



# Interview: Lucy North on Translating Japanese Women Writers



By [Olivia Snaije](#)  
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Lucy North works as a translator and as an editor, in Hastings, England. She is the translator of [Toddler Hunting and Other Stories](#) by Taeko Kono, and [Record of a Night Too Brief](#), three stories by Hiromi Kawakami. She lived for 14 years in Tokyo, and 8 years in Boston. She kindly answered questions for Bookwitty about her passion for Japanese literature, the joys and challenges of translation, and the Japanese literary scene today. The following interview is more than a 2-minute read, but *oh* so worth it!



**What drew you to Japan and Japanese literature in the first place?**

I decided to study Japanese at university. It was different and challenging enough to interest me a lot. Then I found myself completely obsessed by Japanese literature. I think there's something about Japan that is just simply extraordinary—its rich cultural heritage, and deeply ingrained patterns and traditions, coupled with radical transformations and deep traumas that have several times riven the country in the past 150 years. Japan (it has been said) is premodern, modern and postmodern all at the same time. Especially in Tokyo, it can be fascinating but sometimes almost hallucinatory.

**As a translator from a language and culture so far from the West, was there an *aha* moment in your career when you felt that you really understood the language and culture?**

It's a never-ending process. Japanese culture and society is changing and being added to all the time. But it does feel great sometimes to be able to read certain situations and to know of expectations that pertain and that aren't necessarily spelt out. But I'm still making blunders.

I think when I was first translating Taeko Kono, and began to get the hang of her writing, I realized I could never let go of Japanese literature. It's nice to think that I am able to discern a writer that I feel really has something special as opposed to one that doesn't quite do it for me. But this too, is an endless project.

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**This seems to be a banner year for Japanese women authors being translated into English--Hiromi Kawakami, Minae Mizumura, Misumi Kubo, Tomoka Shibasaki to name a few. How do you explain this phenomenon when a few years ago the only name we seemed to hear was Murakami's?**

I think you're going to see more and more Japanese women writers being translated. Believe me, there are lots of them, and they are good. I think the question is rather how to explain the Murakami phenomenon! I think publishers have suddenly become

active and very willing to publish Japanese women because they've realized that there are quite a few extremely good women writers out there. I'm really happy to see [Strangers Press](#), for example, give pride of place to women in their Keshiki series. Of course, certain institutions and people and publishers have played a part. There has been a lot of dedicated encouragement from individuals associated with the British Centre for Literary Translation. I think it's helped tremendously that Allison Markin Powell, who is a superb translator of Japanese literature, and active and vocal in her support of translators, has been co-chair of PEN America's Translation Committee. In fact, I wonder whether her translation of [Strange Weather in Tokyo](#) didn't suddenly make people sit up and realize that there was a lot more to modern Japanese literature than coolness: there was lightness and freshness and melancholy and romance and wit and poetry as well.

**Did you work directly with Taeko Kono on the translation of *Toddler Hunting and other Stories*? What were the joys and challenges of that translation?**

**Are any more translations of her work planned?**

Well, I worked on the stories for that collection from 1991 to 1995. I wasn't near Kono, and in those days we still only had telephones, faxes, and postal mail. I was a graduate student, living mostly in Boston, and Kono was in Tokyo, then she moved to New York for a while. There were a couple of occasions towards the end when we were in Tokyo together, and I was able to take along a long list of questions to her. She was lovely and gracious.

In those days I had a mentor who lived on the West Coast who helped me get to grips with Kono—so we'd send the manuscripts back and forth across the US by mail—the type of mail that involves big brown envelopes. In the early 1990s, we didn't have email, so by the end I was coordinating with Kono in New York, her agent in Tokyo, and [New Directions](#) in New York, three different entities, via a fax machine in a shop in Cambridge, Mass. I have to say that when I was translating those stories, I was absolutely on fire for them—that was definitely one of the joys.

The stories in that collection come from a number of different collections in Japanese, and were all originally individually published in literary magazines. So it

was fun to work out how to add to the core of seven or so stories. I did this with Barbara Epler (then editor-in-chief, now president of New Directions), who is a complete fan of Kono. And Kono was thrilled to be published with New Directions, who were the first to bring out Yukio Mishima.

I am working on three more of Kono's stories. She is a hard writer to translate. She deals with shocking subjects sometimes (not always), but often in a way that is secretive—she'll use special vocabulary, or refer to something in an indirect way, using vocabulary which is not sexual or luscious or sensationalizing at all—if anything, rather flat and resistant, as if the narrator is very repressed. It can be hard to make that compelling or interesting or even meaningful in an English sentence.

### **Did you work directly with Hiromi Kawakami on the translation of *Record of a Night Too Brief*? What were the joys and challenges of that translation?**

I sent a couple of lists of questions to Kawakami via her agent, which was helpful. The process was a bit clunky though, and involved several stations along the route, meaning devices—computers, fax machines, and a certain black marker pen that came looming out of nowhere.

I knew they were wonderful complex stories from the minute I read them. But when I showed them (the Japanese stories) early on to my Japanese friends, I was a bit taken aback because they shook their heads and told me they had no idea what they were about. (There is a phrase for this in Japanese that is particularly hopeless, *wake ga wakaranai*, meaning, 'I don't get it,' 'incomprehensible'). I think the main challenge was to grasp what I had to make clear and what I had to leave unclear, without it seeming like a story that was badly translated—seen through a murky window, as one of my translator colleagues describes poor translations. They were all quite hard stories to translate—though each for different reasons. The third story of the collection (actually the first story of the Japanese collection, and the story that won the Akutagawa Prize) only came together in the last days before final submission—there were a couple of sentences that I couldn't get right. I forced myself to really think about what might be going on, in the context of the other two stories, and then made some bold decisions. There is a phrase that comes early in the story, when the woman is describing the snake, how it feels as she steps on it, and she says

*'yawarakaku, fundemo fundemo kiri ga nai kanji datta.'* I really spent a long time wondering how I should handle that phrase *kiri ga nai* ('endless'), which is actually very evocative and can be used about quite abstract things, like situations. I didn't want to describe the snake as being 'endless' because the narrator was describing the sensation of her foot stepping down on the snake—it was not a matter of the snake being endless in the sense of 'very long'. There was something else going on: her foot was going down, and her mind zoning out. In the end I chose a long drawn-out, almost scientific description. "...felt so soft. So porous and borderless and infinite", which slows the pace of the sentence down and enacts that zoning out. I was emboldened by the fact that the narrator tells us she was once a science teacher, and also by the way one substance seems to flow into another in the stories, something that is picked up in the commentary to the Japanese collection, where the critic points out that this feature of *kiri ga nai*, the lack of a boundary between one thing and another, so substances can change, from solid, to gas, to liquid, and back again, freely, is the defining feature of the collection. And I think it works. Sometimes when you get bold, it really does come together, and you realize that there is no room for doubt—in being bold, you are actually being appropriate.

*It's generally agreed that writing by women in Japan dominates the literary scene.*

**How has the literary scene evolved in Japan, and what are some of the directions that contemporary literature is taking? What are some of the changes in literature written by Japanese women?**

Women are writing in all sorts of genres—in popular/historical fiction, mystery and crime fiction, literary fiction, manga, nature writing, essays—so I hesitate, really, to generalize, and it's impossible to do so. I think I can say more women are writing now, and getting noticed, more than ever before. It's generally agreed that writing by women in Japan dominates the literary scene. They're trying their hand confidently at any manner of different genres, and being taken absolutely seriously.

Rather than delineating changes in literature written by Japanese women, I think one can point to changes that have taken place in Japanese society, against and within

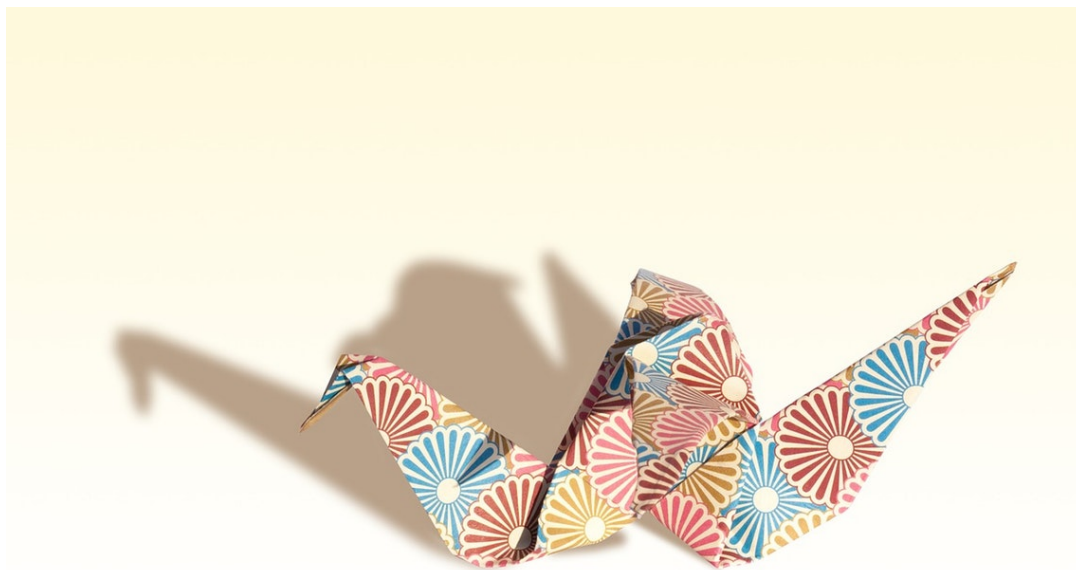
which women are writing. There was the burst of the economic bubble in the 1990s, decades of economic stagnation, several huge and frightening natural disasters, a sense of loss of identity about what Japan is or was supposed to have been, and where it's going, a sense of loss, ennui, and disenfranchisement amongst youth. So there is a sense of ongoing change, and bewilderment. Maybe it helps to look at women writers and see how they write in that context.

When Taeko Kono started to get published it was the 1960s and she was quite clearly writing against something, in a context that was still quite 'postwar' (even in the 1960s), and in which intellectual discourse was coloured by French philosophy (a preoccupation with the Marquis de Sade, for instance); she was using a particular discourse of sexuality to write against social norms. You get the sense of a wish to disrupt and shock in her writing, but also the desire to engage and to tantalize.

Hitomi Kanehara is a writer who I would say is a direct descendent of Kono. But it seems to me that Kanehara's narratives are doing something quite different. In Kono's narratives, you can usually see the desire to disrupt notions of 'normality' and 'deviancy' and a preoccupation with questions of gender—there's an underlying argument. Her women seem beset by dissatisfaction, some sort of nameless desire, a huge hunger for 'something,' 'something else.' In Kanehara's narratives, you see women engaging in a kind of deviant behaviour, which often involves self-harm, but it seems to me that the women are doing it out of a kind of boredom. There's no hunger there, just boredom—and even boredom sounds too positive a word.

There are some superb writers who will soon be published in English. [Hiroko Oyamada](#), who writes a sort of light horror fiction about concerns to do with fertility and the role of young women in the post-modern family, is one to look out for. Sayaka Murata is another: her *Convenience Store Woman*, translated by Ginny Tapley Takemori, will be out in spring 2018 with Grove Atlantic. It promises an absolutely hilarious if sometimes caustic take on aspects of society, as seen through the life of a *kombini* worker.





**If you were to recommend to a reader, new to Japanese literature, five-ten books to begin with, what would they be?**

*The Name of the Flower*, stories by Kuniko Mukoda, translated by Tomone Matsumoto

*Masks*, by Fumiko Enchi, translated by Juliet Winters Carpenter

*Strange Weather in Tokyo*, by Hiromi Kawakami, translated by Allison Markin Powell

*Manazuru*, by Hiromi Kawakami, translated by Michael Emmerich

*The Bridegroom Was a Dog*, stories by Yoko Tawada, translated by Margaret Mitsutani

*Kitchen*, stories by Banana Yoshimoto, translated by Megan Backus

*The Shooting Gallery*, stories by Yuko Tsushima, translated by Geraldine Harcourt

*Child of Fortune*, by Yuko Tsushima, translated by Geraldine Harcourt

*Territory of Light*, a novel in short stories by Yuko Tsushima, translated by Geraldine Harcourt (forthcoming)

*Snakes and Earrings*, by Hitomi Kanehara, translated by David James Karashima.

*Building Waves*, by Taeko Tomioka, translated by Louise Heal Kawai

Recently I've had a lot of people coming up to me and saying, 'Why is modern Japanese literature so weird? Is it just the translators? They've been choosing this weird stuff?' And I'm starting to wonder if readers have been primed now to feel Japanese literature is weird, or at least 'quirky.' So there are a couple of titles in there designed to demonstrate that there's quite a bit of non-weird stuff as well. If I included men writers, I'd include a number of books by [Junichiro Tanizaki](#), who is my absolute "fave."

**As a translator, how much of a role do you play in the promotion of the books you translate and has this become an integral part of the translator's job in order to help the book become known?**

So far, my role has been confined to Twitter, a public reading or two, and importuning people to review my books.

*Toddler Hunting* was published in 1996, quite some time ago, when social media didn't exist. The reviews in newspapers came out, basically positive, but also rather amazed and shocked, some repulsed; and then the book seemed to disappear, though every now and then someone still mentions it, like Rivka Galchen, which tells me that people are still reading it—and liking it. And of course Kono is read by academics in Japanese literature in the States who can fit her writing in a timeline and know how amazing she is, and don't immediately put the book down in a kneejerk way because some of the stories feature masochistic women or make the hairs on your neck rise with some of their implications—about motherhood and aggression, for example. This is just as well because Kono's influence on writers who came after her is immeasurable.



*Record of a Night Too Brief* featured a little bit in the Japan Now festival in London, which this year had several panels on literature. It was wonderful to hear the critic Susie Feay, whose writing I love, describe it as 'brilliant, sophisticated, and playful,' which confirmed to me that those aspects came through in the





translation. I think translators need to feature more in discussions—they live with the works they translate, for months, if not years, so they know them so well, they’ve wrestled with what is going on in the texts, and I know I was bursting with questions I wanted to ask Kawakami when she came over all the way from Japan—questions about aspects of Japan that she might have been dealing with in the stories, what she thought about the Akutagawa Prize committee’s comments when “A Snake Stepped On” won the prize, things like that, things that it might have been interesting for her to talk about and for an audience to hear about.

There are many bridges and platforms yet to build, I feel, in Japanese literature. Publishers in Japan are beginning to listen more to and trust translators as ambassadors of their writers’ work, even those of us who aren’t in the academic world, which is to be welcomed. Translators can play an important part both in the early stages of a publishing project and in the post-publication period. When the author is far away, like Kawakami is, it’s much harder, though I think people would like to hear more from translators at readings and events. But we need bridges and platforms in and between the UK (and elsewhere) and in Japan, so that our voices as translators can be heard.

## Tags

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