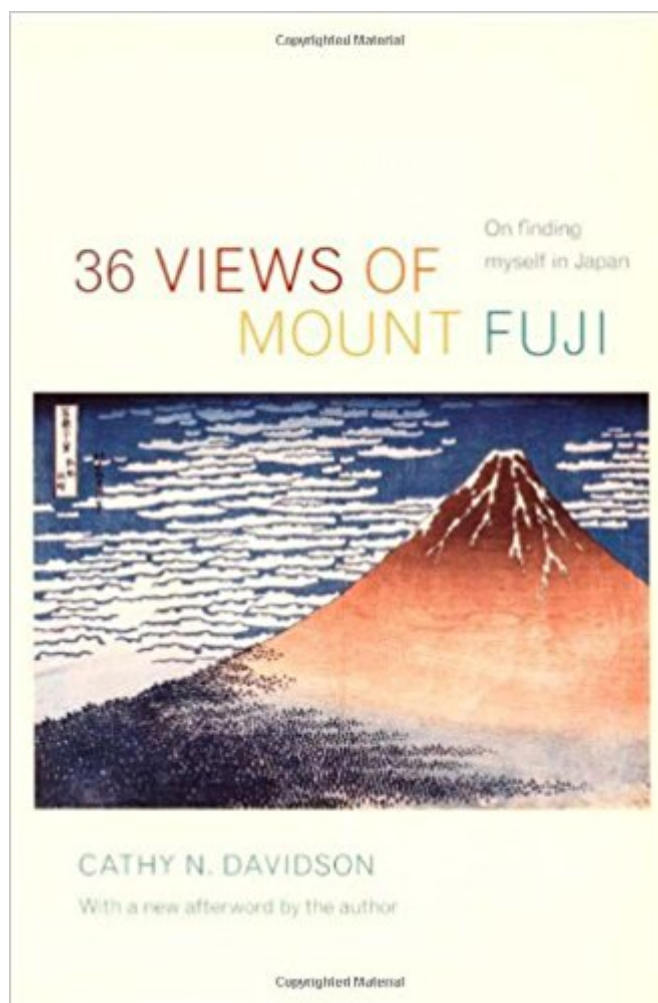


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# 36 Views Of Mount Fuji: On Finding Myself In Japan



## Synopsis

In 1980 Cathy N. Davidson traveled to Japan to teach English at a leading all-women's university. It was the first of many journeys and the beginning of a deep and abiding fascination. In this extraordinary book, Davidson depicts a series of intimate moments and small epiphanies that together make up a panoramic view of Japan. With wit, candor, and a lover's keen eye, she tells captivating stories—from that of a Buddhist funeral laden with ritual to an exhilarating evening spent touring the "Floating World," the sensual demimonde in which salaryman meets geisha and the normal rules are suspended. On a remote island inhabited by one of the last matriarchal societies in the world, a disconcertingly down-to-earth priestess leads her to the heart of a sacred grove. And she spends a few unforgettable weeks in a quasi-Victorian residence called the Practice House, where, until recently, Japanese women were taught American customs so that they would make proper wives for husbands who might be stationed abroad. In an afterword new to this edition, Davidson tells of a poignant trip back to Japan in 2005 to visit friends who had remade their lives after the Great Hanshin Earthquake of 1995, which had devastated the city of Kobe, as well as the small town where Davidson had lived and the university where she taught. *36 Views of Mount Fuji* not only transforms our image of Japan, it offers a stirring look at the very nature of culture and identity. Often funny, sometimes lilyingly sad, it is as intimate and irresistible as a long-awaited letter from a good friend.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

...but I just didn't like this book. I live in Japan, and the Japan the author describes just doesn't jibe

with what I see around me every day. The author claims that her status as a university professor do not make her experiences special or unique. However as someone who has been in a similar situation and now leads a more normal life, I say that it MUST. I also found her criticism of other foreigners unfair and prone to caricaturization. While there is value in observing the "ugly tourists" and those who have "gone native," it is also important to look inside to see if we can find any of those people inside ourselves. The author chooses not to, and comes across as somewhat elitist as a result. I was confused by the author's representation of her linguistic skills. She often claims to have little language ability, but then she also claims to have complex communications with people who do not speak English. I had great difficulty justifying the two ideas, as my own experience has been that even when you think you know what is going on, you probably don't. And I speak, read and write Japanese quite well. I had difficulty with her presentation of a Japanese man who has an outspoken, artistic, independent French wife as typical. I have known a few people like that, and while I'm glad they are my friends, I wouldn't dare try to pass any of them off as typical. Finally, I got the feeling that the author wasn't really "going to" Japan as much as she was "running away" from America. In her book, Japan generally receives favorable treatment, while America is often criticized. The author seems to have a thinly-veiled Lafcadio Hearn complex, where she wants to replace her American identity with a Japanese one.

Davidson Sensei's book is worthwhile just for the vignettes and anecdotes about a gaijin living in Japan in the 1980's. The book is even better as a discourse and commentary on the relative merits of egalitarian and elitist cultures. For many gaijin, Japan is a middleclass paradise... safe, clean, polite, orderly, full of giri (reciprocity); an egalitarian meritocracy. The ultimate middle class experience. At first, Davidson falls in love with Japan but by her fourth visit, she sees it as a sad, depressing place. Her discomfort reaches a peak during a stay at her former host University's Practice House, an ersatz model Western home designed to be a laboratory for teaching young Japanese women Western manners, practices and protocols. The Western, and particularly the American elite's disdain, if not outright contempt for what's left of the middle class is well known. Academic elites, in particular, loath their middle class students (while craving the middle class tuition dollars that pay their salaries). Davidson tells us about her family's failed efforts to participate in the middle class Chicagoland suburbia of the 1950's. She hates all of the mid-20th century middle class symbolism in her Japanese host's Western Practice House. Davidson moves on to a job at an elite East Coast University, builds a fabulous Japanese house on a beautiful lakeside setting in the country, and leads a life that most Americans can only imagine. Ultimately, the author chooses to

participate in the upmarket options that are only available to her in Elitist America instead of the living in middle class Japan. She makes the decision after a blinding flash of insight gained while vacationing in Paris.

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