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.

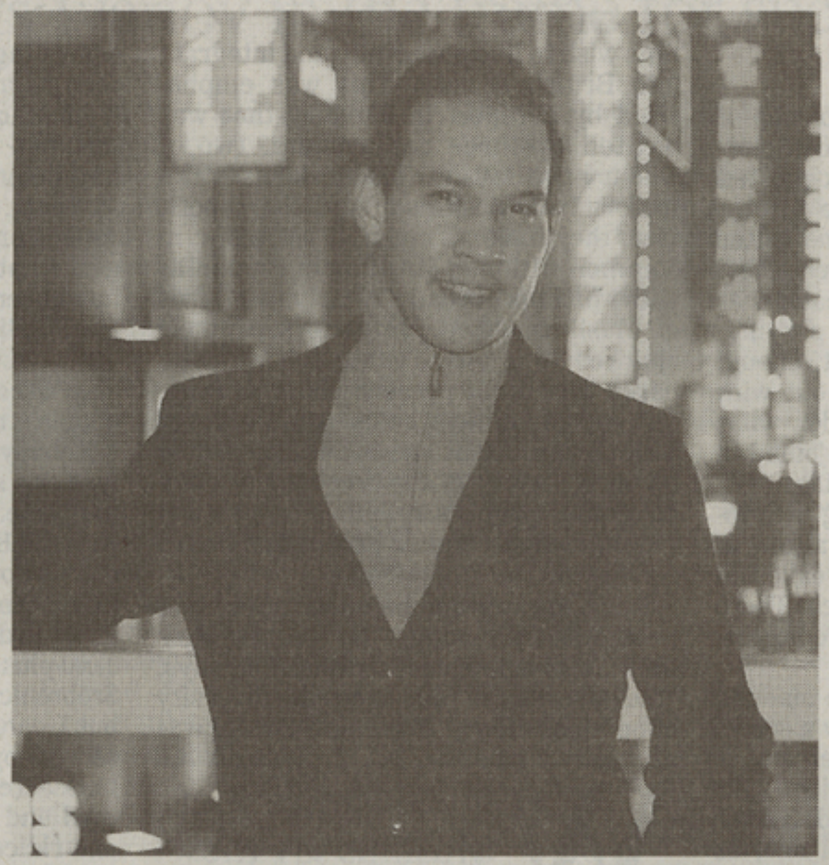
Last year saw the publication of his hardback, "Japanamerica: How Pop Culture has invaded the U.S." With an endorsement by Pete Townshend of The Who, the U.K. edition is just out, and the Japanese translation will soon be published here by Random House Kodansha.

"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 99."

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 stories in Playboy magazine, they commissioned a novella with a Japanese twist for turning into a screenplay.



FREELANCE WRITER and author Roland Kelts focuses on anime and manga in his latest book "Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop Culture Has Invaded the U.S." LISA KATO PHOTO

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 titillated 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 Leo Lewis, who as a researcher, 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.

"Now I have an apartment in Yoyogi, lecture part-time 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 Japanese anime and manga because he is a writer with 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 Battle of the Planets and other Japanese animated cartoons dubbed — botched, he says — into English. "Battle was picked up by U.S. TV after the success of Star Wars. No one knew a word of Japanese; they simply cut stuff out and made stuff up.

Although Palgrave Macmillan said it wanted a book that ordinary people could dip into and not be overwhelmed by a deconstruction of anime, Kelts was unsure. "I told them I wasn't an expert, that I would be torn apart by *otaku*. But they were adamant: they wanted a storyteller, not an obsessive list maker."

Reviews since late 2006 have ranged from the controversial to the wholly positive. Otaku like to read about the business side of the subject, which has never been written about in English before.

"In researching, I read what was out there in English, but with a few exceptions, most of it was stuff written by geeks for geeks. There was no thorough explanation of why and how Japanese pop culture is now taking the U.S. by storm."

Kelts believes we need to retrace the apocalyptic nature of anime to understand its roots as an expression of Japanese trauma after WWII. Look at anime's first hero, he adds: Mighty Atom.

It was on the subject of apocalypse that some reviewers — coming mainly from a generation traumatized by 9/11 — took Kelts to task. "I didn't write that there was a direct parallel between 9/11 and the dropping of two atomic bombs. Only that there are 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 tenet that everything, animate or inanimate, has an inherent divinity.

"At 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 tone."

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."

Web site: www.japanamerica-book.com Good Day Books: Feb 18, Booknotes 6:30 — 8 p.m. Buy a book to get in. Web page: www.gooddaybooks.com, 3F Asahi Bldg, 1-11-2 Ebisu, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo tel: (03) 5421-0957; fax 0958)