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Interview with Roland Kelts, contributing editor of *MONKEY* Magazine

MONKEY Magazine Exchanges Literatures Between the US & Japan

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

Roland Kelts, a distinguished Japanese culture expert, is contributing editor of the English-language edition of the literary magazine *MONKEY* – a journal that focuses on contemporary Japanese literature and American literature in translation. He is also author of the best-selling book *Japanamerica*, and his articles, essays and stories appear in several publications. He has taught at many universities, including New York University and the University of Tokyo.

In an interview with Naoyuki Haraoka, editor-in-chief of *Japan SPOTLIGHT*, he talks about the birth of *MONKEY*, the improving quality of translation, Japanese women writers, commonalities between Japan and the United States, and cultural exchange in Asia.

(Interviewed on Feb. 3, 2021)

Birth of *MONKEY*

JS: How was the English-language *MONKEY* born and how was it developed? What is your role as contributing editor of this magazine?

Kelts: The original idea for the English-language *Monkey Business* came from Prof. Ted Goossen. He is a scholar and translator of Japanese literature at York University in Toronto and the editor of *The Oxford Book of Japanese Short Stories*, a major anthology of Japanese fiction used in universities worldwide. His publisher asked him to create a new anthology. Ted was meeting with Motoyuki (Moto) Shibata, professor of American Literature at the University of Tokyo, here in Tokyo in 2010, and Ted's idea was to take Moto's literary magazine, called *Monkey Business*, and make an English edition. Both Ted and Moto thought that there was a lot of new Japanese literature that was not available in English. They wanted to introduce new writers. So, that was the original idea. And Moto agreed with Ted, and then they came to me. They asked me for help getting a publishing partner in the US because they felt they should have some kind of relationship with an American publication. At the time, I was spending a lot of each year in New York City so I had some meetings with people in New York. Fortunately, Brigid Hughes, a friend of mine and editor of a New York literary magazine called *A Public Space*, said she would like to make a partnership with *Monkey Business*. So that's how we brought out



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our first issue. It was published in 2011. I think my role has been to help build a bridge between Tokyo and New York and forge relationships with other partners in the US.

Attracting Readers

JS: Generally speaking, American interest in Japan has been declining. Instead, American interest in China has been rising. In this situation, there may be few publishers who may be interested in publishing magazines on Japanese literature. Japanese animation seems to be quite popular

in the US, but how can you attract readers to other kinds of Japanese culture?

Kelts: When we started in 2011, obviously the most famous living Japanese writer was Haruki Murakami, who is still very popular. But there was not such a great knowledge of younger Japanese writers. However, I think that now, 10 years later, there is a growing interest in contemporary Japanese writers. It's partly because there are so many great women writers in Japan today – and that is giving a fresh perspective to the reader and a fresh style to Japanese literature. Japanese women's stories are really attractive now to English-language readers, particularly Americans and Europeans.

The second reason is that fans of manga and anime are now getting older. And I think some of those fans now want to read different kinds

of stories from Japan. Kids who may have loved *Pokemon*, *One Piece* or *Slam Dunk* are now a little bit older and are interested in Japanese literature. Some pop culture fans are now reading *Monkey Business* and *MONKEY* magazine.

The third reason is that the quality of translations of Japanese literature has improved very dramatically over the past 10 years. Moto says that the quality of translations, especially translations done by younger translators of Japanese to English, is much more sensitive to the nuances of Japanese. Moto also told me that young translators today can hear the music of the Japanese language and capture it in English. I think the quality of translation is very important, and that has grown the audience for Japanese literature.

Like I said earlier, pop culture has actually produced more interest in Japanese literature. I also think that compared to China, for example, Japan feels much more accessible to Americans. They feel they can visit Japan and indulge in Japanese popular culture, style and fashion. It's not so alien anymore. And so contemporary Japanese literature may feel closer to the American reader today than contemporary Chinese literature. At least for now.

Birth of the Japanese Magazine *MONKEY*

JS: The quality of translation of the contents of the Japanese magazine *MONKEY*, which was released quite recently, is very good. How was the Japanese magazine *MONKEY* born? According to Prof. Shibata's brief remarks on this magazine, an English version exists. It's a complicated story. Could you please explain to me the relation between these magazines?

Kelts: In 2008, Moto introduced the Japanese version of *Monkey Business*. He was partly inspired by American literary magazines. Most Japanese literary magazines are kind of conservative. They are published by major publishers largely to promote their own authors. But in the US, literary magazines are very independent. So they are freer. They can be very clever, innovative, irreverent and very funny. They can publish more eclectic and eccentric stories and poems. Moto wanted to create that kind of magazine in Japan. So that is how *Monkey Business* came into existence in 2008. When we started the English edition, Moto and Ted decided to use some material from the Japanese edition and combine the content with new selections. They eventually decided to publish some traditional literature from classic authors like Ryunosuke Akutagawa and Franz Kafka. In the new issue, they published an English translation by Jay Rubin of a Noh play from the 15th century. And they also include American writers in the English edition. So the Japanese *MONKEY* and the English *MONKEY* are related but not exactly the same. They each contain original material and are slightly different from each other. Of course,

the Japanese *MONKEY* is published three times each year, and the English version is published just once a year.

JS: So the Japanese *MONKEY* was published before the English *MONKEY* in 2008?

Kelts: Yes. The original publication was called *Monkey Business*. But when Moto changed publishers here in Japan, he could not use the same title. So he made it just *MONKEY*.

Selecting the Content

JS: What is the role of your editorial team in choosing the content of the magazine? Do you follow a policy?

Kelts: We don't have a formal or written policy. Most of the content is chosen by Moto, Ted and Meg Taylor, the managing editor. Selection of the content is based on their tastes – what they really like. And the second level of decision is probably made by the translators, because Moto, Ted and Meg get a team of really great translators together. Trust between them and a translator develops when the translator says that he or she is really interested in translating a particular story or poem. For example, the Noh play was translated by Rubin, a former Harvard professor. He has also been a translator of Haruki Murakami's writing for many years. Then some of the English language material is by American writers whose work Moto translates into Japanese. In the English language *MONKEY*, he sometimes publishes their original work in English.

Commonalities Between Japan & America

JS: You talked about some sort of commonalities growing between contemporary Japanese literature and American literature. Do you think that globalization is a cause of the growing commonality between Japan and America?

Kelts: Of course, especially with the rise of the Internet. Now you can get our magazine *MONKEY* in the print, paper, PDF and eBook or Kindle versions. It's much easier for a global audience to access Japanese literary writing. And of course, there is a great interest in women's voices and stories written by women. I think that's true all over the world. Women writers in Europe and in America are also being listened to and being read much more avidly now.

However, I think that contemporary American literature and Japanese literature do have some very important differences. I feel a lot of American literature is very much about identity and representation. As you know, the US has a very diverse population. So there is a lot of interest in the personal stories of black writers or the

personal stories of gay writers and Latino writers – different ethnic voices or ethnic groups. Japan is comparatively much more monoethnic. I think Japanese writers are exploring the kind of surreal world that we live in – the kind of imaginative, fantastical world of our existence today. I think American writers today are writing more realistic stories about their ethnic identity. Mieko Kawakami has a powerful story in *Monkey Business* from the perspective of the afterlife. Another wonderful writer in *MONKEY* is Aoko Matsuda. She has written a great book about female ghosts from Japanese history. Again, I think American writers are much more into writing about realism right now.

Japanese Women Writers

JS: As you said earlier, today's Japanese literature seems to be led by talented women writers. Most of the distinguished prizes have been given to women writers. What do you think about these women writers? Are they good at describing their imaginative worlds?

Kelts: A couple factors are at work. One factor is that in today's Japanese society in general, women are still not in many positions of power in corporations or the government. Of course, more women are working today. But not many women occupy big positions – CEO or president. And because Japanese women are generally not in the center of society, they often have a unique and fresh perspective on Japanese culture. For a writer, being an outsider can be a very good thing, as the writer can carefully observe the system and describe it in his or her writing. For example, Sayaka Murata has a very successful novel about life in a Japanese convenience store. The novel is interesting because Murata looks at the Japanese retail and marketing culture from the perspective of a young woman. I think she has a unique female perspective on that world. But also women in Japan are tending to get married less and having fewer children. So, that could mean that Japanese women have more time to read and to write fiction and poetry.

This situation is not unique to Japan, of course. South Korea also has a very low birth rate. The birth rate is low for native-born US nationals as well. Many countries in Europe have very low birth rates. I think, around the world, there are generations of women who now have the time and energy to create and consume literature.

JS: Your views on Japanese women writers reminded me of Ichiyo Higuchi of the Meiji Era. I learned from one of your online programs that Mieko Kawakami, a distinguished writer, was deeply influenced by her. Higuchi is one of the most important writers in the history of Japanese literature. She describes the

difficult times of the Meiji Era so well. Many writers consider that period as the idea of rising Japan, but Higuchi did not. She observes reality objectively and with some irony. I guess an outsider's view is very important for literature. I also think that loneliness has been a good writing topic. Do you think today's talented Japanese women writers also represent a kind of solitude or loneliness against the backdrop of globalization?

Kelts: I completely agree with you. We can go back to Haruki Murakami. His characters usually don't have much family connection – maybe no family at all. They often experience divorce or broken relationships. Murakami writes about solitude very well. What you said about Higuchi is revealing. I find women writers' ability to look at the low level of culture quite fascinating. In Kawakami's novel *Breasts and Eggs* (*Chichi to ran*) the narrator talks a lot about poverty, and characters deal with not having enough money and needing to work extra hours at a hostess bar – and that's kind of a low level of Japanese society. It's quite different from Murakami's novels. Of course, Murakami's characters sometimes visit the low levels of society, but they usually live a comfortable middle-class life. They enjoy cooking; they enjoy wine; they can travel. But in Kawakami's books, the characters are often at quite a low level of society without any illusions. That's a very interesting point of contrast between Murakami and Kawakami.

New Authors & Literature

JS: In today's world, neither capitalism nor socialism works well and inequality is increasing. Do you think that the concerns and anxieties caused by these problems and the new normal imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic would create new authors and literature all over the world?

Kelts: It is true that neither capitalism nor socialism works well in today's world. There seems to be confusion about systems and ideologies, which causes anxiety. I think these conditions might help to generate a new kind of literature. Also, people may be feeling less and less secure on social media. The Internet is a very public space today. People are constantly communicating and posting their thoughts, ideas and photographs. They can be constantly creating public stories. But I think literature is usually best at looking at the inner world – our inner lives, our imagination, our personal space. If people become less trusting of social media, they may turn more towards the interior world of writing. I hope this is happening because we as human beings suffer when everything is public. We need private space. We need space to dream and imagine, and that's

where literature is the best. Movies are very public and so is television. You watch these things with other people. When you read a book, it's just you. It's a very personal experience. I think people may want that again in the future.

English Translation of Japanese Literature

JS: As you mentioned, the English translation of Japanese literature has improved quite a bit. What has led to this improvement?

Kelts: Like I said earlier, manga and anime enjoyed huge popularity in the US and Europe. Generations of Americans, Europeans and other English-language populations fell in love with manga and anime – Japanese pop culture. When they got older, they wanted to read the original or they wanted to even write the original. I think some of those “Pokemon” kids are now 35 to 40 years old and they want to translate. They really love the Japanese language. It's not the only factor, of course, but one theory of mine is that the popularity of Japanese pop culture has helped to improve the quality of translation.

JS: I noticed the good quality of the Japanese language of American literature translations. On the side of Japanese translators, there is some improvement. Prof. Shibata seems to be the main force behind this. There may be other Japanese people too involved in translating American literature. Do you know anything about them?

Kelts: That's a difficult question for me to answer. I'm happy to hear your opinion about translation. That's good news, but I don't think I'm qualified to answer this question. Moto would be better for that.

Watakushi Shosetsu

JS: So your favorite Japanese author is Haruki Murakami. Is that so?

Kelts: I like many other writers. I really like Natsume Soseki, and I am very fond of Kenji Nakagami. I think his writing is really original and very energetic and sensual. Yoko Ogawa is masterful, and I re-read Junichiro Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows* every few years. I have always liked Kobo Abe, too. He had a great outsider perspective on Japanese society and the world. Actually, I like many Japanese writers.

JS: I am curious about the nature of literature in Japan. You may have heard the Japanese term

***watakushi shosetsu* or I-Novel. I think the long tradition of Japanese literature is nothing but a “private story”. But now Japanese novels have a very close relation with society. What is your take on this matter?**

Kelts: What you said is definitely true. I think that part of it is Japan's growing prominence in the world, especially after World War II. With modernization, Western cultural influences and a world-beating economy, Japanese awareness of the world and their society in the world naturally expanded. Another factor, again, may be the growing voices of women in society and as writers. It's kind of a stereotype – some say that women tend to be better social citizens because they can have children. Because women can have children, they are more realistically engaged with the world, whereas men, especially in the past, had the freedom to just go off by themselves and go to a *ryokan* and write a very personal novel. In general, women tend to live more in the day-to-day society. Certainly, women who are parents do. If a woman in Japan is a mother, she is usually dealing with a lot of societal groups, parents' associations and school regulations. So I think there may be some reason why Japanese literature written by women is more engaged with society at large. That's just my theory.

Cultural Exchange in Asia

JS: Do you think that the type of cultural exchange that takes place in *MONKEY* – mutual translation of two languages – can be applied to other languages and literatures, such as Indian and Japanese?

Kelts: I wish there were more cultural exchange among Asian countries. With *MONKEY*, we have done events in Indonesia and Singapore. We have always had great audiences in Southeast Asia. We also went to the Philippines with *MONKEY* to introduce Japanese literature. I think those areas of Asia are very hungry for other Asian stories. They see Japan as a kind of cultural leader in Asia. They are very enthusiastic about Japanese art and literature. So I think there is a great opportunity for Asian nations to exchange culture, media and art, but it's not happening enough right now. I hope there will be many more opportunities for cultural exchange in the future. **JS**

Written with the cooperation of Rajesh Williams who is a professional editor and a writer with a background in instructional design, technical writing, technical editing, and teaching.