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Manga makes it in America

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Roland Kelts has been writing since he was in sixth grade. His classmates still vividly recall the poem "Adam was a Fool," in which Kelts lambasted the father of mankind for his dud choice—picking the brain when God was handing out skills like super speed. The cheetah got that instead.

Since then the 37-year-old writer has mellowed—a little. He has written about the sex industry for Salon and Playboy, interviewed the likes of Haruki Murakami for The Village Voice, and currently works as the Japan editor of the literary magazine A Public Space and as a lecturer at the University of Tokyo.

Kelts' first book, "Japanamerica," explained the success of Japanese pop culture in the United States; it was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2006. A Japanese version will be released by Random House Kodansha in April.

It is strange then that Kelts initially wanted to become a rock star, or at least half of one—a drummer in a rock band. He nearly enrolled in Berklee College of Music in Boston and was only put off the career by his experiences at Oberlin College in Ohio.

"They had a music conservatory and I ended up taking classes. What I learned was that there were a lot of guys and girls who were very good drummers," Kelts said. He eventually majored in English literature with a minor in creative writing.

After college, though, Kelts dabbled with the rock 'n' roll lifestyle, moving to San Francisco and surviving a near-death experience when he was robbed at gunpoint. "They were pretty chaotic times in the Bay Area," Kelts remembers fondly. "There were riots and people were banging bongos and getting wasted."

Nowadays, he plays the drums in Tokyo for a band called Ali-mo.

Still it does seem that Kelts was born to write. His maternal grandfather, Ikuro Saeki (1901-1992), was a well-known poet in Iwate Prefecture and was friendly with many leading poets and authors of children's literature of the time.

The son of a Japanese mother and an American father who met in Puerto Rico, Kelts grew up on the East Coast, where his father, a professor of marine biology, taught at various universities.

At the age of 6, Kelts moved from the United States to the family home in Morioka in Iwate Prefecture. He has happy memories of kindergarten there and of sitting on tatami mats watching "Ultraman," a children's TV drama series featuring an alien superhero, while sipping the sake his grandfather illicitly gave him.

His mother's recollections are different. "My mother says that I was crying all the time," Kelts said. "I guess it must have been tough because everything was in Japanese." He chuckled as if to say memories are like that.

Despite dividing his time between Japan and the United States ever since, Kelts never learned Japanese fluently and is still something of an outsider here. Tall and confident, he is more often mistaken for an Italian or a Spaniard than a Japanese.

What is tough for the soul, though, can be a fertile source of inspiration, and questions of identity have proven a constant theme for Kelts as a writer. He is working on a novel set in Tokyo, New York, Osaka and Alaska about transcultural identities and a love triangle with a "very suspenseful" subplot involving an Internet-based cult.

YUKO YAMADA/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Roland Kelts' book "Japanamerica" charts the success of Japanese pop culture in the United States.

In his most significant piece of published fiction to date, "Hiropon my Heroine" written for Zoetrope: All-Story, the American fiction journal founded by Francis Ford Coppola, Kelts explores Tokyo through the eyes of an American couple caught up in a yakuza scam. The punchy and stylish prose very nearly rescues the silly plot.

Of driving in Tokyo he writes: "We ascend on a raised expressway, surfing lanes of paved sea. Billboards, skyscrapers ... Elevated trains glide by in soundless streams while the buildings above them blink red, eyeing air traffic like insomniac monoliths."

The story, Kelts added, in a roundabout way provided the inspiration for the hit film "Lost in Translation" directed by Sofia Coppola, but he is reluctant to say more for fear of stealing an unfair share of the credit.

For the moment, though, it is Kelts' nonfiction work "Japanamerica" that is in the spotlight. The book charts the remarkable rise of Japanese pop culture in the United States that has made anime, Haruki Murakami novels and sushi ubiquitous from New York to New Mexico.

Kelts uses the image of the Möbius strip, a never-ending twist of paper, to explain the surprising give-and-take nature of the U.S.-Japan creative relationship. The father of Japanese manga, Osamu Tezuka, was heavily influenced by Walt Disney. Decades later, U.S. animators are borrowing from their Japanese counterparts.

In explaining the popularity of a series such as "Naruto" in the United States, Kelts combines more and less familiar arguments. The dynamic use of movie-like images in manga, he claims, is particularly attractive to American youngsters. More speculatively, he suggests a collapse in national confidence since 9/11 has made the apocalyptic themes of manga more resonant with the U.S. public.

Kelts is perhaps most comfortable navigating the cerebral worlds of identity politics and Japanese literature, but his career has taken him to grittier places. While at Columbia University in New York on a Javits Fellowship for creative writing, Kelts won the Playboy College Fiction Contest. That success brought him to the attention of publishers and agents and provided the odd commission.

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> *Writer*

"Since I had one story and then other articles published in Playboy, I would get asked by someone like Details (magazine) to check out this bondage scene or whatever in New York," Kelts said.

That expertise certainly stands out in "Japanamerica." In a chapter guiding the reader through the world of *hentai* manga as it is known in the West, Kelts visits manga dives and pores over a friend's extensive pornography collection with admirable sang-froid.

His conclusions, too, are pithy. To outsiders, "The culture might seem at once a pleasure dome of guilt-free perversions and a hyper-prim overpopulated dystopia." But that is the point. Japan's strict demarcation of public and private spheres ironically allows for greater freedom of expression than in more transparent, less compartmentalized societies.

"If there is a man tying up a naked woman or a woman tying up a naked man or five naked people being tied, the people doing the tying are incredibly serious," Kelts said. "They look like they are doing a scroll painting, like they are ikebana experts or something ... it is terrifyingly professional."

Radically different sexual mores are just one of the reasons why Kelts is cautious about the long-term possibilities for Japanese pop culture in the United States. Will U.S. Puritanism, Kelts wonders, be the starting point of a backlash against Japan's cultural products?

Other problems abound. And despite the bombastic subtitle of "Japanamerica" (How Japanese pop culture has invaded America), Kelts' most useful contribution to the current wave of manga and anime criticism is to point up the weak supply lines and shaky infrastructure of the Japanese vanguard.

Moreover, anime and manga can only take Japan so far. In a lecture in 2006 arranged by the Japanese Literature Publishing Project, a government-affiliated body that promotes Japanese fiction, Kelts argued that only when Japanese literature is read widely in the United States would Japanese culture have the depth and weight to make a lasting impression.

Still for Kelts, the real dilemma is not the future of "Fullmetal Alchemist" in Buffalo, Indiana. It is whether he made the right decision giving up rock 'n' roll all those years ago. After the 2006 lecture, he wrote about the differences between being a writer and a musician on his band's blog.

"Drumming may be hard, and it smashes up your body, but at least you've got a great singer, guitarist, bass player and keyboardist in front of you. And lots of NOISE," he wrote. "But when you give a speech, or a reading, or any other 'literary' performance, there's just you ... It sucks."