A Conversation with Holly Thompson

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Orchards clearly focuses on questions of identity. Half Japanese and half Jewish, Kana has been raised in New York, but her visit to Japan helps her connect with her Japanese roots. Do you have personal experience with biculturalism?

Kana, like many of our children's friends and the children and teens I have known and taught over the years, is the child of a Japanese and non-Japanese parent. She straddles their languages, belief systems, behaviors, and social customs. She operates in a sort of psychological and linguistic duality, much as I do, but her biculturalism is based on personal heritage whereas mine is acquired—due to my life's circumstances.

I've lived and worked in Japan for over 15 years, and we've raised our two children here. Both attended Japanese public schools before switching to international school, and both are bilingual. My husband and I both speak Japanese and deeply value our local community; for many years, Japan has been home for us. We return to the U.S. for visits and often experience culture shock there now. Straddling U.S. and Japanese cultures is a complicated balancing act, and not being ethnically Asian or with mixed roots or in an international marriage means that to others we are sometimes invisibly bicultural.

In addition to our Japan life, our children have both Jewish and non-Jewish grandparents, a Paraguayan aunt, and Mexican cousins, all of whom provide additional intercultural opportunities.

Your writing is spare, yet you convey so much in the verse format. Why did you decide to pursue verse instead of prose?

Orchards is a story about the intense emotions after a devastating loss. Traditional prose never felt right for Kana's voice. Tight, spare vignettes or splashes of emotion and action seemed more appropriate, and from the beginning Kana's story came to me in verse. I like the process of distillation, of finding the essence of a scene or the key words in a dialogue when writing in verse. And I liked having the chance to think about page turns and blank space, something you can't do in a typical prose novel.

Kana's narrative addresses Ruth, the girl who commits suicide, and feels very much like an ode. Was this a reason you wrote the novel in verse form?

Orchards is certainly ode-like, though I wasn't specifically thinking of odes during the writing process. A death by suicide raises so many questions. A suicide survivor, whether a friend or family member, close or peripheral, feels so many emotions—loss, anger, regret,

guilt, fear, blame, despair, love. Kana works through her feelings by addressing Ruth, first in anger and frustration and gradually in a confiding friendship. It is a belated act of reaching out and an offering of respect.

What made you choose the mikan orange farm setting for Kana's relatives in Japan?

I was working on an adult novel about an American woman who marries into a Japanese mikan farming family, and in a topsy-turvy sort of way, I imagined my setting first, then set off to find the real thing. I started searching in our prefecture and the neighboring prefecture and was thinking I might have to go farther afield, when, after camping in the Izu mountains with my kids, I took a back road down to a bay and landed in the middle of a string of villages designated as an agricultural area. Approaching the bay we were surrounded by steep, terraced mikan groves—I knew I'd found my coastal mikan village.

But I couldn't just walk into the village and ask a farmer to take me on as an apprentice; I needed a proper introduction. I sought out contacts for several months, and eventually it turned out that my husband's former colleague's wife's husband's childhood friend's wife's colleague's friend's cousin was a mikan farmer in that village. On one extraordinary day all of those individuals gathered in the tiny village restaurant to formalize introductions and arrange for me to apprentice for a year.

After that, once a week, sometimes twice, I drove two hours each way to the village to work a full day in the mikan groves. Eventually I was able to rent rooms in a nearby village farmhouse, and for a while moved there with my daughter. The year stretched into eighteen months. At one point an American-born niece of the farmer came to visit, and observing her in that environment got me thinking about a YA story of a bicultural character coming back to visit relatives. Ultimately, I set aside the other novel to focus on *Orchards*.

What inspired you to write a story centered, among other things, on both suicide and bullying? Have you been directly affected by school bullying—in your own childhood or through your two children?

I think everyone has been affected by bullying at one time or another. I witnessed plenty growing up, and as a young adult was bullied badly by a coworker at a summer job; when the manager ignored my complaints, I felt I had no choice but to quit the job. Our children, when younger, as non-Japanese in Japanese elementary schools, had to fend off repeated verbal and, in the case of our son, physical abuse.

Have you been directly affected by teen suicide?

Orchards is a book I wish I hadn't had to write and is dedicated to the three individuals whose deaths by suicide directly impacted me. First

was a friend's fourteen-year-old daughter; I learned of her death while holding my infant daughter in my arms. The news stunned me and haunted me for years. About ten years later, my brother-in-law committed suicide, leaving a grieving wife, two young children, and many devastated family members who had tried for years to help him cope with bipolar disorder. Soon after that, a dear friend lost his wife to suicide. At that point, I started hearing Kana's voice in my head. Hesitantly I began writing the lines of verse, thinking I was creating a poem. Soon, I put aside all my other writing projects and let Kana speak.

Orchards also deals with teen depression. Among adolescents, one in eight may suffer from depression, but less than 30 percent of those get help. What message do you hope readers take away from Ruth's story?

I hope that teens feeling depressed will talk to friends, parents, and teachers and that those friends, parents, and teachers will take them seriously, listen, and point them to professional help. Depression can usually be managed. I hope that all my readers will learn to recognize signs of depression and that schools will step up efforts to screen for depression and suicidal tendencies.

School bullying seems universal. You've lived in Japan for over a decade, and have children who attend/attended Japanese schools. Is bullying as rampant over there as it is in the U.S.?

Bullying is, unfortunately, a major problem in Japan. In schools, in the workplace, and in local communities, the pressure everywhere is to conform. Anyone outside the norm struggles in Japan, and for non-Japanese, it is nearly impossible not to stick out. Most biracial or non-Asian children in Japanese schools have suffered from bullying. Boys tend to be physically abused; our son was hit on the head, and shoved and punched daily. Our daughter was cruelly verbally abused by one group of boys. Our children had good friends who provided sanctuary and helped shield them from the bullies, but in our son's case, that sanctuary was simply not enough and we ended up removing him from that school.

Why did you choose to write from the point of view of a girl who contributed to the bullying rather than the girl being bullied?

I wanted to write from the point of view of a suicide survivor in the throes of the complicated guilt-ridden grieving process. Kana participated in bullying a peer in a rather passive way, the way in which many teens do, as a follower and a condoner rather than an instigator. In the beginning of *Orchards,* Kana is not fully aware of her role in the ostracizing and bullying of Ruth, but by the end of the novel, she has come to realize that not acting to stop bullying can be as damaging as instigating bullying. Kana is haunted by

Ruth's death, and her reflective summer in Japan allows her to see what she could have done differently.

Orchards is also an uplifting novel. Was it important to portray Kana as someone who could reflect and turn her guilt into life-affirming action? The other girls, too, seem deeply affected by what they've done—especially Lisa, the ringleader of the bullying. Do you think most bullies recognize and regret their behavior?

I wanted Kana to turn her grief into action, which is one way that survivors cope. Unfortunately Lisa suffers from her own issues, as is often the case with bullies, and she is alone during one of her moments of vulnerability.

Bullying is a form of abuse; it is harassment, violence. I am hopeful that more children, teens and adults will begin to recognize what constitutes abusive language and behavior and learn how to avoid it. To achieve peace at any level, we need to listen and communicate. We need to develop empathy, and we need to create environments in which even those who are outside the norm are treated with respect.

Everyone makes mistakes. As they say in Japan, *saru mo ki kara ochiru*—even monkeys fall from trees. But bullies can be taught to recognize their behavior and learn from their mistakes. Whether they do or not, depends on various factors, including the environment and whether the bullying is enabled by others. Peers need to speak up. Sometimes just a single word can put a halt to bullying and cause a bully to reflect and ultimately stop the abuse.