

Finnish Writers in Youkobo 2018 #3

Finnish Writers in Tokyo in cooperation with the Union of Finnish Writers, Helsinki and
Youkobo Art Space, Tokyo

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Foreword

Hiroko Murata

Acceptance of artists and researchers at Youkobo began in 1989 and established as creative and research activities by foreign writers. The acceptance of recommendation frames from international organizations is also increasing year by year. This program began with the Finnish Writers Association (UFW The Union of Finnish Writers, Suomen Kirjailijaliitto) in 2016, and Finnish writers are accepted for the third times this year.

Three writers have taken their turns in research for a each one month and are a good opportunity to mainly produce new works. Essays are an opportunity to receive their frank opinions and their opinions, such as experiences of their intercultural experiences during their stay and the work of themselves. Comments from writers which are slightly different from art creators, these are very exciting and interesting. I think that it affects to artists who is staying in Youkobo with writers in the the same time.

In the three years of the 1st agreement, we were able to successfully end acceptance of 10 Finnish writers. We will continue to accept writers from Finland next year from March 2019 under based on a new agreement between the Union of Finnish Writers and Youkobo.

FWU Writers in Residence in 2018

March 2-31, 2018 Anneli Kanto

April 1-30, 2018 Henrika Ringbom

May 3-29, 2018 Elena Mady



Anneli kanto

Anneli Kanto is a writer, playwright and screenwriter. She is a productive writer, whose works include children's books, historical novels, theatre plays and tv series. Her literary production focuses on Finnish national history, especially the Finnish civil war in 1918 and the 1600s. She has written about special people, such as the persecuted witches and hangmen or red women in arms. She has also written a popular series of children's picture books and books for pre teen readers. She has received various awards for her books and TV series.



Henrika Ringbom

Henrika Ringbom is a Finland-Swedish poet, living in Helsinki. Since her debut in 1988 she has published several collections of poetry, novels and essays. She also translates Finnish poetry into Swedish. The Japanese culture has enriched her since she was seven years old and her latest book, a poetical essay, tells, among other things, about her first journey to Japan in 2012. The journey turned out to be seminal and transformative.



Elena Mady

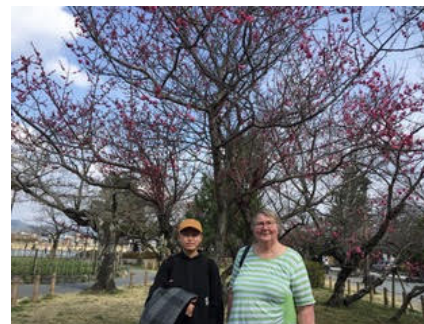
Author Elena Mady writes her books on a quaint little island in the Baltic Sea, and her love for the exquisite Finnish nature is omnipresent in her texts. She incorporates the unique heartbeat and beauty discovered during her extensive travels into her work as a writer, illustrator and successful singer songwriter with radio hits in Finland and Scandinavia. The dash of the surreal in her writing serves as a gateway to heightened emotional truth, to keeping it real and relatable.

Sakuras in Tokyo

Anneli Kanto

March was the month I spent at the wonderful Youkobo residence. I had the privilege to follow the trees as they came into bloom in the residency's yard, and when I left, the sakura was at its best. Tokyo's farewell was to see the long boulevard in Narita, flanked by sakura -trees. It was a sight never to be forgotten.

I had dreamt about Japan for a long time since my daughter became interested in Japan at the age of she was 13. She has since, studied Japanese language, spent an exchange year in Yokohama and is now studying for a now the fourth year in Japan. We have also had three Japanese exchange students stay in our house in Finland, one of who even came with her mother and grandparents to see me at Youkobo! So I have had connections with Japan even though I had never visited the country before.



It was wonderful luck that I got the Finnish Writers' Union's residency grant. A month is more than a tourist trip.

Naturally I had very much assistance from my daughter, who acted as a private guide and translator for me. Also my son, who is a video filmmaker and stationed in Thailand, came to visit me and his sister in Tokyo. We had a real family meeting in Tokyo, since my son's fiancée also worked here in March.

But the month was not about family.

The evenings were long without TV or Netflix and there were rainy days even days with snowfall when I did not feel comfortable to put my nose out. So I worked and wrote. I wrote a film script and about 20 children's short stories. They demand effort, and are so simple to write. I can be rather content with the results of my stay. The good internet-connections at Youkobo made it possible to deal with everyday issues, negotiate and promote some work projects that are on their way.

My main goal was to grasp something about Japanese culture and art and get new impressions. I also gathered material for a youth book that I plan to write: – it is about an exchange year in Japan.

While writing this in June it has been two months since I was in Japan. What were the most impressive experiences? What do I remember now?

Tokyo traffic. Everything functions perfectly. People don't rush or push around. They don't speak on their cell phones in public.

The district surrounding Youkobo. So peaceful and quiet.

The **aesthetic orientation** in the Japanese way of living. Everything is beautiful. Cups, bowls and plates are elegant. The bento -meals are so beautiful, colours, shapes, everything. Parks are an aesthetic experience.

The **Japanese mentality** that so much resembles that of the Finnish.

The effective **recycling system** in the city.

Mori Art museum and the wonderful **view** over Tokyo.

Kyoto. The temples, Gion district, amazing railway station, kimono.

Japanese **food.** Always tasty, beautiful, light, delicious.

Hanami picnic in park Yoyogi Park. Wonderful! Cheerful parties of people, nice food and everything so clean. Nobody threw wastepaper around. Every troupe had waste bags with them!

Ueno district with its wonderful museums.

A boat trip along the **River Sumida** that ended in **Asakusa**. Sakura time, blossoms falling in the evening, small boats with lanterns passing by. We were all there my daughter and son, my daughter's friend Mei and in Asakusa we met my son's fiancée Lotta. We went for a walk, saw the famous Asahi Beer Company building with its enormous golden statue, the Senso-ji shrine district and small groups of people enjoying picnics under the sakura trees. We had a long dinner with so many small portions of various delicacies. A day to remember!

Last but not least, the very warm and caring **staff** of Youkobo. They really did their best to make the visitors feel welcome and comfortable. I was also astonished to see how many friends Finland has in Tokyo. When I gave my talk in the residence, there were about 20 participants, and many of them spoke Finnish! Amazing!



Staircase to Nō

Henrika Ringbom

When I arrived in Japan on April 1st the cherry blossoms were already falling like snow from the trees. Brownish pink drifts lay in the streets. Some of the petals even found their way into my room on the second floor at Youkobo. A spiral staircase led up to the flat. I almost immediately felt at home in the sparsely furnished rooms, and especially enjoyed the balcony with a view over the garden.

It was my third stay in Japan and my second time in Tokyo. I started out by visiting places I had been to before. At the National museum in Ueno I saw an exhibition of Nō –masks, and it gave the cue to the whole stay. Some days later I was able to see a performance of a Nō play called Utoh, Birds in Hell. It made a huge impression on me: the masks and the dances, the clear structure, the sorrow and rage of a man condemned to hell because he had tricked and killed birds, and his family who in vain tried to relieve his pain.



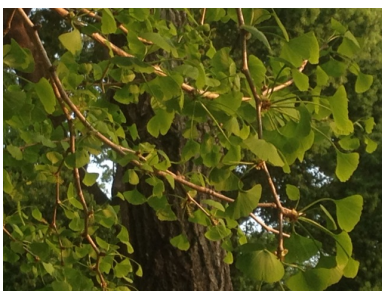
Some days later I bought a book with Nō-plays translated into English from Kinokuniya bookstore in Shinjuku. For the rest of my stay I read a play almost every day before going to sleep. I found the Nō-plays both strange and poetic and very inspiring, and during my stay I had several dreams clearly influenced by my reading.

For me, being in Japan proved to be both exciting and restful. I liked staying in this kind of very Japanese residential area where you do not see a lot of tourists, and found the transitions by train and bus to Youkobo from such crowded places as Shinjuku pleasant. I also found rest in the parks and gardens, in onsens (hot springs) and in eating the wonderful food!

Such simple things as buying groceries was an adventure, all the different kinds of fish and mushrooms and pickles we don't have in Finland! We do not have warm weather in April either – at first I could not believe how warm it was and constantly dressed too warmly. But I learned, and soon left the socks and scarves at home. Tokyo as a metropolis excited and intrigued me, such a huge and diverse city working so smoothly, being so... nice! Easy to stay and move around in, and friendly.

This stay deepened my knowledge about and feeling for Japan. I enjoyed being part of a small community, the other artists staying in Youkobo and the helpful staff. Before I came to Japan I had contacted the translator Maki Hatanaka and met with her several times. We revised the translations, she showed me around in Yokohama and we became friends.

Every time I go to Japan I am a little afraid of being disappointed, as my expectations are so high. But no, this time, too, the stay exceeded my expectations. Back in Helsinki again I feel nurtured, inspired and transformed. I revise the notes I made in Tokyo and find several threads I want to develop further. I also continue reading the Nō-plays, sensing how they work on my imagination. Under their influence, some unforeseen and strange poems will take form, I am sure.



The Art of Silence

Elena Mady



My journey to Japan was serendipitous. I applied for the residence grant on a whim, not really thinking that I would be selected this time but eventually, perhaps. Yes, I had studied Japanese, as well as Japanese history, East Asian art, and Japanese economics at Stanford University, and yes, I was planning to place some events in my next novel in an imaginary version of Japan. As a result, my application looked strong through my biased eyes, but I was certain that I was just laying some ground work. So, imagine my gratitude when I discovered that I was, dramatically speaking, *the chosen one*. Maybe how I felt was a sign, as the entire trip turned out to be an exercise of gratitude and an exploration of humility.

Despite the numerous books on Japan I had read, I knew that I had nearly everything to learn. For this reason, I made sure that I went to Japan with an open mind. Due to deadline-related, feverish writing of my next novel up until the night before my flight over to Japan, I had also made uncharacteristically few plans. Still, it took me by surprise to experience how little I knew, and that I, too, had formed numerous, albeit mostly subconscious, preconceived notions.

I was overjoyed to have the opportunity to debunk nearly all of them, good and bad, and to replace them with a titillating set of yet-to-be answered questions. What made me even happier was to learn that, although Finland and Japan are almost polar opposites in numerous ways, I felt a sense of oneness, of the same, of belonging in my heart. What unites humanity in my book (pun intended) is love, compassion, and kindness. Everything else is insignificant in the deeper scheme of things.

Let me illustrate. I have long felt that we are defined to a much greater extent by what we see and love to look at than by what others see when they look at us. In Japan, I felt right at home. I swam right in with fish that looked nothing like me -- because they looked at the water the same way I did. Women, in particular, were taking photos of leaves and flowers, precisely as I have the habit of doing, as they wandered through the park in silence, just the way I always do. The Japanese, I found, speak the language of silence and solitude beautifully. Definitely better than Americans or Europeans do -- though taciturn Finns are a close second. All of a sudden silence wasn't a punchline or something that needed to be explained but something beautiful and worth protecting. I was told that in Japan it has, traditionally, been considered polite to enjoy a meal in silence, as well, something many Finns can relate to -- and also another identical piece of the intricate puzzle that makes up a culture. To find such eloquent and elegant silence in a country so well known for bright neon colored plastic signs and millions upon millions of people crowded in an impossibly small piece of land was surprising, even for someone who had travelled to Japan eager to be surprised.

One Saturday I visited a little café nearby that is only open on Saturdays, and I hummed *What a Wonderful World* as it played on the radio, as one does sometimes. One thing led to another, and I ended up singing some songs I have written for an audience of four: the owners and their two customers. Once again, Finland and Japan got along splendidly. Aki Kaurismäki, the famous Finnish director would have been delighted to hear that his films are the couple's favorite. I was delighted to find a photo hanging on the wall that was an identical twin of a photo I took near our summer cottage in Finland. Come to think of it, it was all very Kaurismäki.



Being illiterate, however, was a shock and a challenge, particularly for an author. Being able to read Hiragana and Katagana but no Kanji meant that I had to rely on spoken language alone, and my limited vocabulary meant that the phrase I uttered most frequently was, “Do you speak English / Eego ga hanasumasu ka?” However, I soon started connecting with proud dog owners and parents by complimenting their canines and children in Japanese. You don’t have to know many words to make a meaningful connection. *Beautiful* and *pretty* get you far, and they take you home, as well. As do trees, flowers, birds, rain and sunshine, grocery stores, and cars. The elements of life. Admittedly, cars in Finland are less well maintained and sparkly clean, and my neighborhood store isn’t located right next to a gorgeous Shinto park and shrine. But it is located near lovely trees and the Baltic Sea. Win / win? Yes, particularly as one of the discussions about trees at the grocery store earned me a lunch invitation at the home of a lovely Japanese family.



I saw open hearts, ready smiles, and kindness everywhere. The Muratas and Makiko, Alice and Lynn, my fellow residents, were warm, helpful, and incredibly generous and kind. My neighborhood was quiet and safe, but Tokyo in general was a city where I felt safe to lose my way and get overwhelmed because when that happened, someone was always there to catch me: to offer me a seat in a crowded subway, to walk me over to the right – or, at times, the wrong – platform. Every single day I felt overwhelmed with gratitude for the experience, for the beauty of my fellow humans, and for seeing the most adorable children in the world.

Still, I am a Nordic woman, proud and fiercely protective of my right to speak and write my mind, and gender equality runs through my veins. I feared I might feel stifled in a society so different from the ones I am used to. After all, I identify myself as an individual first – or do I?



I have always had a sense of justice beyond justice for myself, I have fought for those less fortunate than I am ever since I was a little girl, and I have always cherished the Finnish way of taking care of everyone, and my most meaningful role in life is that of a mother to our son. In any case, instead of feeling stifled interacting in a society not built around the individual, I found myself thinking that there was something more advanced about the Japanese way to live in comparison to our western one. That by focusing on the individual, we in the west actually fail to do so because we fail to provide the individual with what she or he needs to thrive: attention, care, and love. No man is an island, even on an island. We only exist if we do so together.

Frustrations are a natural part of life. I did feel frustrated at how the system differed from the ones I am used to living in Finland, the US, and Germany. Also, no matter how great a system is, the human condition is to crave improvement, and comparison is one key element of progress. I did feel that the Japanese are very isolated and alone, and that they, too, would benefit from having access to more and different choices. For example, everything, it seemed, was wrapped in plastic, and not just once but multiple times. And despite the seemingly thorough waste disposal and recycling system, humans are fallible even in Japan. Recycling takes so much effort that many fail to recycle effectively. The world is literally drowning in waste, so this was one aspect I desperately hoped would improve in one of the largest economies in the world. If only Japan were less isolated...

But then I realized that *I* was here. The Muratas and the Finnish Writers’ Union were a part of breaking the barrier, of creating the exchange of ideas, choices, and cultures that I felt was lacking in Japan. I, too, was a droplet of water, flowing in the direction of a greater mutual understanding and appreciation. Japan had become a part of my story; it had changed me, taught me invaluable lessons, made me question my way by showing me another. Similarly, I had become a tinier than tiny, miniscule part of Japan’s story through the people whose paths I had crossed. I would write about my imaginary Japan and share it with my readers. And, personally, I would never forget this gift of time in amazing, kind, one-of-a-kind Japan. Where else can you wake up and find that an enormous banana tree leaf has sprouted overnight outside your window, perhaps just to tell you that life is resilient and so are you. Thank you, thank you.

