

An Interview with Holly Thompson

by Suzanne Kamata

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Native New-Englander Holly Thompson first went to Japan with her husband in the mid-80s to teach English at Japanese high schools. This experience served as inspiration for her first novel, *Ash*, published by Stone Bridge Press in 2001. Thompson and her family had the opportunity to return to the country in 1998, and have lived there since. Thompson says that she finds Japan a rich source for her writing. "I love the physical landscape of Japan – the mountains, headlands dropping into the sea, lush mixed growth forests – and the way the villages traditionally have interacted with the land." These natural elements often appear in her work. The title of her novel for adults refers to the volcanic ash that falls upon the city of Kagoshima. Her newest book, *The Wakame Gatherers* is a picture book for children, inspired by the sea. Here, Thompson talks about writing, publishing, and the best way to prepare seaweed.

KAMATA: First off, congratulations, Holly, on publishing your first picture book. Could you tell us a little about *The Wakame Gatherers* and, and what inspired the story?

HOLLY THOMPSON: *The Wakame Gatherers* is about a bicultural girl who goes *wakame* gathering with her Japanese and American grandmothers. For many years I've lived near the coast in Kamakura and every spring have loved the sight of fresh *wakame* pegged and drying in the wind like laundry along the beach. I also learned to gather *wakame* from some elderly *wakame* gatherers and wanted to share their methods with others in a story. I have raised my two children in Japan and have taught many bicultural children in an afterschool program, and I wanted to create a book that would focus on their world and the challenges of navigating back and forth between different languages, cultures and belief systems.

KAMATA: There seem to be very few books for children about contemporary Japan, and not enough books about bicultural families. I know that my bicultural children will appreciate *The Wakame Gatherers*. How about your kids? Do you try out your stories on them first?

THOMPSON: Absolutely, and I bounce many questions off my children as I am first developing stories. They give me helpful input and criticism, provide guidance in developing my characters and always raise questions I'd never thought of. I try to read my stories to other children as well for more objective feedback.

KAMATA: How long did it take you to write the book? How many revisions did you go through?

THOMPSON: I first began thinking of the book, conducted my initial interviews and did some preliminary research five years before the book was accepted for publication. I worked on it, put it away, worked on it a bit more, put it away. I wrote many, many drafts—there are nearly twenty versions saved in my computer.

KAMATA: What attracted you to Shen's Books?

THOMPSON: I admire Renee Ting's commitment to publishing and marketing picture books that will open children's eyes to other cultures and other parts of the world. I especially liked one of their recent books *Selvakumar Knew Better*, by Virginia Kroll and illustrated by Xiaojun Li, and felt that *The Wakame Gatherers* would be a good fit.

KAMATA: As it turns out, you were right. It also turned out to be a good fit for the artwork of Kazumi Wilds. In most cases, debut children's book writers do not choose the illustrators for their books or collaborate with them, yet you had the unique opportunity to suggest the illustrator for your book. How did you decide upon Wilds and what was it like to work with her?

THOMPSON: Since it was clear that the illustrator for *The Wakame Gatherers* would need to be familiar with *wakame* and Japanese harvesting methods, and since a Japan-based illustrator would be able to include the cultural details that an illustrator based in North America might miss, the publisher was open to considering an illustrator in Japan. My SCBWI contacts led me to Kazumi Wilds and other talented illustrators, and I submitted their names and artwork to the publisher. The final decision about which illustrator to use was the publisher's.

Kazumi Wilds was wonderful to work with from the start. She visited me in Kamakura, observed the local harvesting of cultivated *wakame* and took many photos of the area. She then worked up a storyboard of rough sketches and page breaks that we were able to discuss in detail. We shared our ideas, and after the visit Kazumi began creating a

dummy. Meanwhile I continued to send her more information and photos of *wakame* harvesting and coastal Maine. She was open to my suggestions and comments throughout the process and the collaboration was a joy. It was a thrill to receive copies of the paintings as she finished them and to watch the story gradually come to life visually.

KAMATA: You also had the rather unique experience of having your publisher come to visit you in Japan, didn't you?

THOMPSON: Renee Ting happened to be planning a visit to Asia just after the contract was signed so I was able to meet her in Tokyo, talk over Kazumi's dummy then relay the comments to Kazumi who lives in western Japan. It was great to have the chance to speak face to face so early in the publishing process.

KAMATA: Let's go back a little bit. When did you start writing for children?

THOMPSON: I have been fiddling with stories for children for years. I have myriad scraps and beginnings of stories and poems filed away and I'm always coming up with new ideas. When SCBWI Tokyo formed several years ago, I was encouraged to tackle my children's stories seriously and since then have finalized some ideas I'd been mulling over for ages and have started completely new works ranging from verse novels and poetry collections to middle grade stories and picture books.

KAMATA: Earlier, you mentioned the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. Could you tell us a bit about your duties as regional adviser for the Tokyo branch of SCBWI and the organization in general? How has membership helped your career? What kinds of activities have you organized?

THOMPSON: I have been the Regional Advisor of the Tokyo branch of SCBWI for several years now and have worked closely with other volunteers to build an active chapter and organize monthly events for writers and illustrators of children's books in Japan. We hold workshops, guest speaker events, manuscript and illustration exchanges, and meet the author events, and we have created an e-mail group for exchanging ideas, an online critique group, and website. I also edit the binannual newsletter which features author and illustrator interviews, news and trends in children's publishing in Japan, and articles on craft. Clearly this volunteer work for SCBWI has meant a great deal of extra work on top of my regular full-time job and family, but through SCBWI Tokyo events and international SCBWI conferences I have been able to connect with and learn directly from publishers, agents, authors and illustrators from around the world. For me

it has been a tremendously valuable experience, a volunteer activity from which I certainly gain as much as I give. My writing has improved immensely and I have confidence in marketing my work.

KAMATA: In your capacity as regional adviser for SCBWI, you recently went to Mongolia to work with aspiring children's book writers. Can you tell us a little about that?

THOMPSON: I was fortunate to be invited with my SCBWI illustrator colleague John Shelley to volunteer teach three days of writing and illustrating workshops to Mongolian children's writers and illustrators in Ulaan Baatar through the Mongolia SCBWI chapter. Regrettably our flight was delayed 36 hours so our visit was cut short, but we delivered a rather intensive overview of the genres of children's literature, the elements of picture books, and the dos and don'ts of publishing and marketing. The workshops were wonderful, attended by ardent writers and illustrators of all ages, published and unpublished, who delved into every workshop task with gusto, and shared rich and varied tales with us over the three days. I would love to do more of these workshops. There are so many parts of the world where children's publishing is underdeveloped, where there are few opportunities for writers and illustrators to learn the tricks of the trade, and where children have minimal access to books, especially picture books. Children of all cultures and nations deserve access to libraries of picture books. I would like to do what I can to help empower writers and illustrators to create and publish quality books and to help get more books in the hands of children everywhere.

KAMATA: You also spent some time as a writer-in-residence in Tasmania this past summer. How did that come about, and what were you working on *Down Under*?

THOMPSON: At the urging of another SCBWI Tokyo member, I applied for and was awarded a writing residency from the Tasmanian Writer's Centre. With funding from the Hobart City Council I was flown to Tasmania and given a month of writing time in a writer's cottage. The uninterrupted work time was sheer luxury for me and allowed me to make considerable progress on a rather complicated novel set on a Japanese *mikan* (mandarin orange) farm. I also worked on several children's books. My goal now is to complete a full draft of the novel within the next year and to complete several more children's books along the way.

KAMATA: In workshops you've conducted you've spoken about some of the mistakes writers make when attempting to write multicultural fiction. Could you give a couple of examples?

THOMPSON: Perhaps the most serious mistake writers make is not knowing a culture deeply enough; this can result in a book full of clichés—in setting, characterization, and dialogue. Another mistake is not doing enough research and relying on rather narrow personal experience. A writer doesn't need to be a native of a culture to write about a culture; research with primary resources, substantial direct experience and interviews with experts can enable a writer to create an authentic story.

It is also important to find plenty of good readers to check a manuscript before sending it to publishers. And of course all writers should read many books in their genre. Too many writers don't seek out enough critiques and don't read enough examples of other work published in their genre before trying to get their work published.

KAMATA: Finally, what's your favorite way to enjoy *wakame*?

THOMPSON: I love *wakame*! I especially enjoy *wakame-miso* soup. I also like *wakame* salads, *wakame* mixed with *natto* (fermented beans), and *wakame-shiso furikake*. But absolutely best of all is freshly harvested *wakame*, boiled for about 30 seconds, drained, chilled and served with citrus *ponzu* sauce.

KAMATA: Thank you so much, Holly.