Eye on Stories

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 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 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."

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 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 Lilacree. "I grew up in Ross-
land, British Columbia (Canada), two hours from the old Japa
ese 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 Lilloat, I finally made a trip out to New Den-
ver. 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 Van-
couver. 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 disas-
ters and feature teens trying to make sense of the havoc being
wreaked on their world. One of these is Ann Tashi Slater’s Af-
tershocks, 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 af-
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 Aria Nishiya 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 Ko-
orean and Chinese before, but this is my first time in English,”
Nishiya 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, Nishiya 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 Nishiya’s story. She enlisted the help of Sako Ikemami, another contrib-
utor 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
Nishiya-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 experi-
ence 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 Eng-
lish! 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 dia-
logue too much.”

Nishiya 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 fea-
tured 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 activi-
ties 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 op-
portunity 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 testa-
ment 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 encoun-
tered 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://tomoaanthology.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) which
provides educational funding, tutoring and foreign language
support to high school students in some of the hardest-hit areas
of Tohoku.