

MONKEY New Writing from Japan – Dynamic Venue for Cultural Dialogue

By Jillian Yorke



Author Jillian Yorke

Origins & Launch

MONKEY New Writing from Japan, an annual anthology of Japanese literature in translation, is the English-language offspring of the innovative Japanese literary journal MONKEY, which is edited by acclaimed translator Motoyuki Shibata. Shibata has translated Paul Auster, Laird Hunt, Steven Millhauser, and Richard Powers, among others. MONKEY New Writing from Japan was launched in 2020. It is edited by Shibata, Ted Goossen, and Meg Taylor. Goossen is best known for translating Haruki Murakami, Hiromi Kawakami, and Naoya Shiga.

MONKEY New Writing from Japan has been published annually since September 2020 by the nonprofit of the same name, based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and founded by Meg Taylor, the managing editor. I eagerly look forward to each new MONKEY, with its refreshingly wide-ranging literary offerings with a contemporary focus; it is also popular with visitors to our Japan Library: Pukapuka in Karangahake, New Zealand. MONKEY is a joy to read, with its attractive design and full-color illustrations. I asked Taylor for her perspective on MONKEY and am deeply grateful for her assistance.

Taylor started her career as a book editor in Tokyo, working for Weatherhill, best known for its illustrated books on Japanese arts and culture. In Canada, she worked as a senior editor at Doubleday Canada and other trade publishers, and served as an instructor and academic coordinator for the postgraduate Publishing Certificate program at Ryerson University (now Toronto Metropolitan University). From 2012 to 2015, as editorial director for the Art

Canada Institute (Massey College, University of Toronto), she was instrumental in developing the Online Art Book Project (see: <https://www.aci-iac.ca/art-books/>) and producing their first 12 bilingual (English and French) publications. As well as her work with the MONKEY annual anthology, Taylor also edits novels and story collections for the Monkey fiction imprint.

Yorke: How did you get involved with MONKEY?

Taylor: When I was hired at Weatherhill in 1979, I was a graduate student at Harvard working on a master's degree, studying modern Japanese literature, and specifically interested in two women writers: Okamoto Kanoko and Uno Chiyo. At Weatherhill I quickly fell in love with book publishing and never returned to academia. Instead, I went into trade publishing in Toronto. I met Ted Goossen in Toronto, and he introduced me to Motoyuki Shibata. I gradually became more and more involved in editing texts for *Monkey Business*, the publication that ran from 2011 to 2017 and laid the foundation for MONKEY. Vowing to “get Japan back in my life”, I contacted old friends and colleagues in Japan and more Japan-related work started to arrive. I moved back to Pittsburgh in 2015 and found Asia-related work in the United States as well. Now, most of my energy is focused on MONKEY as it continues to expand and flourish despite the current economic and political upheavals.

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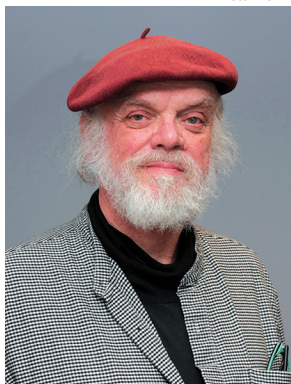
The contents of MONKEY are selected by Shibata, Goossen and Taylor. Some pieces are suggested by the translators themselves. So far six volumes have been released, each with a particular theme. Styles are eclectic, with a “mixture of playfulness and seriousness” (Shibata), but literary quality is always maintained. “The Monkey Speaks” at the front of each volume gives readers a taste of the overall contents, while the center section “A Monkey’s Dozen” leads into the theme-based offerings, which usually number 11. As explained in

Photo: Eisuke Asaoka



Motoyuki Shibata, Founding Editor

Photo: YCAR



Ted Goossen, Founding Editor

Photo: Katie Brook



Meg Taylor, Managing Editor

Volume 1, “Unlike a baker’s dozen (one extra!), a monkey’s dozen is one short, since monkeys are always up to something and on the lookout for delicious treats.”

Yorke: Please explain how you decide the theme of each volume.

Taylor: We started the organization in 2019 but launched the first volume in September 2020 (on Food). In the first year of the pandemic, we were all spending more time in the kitchen. The theme for Volume 2 was Travel; 2021 was the second year of the pandemic, a time when we all longed to travel again. Volume 3 (2022) was Crossings, reflecting our cautious but hopeful crossing into a post-pandemic world. For 2023 (Volume 4), we felt downright celebratory, hence the theme of Music. For 2024 (Volume 5), inspired in part by the paintings by Machiko Miroco that had first appeared on the cover of the Japanese MONKEY, we opted for Creatures. And the theme of Horror for 2025 (Volume 6) reflects the chaotic times we are living in.

Yorke: How do you define “new writing from Japan”? Since you also include some older works, does this mean new translations of previous writings?

Taylor: Our primary focus is contemporary writing in Japan – what’s being written and read in Japan now. In addition to work by Haruki Murakami, we publish a core group of authors who are less well known in the West. Some of them – Mieko Kawakami, for example – have broken out in recent years. I’m thinking of her bestselling *Breasts and Eggs*, followed by three more novels with Europa.

MONKEY typically features work by a dozen or more Japanese authors, including Kaori Fujino, Hiromi Kawakami, Hideo Furukawa, Tomoka Shibasaki, Kikuko Tsumura, Kyohei Sakaguchi, Makoto Takayanagi, and more. By publishing their stories and excerpts from longer works, we are building an audience for the writers we love. You could think of MONKEY as the “farm team” for the big leagues – the established literary publishers like Europa, FSG, Granta, New Directions, Soft Skull, and Knopf.

We work with a core group of translators, many of them associated with specific authors. Occasionally a translator expresses interest in working on a new translation of a modern (as opposed to contemporary) work. For example, we might feature a Shiga story translated by Ted Goossen, or a Kawabata story translated by Michael Emmerich, or a Soseki story translated by Michael Bourdaghs. Every year we publish modern poetry selected by Andrew Campana that responds to the annual theme. We also publish a Noh play every year, selected from contemporary writer and performer Seiko Ito’s interpretations of classic Noh plays and translated by Jay Rubin, who provides an introduction.

In response to your question about including earlier work as well as contemporary, I would say that the focus of MONKEY is very

much contemporary writing, but it’s always good to remind people where contemporary Japanese literature came from! After all, the classics – *Genji*, *The Tales of Ise*, *Heike*, and more – continue to influence Japanese authors writing today.

Yorke: Your contents are decided by the preferences of you three



Monkey magazine covers: 2020 Food, 2021 Travel, 2022 Crossings, 2023 Music, 2024 Creatures, 2025 Horror

editors. Do you ever disagree? If so, how do you resolve the issue?

Taylor: Motoyuki Shibata is the MONKEY visionary, the primary editor. Almost all of the authors we publish are drawn from the Japanese literary journal *MONKEY*, which he runs – editing, writing, and translating. It is published three times a year: Spring, Summer/Fall, and Fall/Winter. Think of the Japanese *MONKEY* as the “mothership” – we publish many of the same Japanese authors (in translation) and feature many of the same authors writing in English (Paul Auster and the Irish author Eoin McNamee, for example).

Ted Goossen founded *Monkey Business* with Moto in 2011, and the three of us founded its successor, *MONKEY New Writing from Japan*, in 2020. We rarely if ever disagree ... in fact, I would say that we continue talking until we’re in agreement. *MONKEY* was born in the dark first year of the pandemic. We had our launch online, and grew accustomed to relying on email and the occasional online meeting. Since I am in Pittsburgh, Ted is in Toronto, and Moto is in Tokyo, we rarely meet in person, but that doesn’t prevent us from staying in close touch over all the decisions involved in putting together the annual anthology.

Yorke: Can you give me an idea of your current readership, online and in print – for example, number of subscribers or regular readers, and their characteristics?

Taylor: *Monkey Business*, which was published from 2011 to 2017, was a magazine. But magazines have a much shorter “shelf life” in bookstores. Also, we publish only one volume annually. So when we relaunched in 2020 as *MONKEY New Writing from Japan*, we shifted to book publishing. Booksellers can now order *MONKEY* through Ingram, the largest book distributor in the US; through Consortium *MONKEY* is distributed outside the US as well. In Japan, *MONKEY* is available through Kinokuniya.

We have approximately 3,000 newsletter subscribers. We also sell

MONKEY through our website, and announce discounts through the newsletter. *MONKEY* readers who discovered us only recently have taken advantage of backlist sales to collect a complete set of *MONKEY*. Truly devoted fans collect *Monkey Business* as well! *MONKEY* readers include fans of Japanese literature, readers of world literature, students and scholars of Japanese literature and those in the expanding field of Translation Studies, readers with curious and adventurous minds! They range in age from high school students to people in their 80s – reflecting in part the range in ages of the authors and translators we work with. *MONKEY* benefits from working with four generations of translators, and the translators benefit from the community they find with us.

Collaboration

Yorke: Your collaboration with Stone Bridge Press (which was established in 1989 and is known for its many outstanding books about Japan) seems highly successful in combining your two networks, connections, and skill sets to deliver high-quality literary translations to worldwide audiences. How did this come about?

Taylor: Peter Goodman, the Stone Bridge Press founder and publisher, approached us to develop a fiction imprint. We have four books out now under the Monkey imprint: *The Thorn Puller*, a novel by Hiromi Ito, translated by Jeffrey Angles; *Dragon Palace*, a story collection by Hiromi Kawakami, translated by Ted Goossen; *Takaoka’s Travels*, a novel by Tatsuhiro Shibusawa, translated by David Boyd; and *A Hundred Years and a Day*, stories by Tomoka Shibasaki, translated by Polly Barton. We have two more novels in the pipeline. All of the Monkey imprint books first made an appearance in *MONKEY* as excerpts or single stories, the idea being that readers might get excited about these authors and be more likely to recognize and reach for the book when it comes out. Our books have won awards and been reviewed in major publications such as the *New Yorker*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *Foreword*.

Yorke: I am most impressed by your beautiful website and the regular events you hold. Are there other ways in which you promote and market *MONKEY*?

Taylor: Our marketing budget is limited, though we do our best to work creatively with what we have. At first, we focused on creating a website that is open, inviting, and easy to navigate. Tiff Ferentini, our marketing and publicity manager, sends out a monthly newsletter, and those are archived on the website. In addition to

Photo: Lisa Kato



Roland Kelts, Contributing Editor

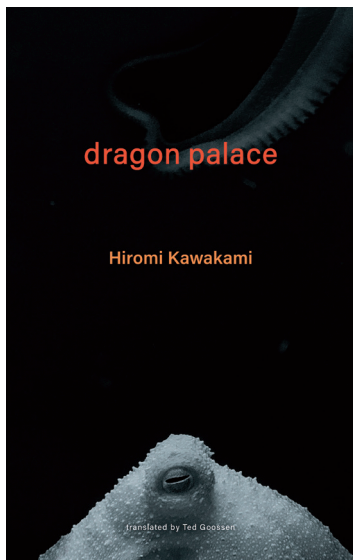
Photo: Rinko Kawauchi



Photos of Hiromi Kawakami and Kelly Link for the April 2024 event at SEIZAN Gallery in New York

Photo: Sharona Jacobs





*Dragon Palace by Hiromi Kawakami, translated by Ted Goossen
(Cover design by Nick Vitacco/Counterpunch Inc.)*

information about MONKEY and our books, Tiff includes news from anyone associated with MONKEY (authors, translators, and illustrators).

In Tokyo, the new MONKEY New Writing from Japan is launched alongside the Fall/Winter issue of the Japanese MONKEY. Switch, publisher of the Japanese MONKEY, has an event space where all 37 issues of the Japanese MONKEY have been launched, starting in 2013. In the US, we do an annual online launch for MONKEY, hosted in recent years by Japan Society Boston and MONKEY contributing editor Roland Kelts. We have been touring with authors from Japan every other year, and we post recordings from the events on the website. The in-person events are especially exciting when we pair an author writing in English with a Japanese writer. Before the event, they read each other's work, and then they discuss their work in front of an audience, with MONKEY founder Motoyuki Shibata acting as moderator. Kelly Link and Hiromi Kawakami were a particularly memorable pairing! That event was held at the SEIZAN Gallery in Manhattan, where we are hosting a similar event on May 16 with Hideo Furukawa and Tomoka Shibasaki paired with American author Matthew Sharpe. Sayaka Toyama, the director of the gallery, is a big supporter of all our endeavors.

Over the years, and dating back to Monkey Business, we have also been lucky enough to receive crucial support from the Brooklyn-based literary journal *A Public Space*, the Asia Society, the Japan Foundation, Kinokuniya, PEN, and others. This year, Roland Kelts and the Japan Society New York's Peter Tatara have organized two special events for us in mid-May. Many of the authors we publish are also E-to-J translators and are part of a much larger community associated with the Japanese literary journal *MONKEY*.

I wanted to mention that MONKEY ebooks are fully accessible,

meaning that people who use screen readers (software that makes digital files accessible to visually impaired readers) not only hear the text but also get descriptions of the images. This is, of course, extra work for us, but it's something we want to support, and it's becoming standard in the industry.

Yorke: Please explain your editorial process.

Taylor: After Shibata's check against the original text, the translator delivers a revised text to me. Then I edit for content and style – content in this case meaning things like “Let's add a title here” or “Do we need a short ‘Note from the translator’ at the end of this text?” Ted Goossen is often involved at this stage as well. He is absolutely brilliant at editing dialogue, for example. The copy editor, Ruth Gaskill, follows. I am the editor who corresponds with each translator to finalize the texts before they are sent to Gilbert Li, the designer in Toronto.

Respect for Translators

One of the most striking and refreshing features of MONKEY is the high recognition it gives translators, something that has often been neglected in the publishing world in the past. In a talk given on May 26, 2021, Shibata said, “We pride ourselves that we work with the best of Japanese authors and writers from North America and Great Britain, and we are even more proud of our translators. We can say with great confidence that we work with the very best of J-to-E translators of Japanese literature.” MONKEY translators are prominently acknowledged; they are named on the Contents page as well as on the title page for each story. In Volume 6, the response of 13 translators to the question, “Has a story or image ever haunted you?” is fascinating, giving readers rare insights into the translation process. The bilingual poetry further deepens our understanding.

Yorke: I greatly admire the way you give full credit to translators, something that is perhaps quite unusual in the publishing world. I am sure your translators greatly appreciate it.

Taylor: MONKEY New Writing from Japan celebrates translation. We work closely with translators, and they seem to enjoy the process. Moto notes that “Good translators always welcome suggestions and corrections. In fact, the better they are, the hungrier they seem to be for input from us.”

MONKEY has a section at the back where we pose a question to translators, such as “What role, if any, does music play in your translation process?” This section has been surprisingly popular with readers right across the board. We have gathered these sections into a PDF for use in the classroom (for Japanese literature and Translation Studies). With the Monkey imprint books, we are part of a growing trend in publishing to recognize the translator on the cover

of the book and the title page, and also to offer them a share of the royalties.

Yorke: In a previous interview (see the May/June 2021 issue of *Japan SPOTLIGHT*), Roland Kelts expressed the view that the quality of Japanese-to-English translation has improved greatly in recent years. What do you think the reasons might be? (Note: see also the Special Article written by Kelts in the Nov.–Dec. 2020 issue of *Japan SPOTLIGHT* on the move online of many anime businesses.)

Taylor: Yes, the quality has improved – not that there weren't wonderful translators like John Nathan and Howard Hibbett working back in the 1970s, but there are many more J-to-E translators now, and the expectations are higher. Also, Japanese novels are hot right now, so publishers compete for the best translators. It's rare, but some translators are able to make a living, though it's still true that the majority hold academic positions.

Yorke: In a talk on your website, Shibata says that “the first duty of a translator is to give readers the same sense of pleasure that the translator had when they first read the original work.” Do you agree?

Taylor: Yes. As Kelly Link wrote: “*MONKEY* introduces me to writers who offer wild delights, who subvert and expand my sense of what narrative is capable of achieving. When a new volume shows up on my doorstep, I greet it like an old friend, too long absent, who has returned with pockets full of strange and delicious gifts.” (Kelly Link, author of *The Book of Love*.)

Yorke: You sometimes feature manga-type works, which as you know constitute a huge proportion of the Japanese publishing industry. Do you intend to include more in future volumes?

Taylor: We always feature the work of Satoshi Kitamura, who is best known as a children's book author and illustrator – though his work for us is aimed at an adult readership. It is extremely difficult to break into more conventional manga publishing, and I'm not sure it would be a good fit for us. We do, however, seek out exciting visuals for *MONKEY*, and work with some marvelous illustrators, such as Sam Messer, Jillian Tamaki, Jon Klassen, and Lauren Tamaki.

International Activities

Yorke: I understand that *MONKEY* has been involved in some activities in Asia beyond Japan. For example, Kelts, Shibata, and the poet Hiromi Ito did online events for *MONKEY* in 2020 and 2021 during the Makassar International Writers Festival in Indonesia. In 2015 and 2016, for *Monkey Business*, Kelts, Aoko Matsuda, and author/illustrator Satoshi Kitamura participated in a series of events in Manila and attended the Singapore Writers' Festival. They also

attended the Makassar Festival in 2015. There seems to be a rich interest in and hunger for Japanese literature in many Asian countries. Do you think a similar magazine, with the same core concept, could be produced in other parts of Asia, or working with languages other than Japanese and English?

Taylor: Yes, absolutely. I would like to see this happen! And we would like to promote *MONKEY* more widely in Asia.

Yorke: How do you see the potential role of AI in literary translation? Do you think that AI will ever be able to replace humans to create high-quality literary translations? Does *MONKEY* have any policy on AI in translation?

Taylor: We have no experience with AI translation (except in marketing, where it's quite useful). We have not felt the need to discuss AI with the translators we work with. It's simply not an issue with the type of literary translation they do.

Future Plans

Yorke: Any comments on the future of *MONKEY*?

Taylor: *MONKEY* will, we hope, continue to expand its reach – through the annual anthology and also through books published under the Monkey imprint. We are dedicated now more than ever to promoting exciting new writing from Japan, and to creating bridges between the literary community in Japan and authors, translators, and readers worldwide.

We have been very lucky to receive generous support from Koji Yanai. In fact, all of this would have been impossible without his enthusiasm. (He even put Moto in Wim Wenders's *Perfect Days*! Look for him behind the counter in the photo shop.)

Please see the *MONKEY* website, monkeymagazine.org, for more information. Print copies of most of the previous volumes can be purchased at a reasonable price, and both PDFs and ebooks are available, as well as the regular e-newsletter.

For the Japanese *MONKEY*, see: <https://www.switch-pub.co.jp/category/monkey/>

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Jillian Yorke is a translator, writer and editor who lived and worked in Japan for many years and is now based in New Zealand, where she is a freelance writer, translator, and interpreter, and the director of the Japan Library: Pukapuka.