Manga makes it in America

Roland Kelts has been writing since he was in sixth grade. His classmates vividly recall the poem “Adam was a Fool,” in which Kelts lambasted the father of mankind for his dulcet choice—picking the brain when God was handing out skills like super speed. The cheat got the better half.

Since then the 37-year-old writer has mellowed—a little. He has written about the sex industry for Salon and Playboy, which has also published his novel “Japancia.” His 2006 collection of short stories, “The Voice Village,” and currently works as the Japan editor of the literary magazine 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.


It is strange then that Kelts initially wanted to become a rock star—half his friends were drummers in a rock band. He nearly enrolled in Berklee College of Music in Boston and was only put off the career by his transfixed interest in writing English. 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 hanging bongos and getting wasted.”

Nowadays, he plays the drums in Tokyo for a band called Ali-mo. Still he does seem that Kelts was born to write. His maternal grandfather, Ikuro Saeiki (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 in the United States, 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 Morikona in Iwate Prefecture. He has happy memories of kindergarten there and of sitting on tatami mats watching “Ultranman,” a children’s TV drama series featuring an alien superhero while the father was eating dusk. He retains the habit of saying that his grandfather’s habit gave him the ability to write.

His mother’s recollections are different. “My mother says that I was crying all the time,” Kelts said. “I guess I must have been tough because everything was in Japanese.”

He chuckles as if to say memories are like that.

Despite dividing his time between Japan and the United States over the years, Kelts never learned Japanese fluently and is still somewhat alienated from it. Tall and confident, he is more often mistaken for a Spanish or an Italian 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.

In his most significant piece of published fiction to date, “Harpoon 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 punch and style are nearly rescued by the plot.

In the course of writing in Tokyo he says: “We descend 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 traffic like insomnia 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 “Japancia” 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 less and more 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 story has taken him to grittier places. While at Columbia University in New York on a Javits Fellowship for creative writing,

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Roland Kelts

Kelts won the Playboy College Fiction Contest. That success brought him to the attention of publishers and agents at the end of 2004. “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 “Japancia.” In a chapter guiding the reader through the world of the West, Kelts visits manga dives and pores over a friend’s extensive pornographic collection with an industry insider, or another artist. 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 an impressionless, less compartmentalized societies.

“If there is a man tying up a naked woman or a woman tying up a naked man or five people being tied, the people doing the tying are considered to be criminals,” 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 point of a backlash against Japan’s cultural products? Will it be boundless? And despite the bombastic subtitle of “Japancia” (How Japanese pop culture has invaded America), Kelts’ most useful contribution to the discussion of a possible backlash against Japanese culture is to point out 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 take root in the cultural marketplace.

Still for Kelts, the real dilemma is not the future of “fullmetal Alchemist” in Buffalo, Indiana. It is whether he made the right decision going to college in the first place. 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 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.”