

# TOMO

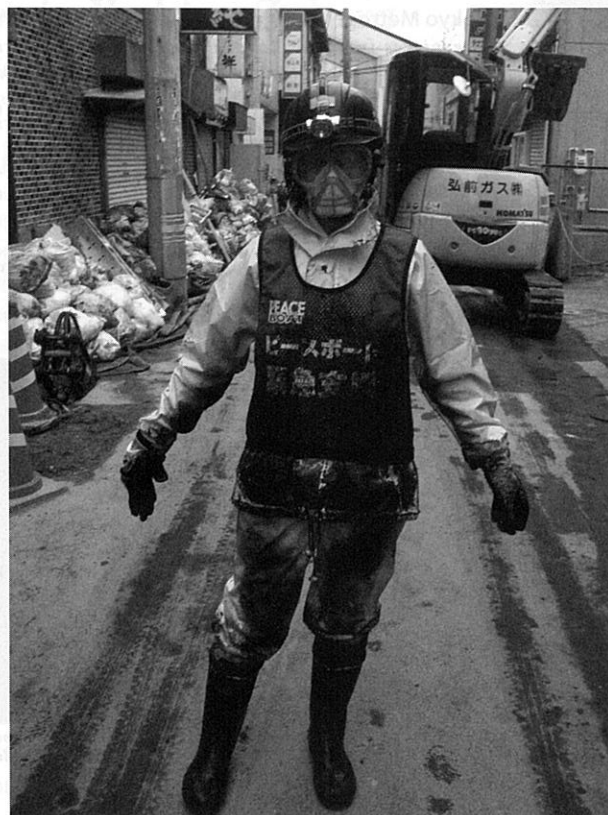
## Friendship through Fiction

*Anthology of Japan Teen Stories benefits Teenagers in Tohoku*

by Louise George Kittaka

The earthquake and tsunami on March 11, 2011 wreaked havoc across Tohoku in the northeastern region of Honshu, Japan's main island. Over 19,000 lives were lost, and many thousands of others lost their homes, their livelihoods, and their communities. From all over Japan and around the world, people saw the horrifying images in the media and asked the same question: "How can I help?"

American Holly Thompson, a writer and long-term resident of Kanagawa Prefecture, wasted no time in joining the army of volunteers who travelled to Tohoku to pitch in with recovery efforts. "Within days after the earthquake and tsunami, author Greg Fishbone in Massachusetts contacted me by email asking what I was doing to help. I was still in a paralyzing fog of disbelief and sadness, and Greg, with



Holly Thompson, *Tomo* editor, during cleanup activities while volunteering in Tohoku last year.

his incredible Kidlit for Japan Auction, inspired me to leap into action and do whatever I could to help. First I signed up to go to Tohoku with the NGO Peace Boat and spent eight days volunteering in late April and early May doing tsunami cleanup work in Ishinomaki."

Yet Thompson knew there was still much more to be done. The author of several books for young people, including the award-winning young adult (YA) verse novel *Orchards* (Random House, 2011), Thompson felt that the teenagers of Tohoku would be left particularly vulnerable by the events of March 11th. "Having seen the devastation, having seen the havoc the tsunami wreaked on town after town up and down the Tohoku coast, I knew the suffering would be long-lasting, and I solidified my plan for *Tomo*—an anthology that would offer



At the Boston launch event for *Tomo*, held at the Boston Children's Museum: Guests writing messages to teens in Tohoku. These were hung on a "wishing tree."

Japan-related stories to teen readers anywhere in the world while benefitting teens in disaster-hit areas of Tohoku." "*Tomo*" is the Japanese word for friend and friendship.

Thompson set about using her connections and experience to make her vision a reality. Finding the right publisher was her first major task in a yearlong labor of love. "I wanted an established, traditional publisher, with the hope that this would be a lasting anthology. But my aim was to have the anthology published in time for the one-year anniversary of the earthquake, so I knew that there wasn't time to shop around this project in the traditional manner. Right away, I thought of Stone Bridge Press, a house that focuses on Japan and Asia. When I emailed publisher Peter Goodman about my idea, with names of writers that were already interested in submitting work for consideration, he wrote back within hours saying, "Yes!" I'm so grateful for the energy that he and the Stone Bridge Press team have poured into *Tomo*."



Boston: The wishing tree full of messages

the book come from all around the world but all share a deep connection with Japan. Everybody donated their time and talent for free to the project. The anthology contains tales of family and friends, love and war, magic, science fiction, and history, and everything in between.

Trevor Kew, a teacher at Yokohama International School and author of several children's books, drew inspiration from history for his story *The Bridge to Lillooet*. "I grew up in Ross-

With a publisher secured, Thompson worked on soliciting and selecting the stories for the anthology. "First and foremost, I sought young adult stories featuring protagonists that are young adults themselves. I know of no other YA English-language anthologies of stories related to Japan, so *Tomo* is definitely unique. Hopefully, *Tomo* will be considered a welcome addition to classrooms and home and school libraries."

*Tomo* features 36 stories, including ten translated from Japanese and two graphic narratives. The writers, translators, and illustrators who contributed to





Contributors posing at the Tokyo launch:  
Back row, L to R: John Paul Catton, Juliet Winters Carpenter, Deborah Iwabuchi, Margi Napper, Louise George Kittaka, Ann Slater, Charles De Wolf, Trevor Kew, Hart Larabee  
Front Row, L to R: Arie Nashiya, Yuko Katakawa, Holly Thompson (editor), Sako Ikegami, Fumio Takano, Leza Lowitz, Mariko Nagai

land, British Columbia (Canada), two hours from the old Japanese internment camp in New Denver, which is now a small open air museum. Not having any real interest in Japan as a child, I never visited the museum. Last summer, before I wrote *The Bridge to Lillooet*, I finally made a trip out to New Denver. Walking around the small wooden shacks where Japanese-Canadian families had lived during and after the internment, I tried to imagine how it must have felt to have your whole life relocated from a big city like Vancouver to such a remote little place. For adults aware of the big picture, it must have been an incredibly bitter pill to swallow, but thinking of children and teenagers, I was pretty sure that they would have quite quickly found sources of fun and joy, despite the hardships, an idea which numerous photographs of sports teams (baseball, ice hockey, etc.) seemed to confirm.”

Kew’s story centers on two Japanese-Canadian brothers coping with life in one of these internment camps, where the fun and thrill of baseball is one of the few things that remains unchanged in their uprooted lives. “Later that summer, when I saw an amazing National Film Board documentary called *Sleeping Tigers* about baseball in the internment camps, my story for *Tomo* started to come together. The final piece of the puzzle was a visit to the former site of Little Tokyo in Vancouver. All that is left of the pre-war Japanese community is a

baseball park called Oppenheimer Park, where the legendary Asahi Tigers used to play.”

Several of the stories in *Tomo*, grouped in the first of seven themed sections in the book, deal with natural disasters and feature teens trying to make sense of the havoc being wreaked on their world. One of these is Ann Tashi Slater’s *Aftershocks*, which portrays a bicultural family in Tokyo coping with the aftermath of the Tohoku disaster.

Slater, a Tokyo-based author and university lecturer, found it beneficial to write about the tumultuous time immediately after the earthquake and tsunami. “Writing the story helped me to get some perspective on that very difficult time. Just after 3/11, emotions were of course running very high for everyone, so it was difficult, if not impossible, to make sense of what we were all experiencing. Writing about it helped me to explore and clarify what was going on for both children and parents during those days of great emotional turmoil and uncertainty.”

When selecting stories for *Tomo*, Thompson was keen to include teen voices from native Japanese writers, and ten of the contributions have been translated into English especially for the book. Award-winning author Ariya Nashiya has built up a domestic following for her young adult novels and short

stories. *Fleecy Clouds*, a tale of teen friendship with a twist, is featured in *Tomo*. “My work has been translated into Korean and Chinese before, but this is my first time in English,” Nashiya notes. “I was delighted to be able to contribute to a project that benefits those affected by the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake.”

Asked about the trends she sees in Japan, Nashiya says, “The focus on Japanese literature for young adults tends to be more entertainment-oriented these days. I think it is important for teens to have a wide variety of literature to select from.”

Juliet Winters Carpenter, a long-term resident of Japan who now lives in Kyoto, translated Nashiya’s story. She enlisted the help of Sako Ikegami, another contributor to *Tomo*, when searching for suitable stories. “I read through the three that Sako sent and picked *Fleecy Clouds*. After I did the translation, I did end up contacting Nashiya-san to go over some of the fine points and make necessary adjustments for readers without any knowledge of Japanese junior and senior high school norms. We communicated by email and Facebook.”

Although Carpenter has translated a wide variety of Japanese literature into English, ranging from haiku poetry to works on Buddhist philosophy, *Tomo* was her first experience at translating for a teen audience. “I have done children’s books before, but not YA. The main challenge was finding the right voice for the character. But then that is the challenge in translating any work of literature—you have to become the character and then let them speak in their own voice, in English! As I wrote I had in mind the voice of another character from a favorite YA novel of mine, and that helped. I tried to use contemporary teen expressions without dating the dialogue too much.”

Nashiya and Carpenter met face to face at the Tokyo launch for *Tomo* in March this year, where contributors and participants had the thrill of seeing the book for the first time. Exactly one year after the Tohoku disaster,

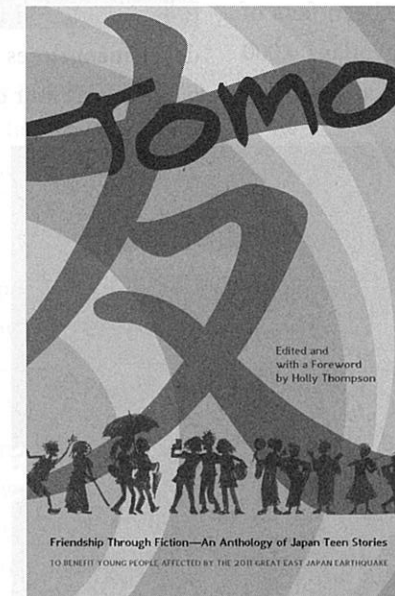
*Tomo* had arrived! A total of 16 contributors, including several other author-translator pairs, read excerpts from their stories to give the audience a taste of the literary feast featured in the anthology.

Two similar events followed in Boston and New York, and a number of US-based contributors attended, reading from their stories and participating in Japan-themed activities with the audience. Along with Thompson, *Aftershocks* author Slater was able to arrange her schedule to be present at all three launches. “The New York and Boston events were a wonderful opportunity to connect with teens in the US. We had a chance to share with them our experience of the earthquake and its aftermath, to put a human face on this tragedy of monumental proportions and offer insight into what it was like for teens in Japan. The launch events were a testament to the power of writing to reach across borders and into people’s hearts,” she recalls.

Thompson echoes the same sentiment when sharing her long-term vision for *Tomo* and its legacy. “I hope that

readers will feel that they have traveled closer to Japan, that they have glimpsed some Japan teen worlds, and have encountered many different versions of Japan. I hope their curiosity is piqued and that they will check out the contributor interviews on the Tomo Blog (<http://tomoanthology.blogspot.com>) and there meet all the authors and translators that are connected to Japan by heritage or experience. And I hope that they will keep Tohoku teens in mind as this 2012 dragon year progresses—the tsunami debris may have been heaped into neat mountains, but the lives of Tohoku residents are still turned upside down and full of countless obstacles and difficulties. Support and friendship through fiction—we can give both.”

Initial proceeds from the sales of *Tomo* will go to the Japan-based NPO *Hope for Tomorrow* ([hope-tomorrow.jp](http://hope-tomorrow.jp)) which provides educational funding, tutoring and foreign language support to high school students in some of the hardest-hit areas of Tohoku. ♥



Tomo cover