregoing a life with Ace for the sake of Japan's people. That's sacrificial.

But who deserves the greater sacrifice—her people or the man she's loved? It's Ace. Sex is that important. Moreover, the people of Japan (just like the people of America) need to set aside their hatred of a former enemy. This marriage can benefit the couple and their peoples. The movie's climax makes this explicit.

In the end, unavoidable tragedy is merely sad; avoidable tragedy is stupid. Ace doesn't compound poor choices by marrying Hana-Ogi. At the very least he makes amends for them.

One of the book's characters reflects that it's better for a boy to take a wife from his community. This strengthens the bond of people.

But if he's not in love with that girl, and, like the two marriages dissected in the book, a happy front is projected for the world while the kids grow up in a fractious house, who's going to benefit? A community prospers when its people make wise choices on sex and marriage. Almost all societal problems come back to that.

The movie is clear: Afraid for the future, Hana-Ogi laments, "But we have duties and obligations." Ace replies, "That's right; we do...and the first obligation we have is to love each other, is to become man and wife and raise some clean, sweet children. And give 'em the very best that we know how. And if we don't meet that obligation, we ain't gonna be any good to anybody."

Hana-Ogi rejoins, "We live in different worlds, come from different races...what would happen to our children? What would they be?"

"...They'd be half Japanese, half American. They'd be half yellow and half white. They'd be half you and half me."

They'd be happy.

Michener is right to denounce prejudice. But he's wrong to condone selfishness.