

A Conversation with Suzanne Kamata

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Suzanne Kamata is a member of the LiLT SIG and a published author, of amongst other writings, young adult fiction. Suzanne also presented on her ideas about creative writing workshops at the 2013 LiLT SIG forum. Congratulations to Suzanne on the recent success at the APALA (Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association) with recognition of writing success in receiving a YA Honor award for Gadget Girl. For more information on Suzanne Kamata's publications her homepage has details <www.suzannekamata.com>

TM: Let's begin with a few questions about how you got involved in writing. What sparked your first interest in writing?

SK: I've been writing stories since I was a kid. I think everyone does, but I never stopped. I suppose that I started writing stories because I liked reading them. I remember my mother taking my brother and me to the library on a regular basis, and always being the kid sitting in a corner with a book during family reunions.

TM: How and when did you start writing professionally?

SK: My first paid assignment was for a newspaper article I wrote while I was a high school student. It was about teens enlisting in the army. During college, I had a part-time job at a library as the community relations secretary. I wrote press releases and newsletter articles, and then later, when I came to Japan, I started to write on a freelance basis for magazines and newspapers.

TM: Who are some of your favourite writers?

SK: There are so many! I'm a big fan of Louise Erdrich, Chitra Divakaruni, Kyoko Mori, Donna Tartt, Jay McInerney, Jayne Ann Phillips, Sherman Alexie, Barbara Kingsolver, the list goes on.

TM: What makes a good story, in your opinion?

SK: I think a memorable, well-rounded cast of characters is the most important element. I like stories about human relationships that touch the heart. Some writers are very good at the craft of writing, and are maybe good at keeping the plot moving along, but don't create characters that I believe in or want to spend time with. Ideally, the characters struggle with something, and come out changed at the end.

TM: How has the Japanese setting influenced you? For example, in 'Losing Kei' the context of the international marriage in Japan is very specific. What can you say about the Japanese context and what aspects of it have been interesting for you to write about?

SK: People always say, "Write about what you know." After 26 years in Japan, the place I know best is Tokushima. Not many Anglophone writers have written about Tokushima. And not a lot have written about international marriage, or bicultural families in rural Japan, especially from a woman's point of view. I feel that I have something fairly unique to write about.

TM: In your creative writing workshops at Tokushima University, what factors have you considered when designing the course?

SK: The level of the students' English ability is probably the main factor I've had to take into consideration. I also implement familiar stories and forms, such as Japanese folktales in

translation, manga, and lists, such as those written in Sei Shonagon's *Pillow Book*. Thus, I consider the students' literary background.

My colleague advertised the class through posters, which were put up around the university, and word of mouth. At our first meeting, we tried to come up with a time that was convenient for most of the members. Most of them had either studied abroad, or were non-native speakers from abroad who spoke English as a second language, so we were able to conduct the entire course in English. Although some students had written poetry or stories on their own for fun before, none of the participants had ever studied Creative Writing, i.e. the craft of writing.

Although creative writing, by its very definition, allows experimentation and innovation, we began by examining basic story structures, such as the three act format of Freytag's Pyramid (inciting incident, development, denouement) and fundamentals of craft. As an exercise in storytelling, students narrated a wordless picture book in rounds (we used *Clementina's Cactus* by Ezra Jack Keats and *Flotsam* by David Wiesner). Students explained what was happening in the illustration page by page, in turns, according to their abilities. We also charted traditional tales such as "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" and "Momotaro" according to the pyramid structure and asked students to rewrite the story or a scene from a different point of view, or in a different setting.

In early sessions, we explored the notion of showing versus telling, by comparing newspaper articles, which are largely reported, i.e. "told," with passages from literature including vivid imagery and strong verbs. We also discussed how to create well-rounded characters, imagining flaws, fears, likes and dislikes of one-dimensional characters such as Momotaro; setting, as established by various sensory images; point of view; and effective beginnings. Additionally, we talked about various forms such as lists (using Sei Shonagan's *The Pillow Book* and Native American chant poems as models), the six-word story (as made famous by Ernest Hemingway's six-word-story "For sale: baby shoes never worn") and had students write lists and six-word stories of their own. Because these sessions were not for credit, and some students were occasionally absent due to job-hunting or academic obligations, our goal was to

concentrate on one aspect of craft per week, and to give students time to write in class. Over a 90-minute period, they were then able to complete a single task, and hopefully feel a sense of accomplishment.

The ultimate goal of our course was to have students write and revise a full-length short story over a period of ten weeks. When students were ready to share a draft of their stories, the work was typed, printed and distributed to all students. Using a list of non-judgmental questions, such as “Where is the story set?” “What kind of a person is the main character?” we discussed each story. The student writer was then able to determine whether or not his/her story had the desired effect and what elements needed work.

TM: What kind of feedback have students given you about the creative writing workshops?

SK: Mostly, I've found they really enjoy creative writing. Many have never tried to write a story or poem in English, and they seem pleased when they're able to finish a piece. At least one student wrote that she was more interested in reading in English after she'd taken my colleague's creative writing course, which was based upon my workshop.

TM: How do you think literature can be useful for language learning?

SK: Literature is part of culture, so in order to know another culture, it's good to study its literature. Students often say that they want to learn more about American or British culture. They can't really learn much from memorizing lists of vocabulary words. I think that stories, poems, and essays are inherently interesting. Students can also learn about prosody (the sounds or words), metaphorical language, and nuances in language from literature.

TM: What advice can you give readers of this journal who are interested in literature in language teaching and writing fiction?

SK: Don't be afraid to give it a try. Many of us may think that our students are not ready for literature, or for writing fiction, but both can be taught to even low level students. Start out small, with six word stories, or flash fiction - or even first lines. Build from there.

TM: Finally, can you tell us a bit about your next project and future plans?

SK: A colleague and I are working on a textbook for ESL students of Creative Writing. I hope to continue to develop and explore the possibilities of teaching Creative Writing in English to non-native speakers. On a more personal level, my next novel, *Screaming Divas*, about an all-girl band in 1980s South Carolina will be published in May by best-selling author Jacquelyn Mitchard's Merit Press. I'm currently working on a sequel to *Gadget Girl*, for which I received a Multicultural Work-in-Progress Grant from SCBWI, and a mother/daughter travel memoir for which I received a grant from the Sustainable Arts Foundation.

TM: Thanks once again Suzanne for the interview and we look forward to reading more from you in the future.