Japan's pop culture made palatable for the layman

By ANGELA JEFFS
Contributing writer

Roland Kelts does not look like his publicity photo, in large part because he's wearing sunglasses. But not because he's trying to be cool: "It's just that my eyes are really tired this morning."

A freelance writer and author, Kelts is working on a book review for The Village Voice in New York. Next he has to turn his mind to reviewing an anime movie for an American magazine.

Last year saw the publication of his hardback, "Japanamerica: How Pop Culture has Invaded the U.S." With an endorsement by Pete Townshend of The Who, the U.K. edition is just out, and the Japanese translation will soon be published here by Random House Kodansha.

"I was very flattered that Pete wanted to be involved. With a 17-year-old son who is into Japanese culture, he told me my book helped put things that he hadn't understood into perspective."

Born in New York to an American father and Japanese mother, Kelts was sent to kindergarten in Morioka, Iwate Prefecture, where his grandparents lived. "My grandmother's still there, aged 90," he says.

Back home in New England his mother rarely spoke Japanese. "As a multilingual scholar, I think she was committed to ensuring my sister and I were proficient in English."

Having spent his teens absorbed in sport, books and music (he's a drummer), and graduating with degrees in creative writing and literature, Kelts quickly gained a name for interesting and quirky essays and stories. A break came with the Coppola family's literary quarterly Zoetrope, founded in 1997. Having read one of Kelts' short pieces in Playboy magazine, they commissioned a novella with a Japanese twist for turning into a screenplay.

The resulting manuscript unwittingly arrived amid the breakup of Sofia's marriage, so she chose to write her own more personal story - the one that ultimately became "Lost in Translation." Kelts' story was published in Zoetrope, garnering the attention of his current agent, and all involved remain friends.

Being a freelance writer anywhere is not easy, Kelts says. "But in New York especially there are so many writers. It's very competitive. Exciting but also oppressive at times."

Coming here, pen in hand (computer under arm) offered relief. Every day he was seeing something new, felt his imagination being illuminated as never before. Which is why in 2001 he packed up and made the move. Initially he taught college writing classes and worked as editor in chief for the now quarterly business magazine JapanInc. It was here he met British business and tech journalist Lisa Katoto, who, as editor, adviser and contributor will assist Kelts on Sunday in presenting "Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop Culture has Invaded the U.S." as part of Good Day Books' Booknotes program.

"I met all these people in an apartment in Tokyo, a public part-time home at the University of Tokyo, edit for A Public Space (a New York literary journal) and write freelance. I return to Manhattan frequently to keep in touch with editors and the literary scene; it's good to dip into the caldron, but I'm always glad to get back."

Kelts was asked by his publisher to write a book about anime and manga because he has a broad knowledge of Japanese pop culture rather than a computer nerd.

He comes from a generation of youths who would race home from school to watch "Star Wars: Episode I - The Phantom Menace". Only later did he see echoes, shades of resemblance in the sense of trauma, and suppressed and misunderstood anxieties.

Kelts believes the character Pokemon was critical in opening up Western markets for Japanese pop culture. Its creators knew it would appeal universally. American cartoon characters are rooted in the natural world - from Bambi to the Lion King. Many of the characters of Japanese anime and manga are creatures we don't necessarily recognize, with endless commercial possibilities."

"Pokemon is now associated with some 400 characters, all fantastical, all with a connection to the Shinto tenets that everything animate or inanimate, has an inherent divinity."

"As Kansai airport you're greeted by a balloon-like character that makes you smile on your way to the gate. In America, you're just searched for bomb-making equipment. It's a matter of taste."

While France is a big taker of Japanese pop culture, the U.K. and Spain are relatively new markets. Anime and manga also have a strong fan base in the Middle East.

Another U.S. publisher is pursuing the novel that Kelts is now completing. Set mostly here, but also in the U.S., he will say only that it concerns the search for a trans-cultural identity, a love triangle, and an Internet-based religious cult.

He prefers instead to turn attention to a Japanese anime debuting internationally at the Berlin Film festival. Based on a manga called "Black and White," "Tekkon Kinkreet" portrays a collapsing world in which two orphans survive on violent streets. With an American screenwriter and director, but created entirely by Japanese artists, it packs an extraordinary visual and emotional punch, he says.

"It's up for an award, and I do hope it wins."


"For the layman it's an accessible and enjoyable book. It's a good place to start."

"No one knew of Japanese pop culture. But they simply cut stuff out and made stuff up."

Kelts' book, which is out in paperback, will be released in paperback in April. In the meantime, he is at work on a novel, "Lost in Translation," which is set in Tokyo. "I can't wait to see the reaction."

TED TANAKA, The Japan Times