

Japan Related Books in Poland: A Scottish Writer Asks His Publisher

by Sean Michael Wilson

I am a Scottish comic book writer living in Japan and proud to say that one of my books has been published in Poland. I adapted the classic Japanese “Tale of Genji” into a manga version, working with a Japanese artist, Ai Takita. To our delight the book has sold well in its English original and come out in French, Italian, Czech and in 2023 in Polish - my first book published in your country. I was very pleased to see it when the publisher, Kirin, sent a copy to my house here in Kumamoto, Japan. So, I thought I would ask my Polish publisher some questions about Poland-Japan connections and what Japan related books they publish.



KIRIN Publishing House (Wydawnictwo Kirin) is a Polish publisher located in the city of Bydgoszcz and they specialize in books about Japanese culture, literature, and language. Established in 2010 by Adrianna Wosińska, it is one of the main resources in Poland for readers looking to learn about Japan. They promote Japanese culture by publishing rare and inspiring books, both academic publications and fiction, as well as tourist information. I spoke with Adrianna Wosińska of Kirin about their Japan related books, her own connection to Japan and about our manga published by them in Poland.

1. How many Japan related books have you published so far? And when was the first?

Adrianna: We are the oldest Polish publishing house focused on Japanese culture and literature, on the market since 2009, and by now we have published about 85 books and 69 issues of our quarterly magazine on Japan, called "Torii".

2. What kind of reactions and connections do Polish readers have to Japanese related books?

Adrianna: Due to the recent boom for Japanese comfort books most people in Poland think that Japanese literature is calming, soothing, and meditative. I always say to them: try reading Ryū Murakami or Hitomi Kanehara! But it's good that they have positive associations with Japanese books and perhaps such "healing novels" can be a good start for some more aspiring literature.

3. What is the state of Japanese manga specifically in Poland? How many fans are there? How much has it increased compared with 20 years ago?

Adrianna: I don't really feel qualified to answer that question, as we are not manga publishing house - "Tale of Genji" is actually our only manga and we decided on that for literature-related reasons. However, a huge rise in the interest in manga in Poland within those 20 years is clearly visible. When I was a teenager and first manga and anime were introduced in Poland, the first fans were scarce and mostly misunderstood by the society. We were considered a subculture by some and a religious sect by others. There were so little of us that during the very first manga conventions women had a free entrance, so that at least 4 or 5 of them would appear! Even, like, 15 years ago, when there were already several manga publishing houses in Poland, there were about 5-10 volumes published every month. Now the numbers rose to 70-80 per month and manga became part of mainstream. My teenage daughter knows more series than me, but she does not actually consider herself a manga fan. She just "happens" to know them, just like she knows popular music bands, memes, movies and so on.

4. How about Tale of Genji manga book, what made you want to do that in Polish?

Adrianna: Genji monogatari, the original novel by Murasaki Shikibu, is one of the most important works of literature in Japan. I don't think there is any true lover of Japanese culture who hasn't heard about it; however, it is not available in Polish (only several short fragments have been translated). We thought it would be helpful to provide the Polish readers with a concise version of it, so that they would be able to get to know at least the content and main characters, in an attractive form of manga.

5. When did your personal interest in Japan begin?

Adrianna: Most people in Poland started their interest in Japan in either of the two ways: from manga or from martial arts. In my case it was both, roughly at the same time. I used to train aikido when I was in high school and about the same time Polish TV started to air first anime - Sailor

Moon, to be exact. My interest in manga and anime gradually faded and on entering the university I had less time for trainings, but at the same time I became more and more interested in the reality behind the stylised etiquette of dōjō and colourful images of cartoons - and that passion remained until now.

6. Have you been to Japan? If so, please tell me where and what was the reason?

Adrianna: Yes, I travel to Japan on regular basis, both for personal and private reasons. For instance, in 2004 I took part in Japan Foundation's Programme for Publishers of Japanese Literature, and this autumn I will be attending a conference in Tokyo. On the other hand, I also often visit Japan just as a tourist. I have visited numerous places in Japan, starting from Hokkaido to Kyushu and Shikoku. I have never been to Okinawa, though, but that's exactly my plan for early 2027!

7. How do you feel about the present state of Polish-Japan relations? What would you like to see happen?

Adrianna: Poland and Japan have a long history of very good relations. Although our nations may seem quite opposite as to the temperament, in fact we share and appreciate the same values, such as courage or hospitality. Our countries develop mutual relations in numerous fields: politics, economy, industry cybersecurity - and of course, culture. Of course, this relation is not exactly equal: the rate of Polish people interested in Japan is significantly higher than the opposite way - and that's exactly what I would like to see in the future: more Japanese people discovering wonderful things about Poland!

8. What are the future plans for Japan related books for your company?

Adrianna: As a publishing house, we do our best to follow the readers' expectations. Recently there was a boom for Japanese comfort books, so we published some titles of this genre (most recently: "The Blanket Cats" by Kiyoshi Shigematsu) and there are more to come. At the same time, however, we search for unique titles - something that hasn't been published here yet, like Japanese high fantasy novel or a horror story for teenagers.

Thanks to Adrianna for this interesting information. Just to follow on from one of her points: that Japanese people do not show as much interest in Poland as Polish people show in Japan seems to me to be a key issue. We can extend that to say that to say that a similiar "imblance of interest" exists for almost all countries. And this points to a ongoing lack of international connections and involvement in Japan. And manga is an extreme example of this imbalance of interest. 100s of millions of copies of Japanese manga are sold in translation around the world, including in Poland. But the amount of European and American comic books that are translated and sold in Japan is tiny. The ratio is not even a 1000 to 1. It is interesting to observe that while the amount of young people from China and South Korea going abroad to study has increased over the last 20 years, in Japan it has actually gone down to about half what it was. So, this is a significant problem that the various groups trying to promote cross cultural communication, and understanding can play a small part in reducing.

As to our own manga book in Polish, it is our version of the Japanese classic, Tale of Genji which tells the story of Prince Genji. Handsome, romantic, and talented in the art of seduction, Prince Genji skillfully navigates the court and all its intrigues—always in search of love and often finding it. His story is the oldest and most famous tale of romance in the annals of Japanese literature and, as a representation of passion and romance, remains beyond compare.

Myself and Japanese artist, Ai Takita, made this version for Tuttle publishing in 2022 and faced quite a challenge to create it. The first being that the original runs to more than 2000 pages. So, how to make a much shorter manga version, yet keep it close and authentic to the original? You can judge for yourself, in either the English or the Polish version, how well we achieved that or not. Certainly, it has very lovely artwork by Ai, and we are both delighted to see our book come out in Poland. As it goes, my sister-in-law in the UK is Polish and I was happy to be able to tell her about our book published in her own language.

About the author:

Sean Michael Wilson is a Scottish comic book writer and graphic novelist based in Japan, known for his wide-ranging work in nonfiction graphic novels, manga, and socially engaged storytelling. He has written more than 40 books published across the UK, the US, and Japan, with translations into more than a dozen languages. Originally from Scotland and of Irish heritage, Wilson studied sociology, psychology, and social anthropology before pursuing a career in writing. Alongside his books, he has written articles for publications including The Japan Times and The Herald Scotland, produced television documentaries, and lectured internationally on comics, manga, Japan, and culture.

<http://seanmichaelwilson.weebly.com>