

Leopoldo Brizuela, Oliverio Cohelo, “Interview with Minae Mizumura,” *La Nacion*, Buenos Aires, March 1, 2008—on the publication of *A True Novel*’s Spanish translation.  
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1. Where and when were you born? How would you describe the circumstance of your family, the American milieu in which you grew up and were educated? Is your human "landscape" the one you choose in writing your novels?

I was born in Tokyo in the nineteen fifties.

My family background is urban and middle-class. Luckily, we were surrounded by wealthier relatives and family friends who provided perfect—and often amusing—models for my novel. The Japanese urban population had always embraced the West eagerly ever since the country opened its doors to the world in 1868, especially the upper echelon of the society. They embraced the West so eagerly, in fact, that, sometimes, they even forgot they were Japanese.

My parents’ love of everything Western was also very strong and, I think, slightly beyond their material means. We were definitely snobs. There was only Western music in our house. My family only went out to see Western movies. My sister and I took piano and ballet lessons. We were given a collection of European literature that was adapted for children. So we grew up not only reading the two Bronte sisters but also Hugo, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Goethe, Pushkin, Shakespeare, Theodor Storm, Stefan Zweig, Hans Christian Andersen, Alexandre Dumas, père and fils, among many

others—an amazing variety, if you think about it. I'm sorry to confess I didn't get to read Cervantes or Borges until I was a grown-up.

I must repeat to you, however, this kind of upbringing that my sister and I had, and which provided the background for my novel, was typical of a certain class of Japanese in the nineteen fifties and sixties. Perhaps the only exceptional thing about my family was that my father loved the English language so much that he read, wrote and spoke English fluently even before he ever set his foot in the United States.

Our family moved to New York when my father was asked to head a small branch of a Japanese company in the United States. I was twelve years old. We lived in the northern part of Long Island, that is, in a typical affluent American suburb with manicured lawns, which also provided the background for my novel. We suddenly moved to a Colonial style house three stories high—a typical house in America but thrice the size of our house in Tokyo, plus what seemed to me to be a huge garage with a huge American car. I was struck by the material wealth of the country, but at the same time, I also felt slightly disenchanted. Through my reading, I had developed this enchanting image of the West, where life itself would be magical like art, but the reality turned out to be totally prosaic as it always turns out to be.

2. How do you explain your penchant for French literature at the university? Is the great tradition of the nineteenth century realism a recognizable influence on your work?

Oh, I wish I could tell you about my *penchant* for French literature. That

would make me look very sophisticated. I'm afraid that was not the case. It wasn't my *penchant* for French literature that led me to study French.

Studying French literature was something very natural for a Japanese girl of my generation to do. Today, even in Japan, girls are expected to seriously consider their careers, but when I was growing up, girls were only expected to marry a respectable man, preferably after falling in love with him. What were required of us were womanly accomplishments, such as taking piano lessons, learning tea ceremonies and practicing flower arrangements. Studying French literature was considered just another variation of those womanly accomplishments. The only factor which made my studying French rather unusual was my living in the United States. Americans often were amazed to find a Japanese girl speaking French.

However, from my standpoint, my being in America made it even more natural that I study French literature. You see, since my family was not an immigrant family, there was no pressure for me to assimilate into the American society. In American high school, I not only felt like a stranger but was literally a stranger, but that did not make me want to learn English and become part of the American society. On the contrary, I turned my back to the English language and spent my entire teenage years reading a collection of Japanese novels my uncle gave my mother. (I stopped reading translations of European novels for a long while.) My English remained embarrassingly poor and all I wanted was to leave America and go back to Japan. My parents, however, enjoyed their life in America and decided to prolong their stay.

When the time came for me to go to college, I first chose to go to an art

school. I knew I was a mediocre painter but I wanted to avoid going to a regular college. Once enrolled, I was naturally bored with art school so an idea eventually emerged that perhaps I should study French literature. It would not only be the right thing to do for a Japanese girl like myself, but it would also save me from having to learn English. Moreover, my knowing the much revered language would allow a small, insignificant Asian girl to look down upon the big, white, almost invariably uncultured, monolingual Americans. I wasn't conscious at that time of this rather vengeful desire, but as I grew older, I began to understand that there must have been this ulterior motive, however unconscious, behind my choice.

Looking back, it was not a bad choice at all. First, as I learned the French language, I somehow also ended up learning the English language without really knowing it. Second, though I did not know it then, Yale French Department, where I ultimately ended up studying, was perhaps at its zenith at the time, and it was there that I was introduced to a new way of understanding literature. What I learned there made it difficult for me to truly begin writing for a long time, for I would be asking myself questions like, "how can a sentence mean what it means," but it now helps me. Now that I'm completely liberated from the academic yoke, I continue to enjoy the innocence and the leap of faith required in the act of writing.

As for the great tradition of the nineteenth century realism in French literature, I think I learned some essential things from Flaubert. But my favourite French author is Stendhal. He is so much fun to read—so clear yet so vibrant.

3. When did you begin to write? Is this your first novel? If not, what are the differences between this and the previous ones?

I had already harbored the idea of becoming a writer by the time I was twenty. But I kept writing student papers in French and English as I turned into an eternal student in the United States by moving on to graduate school. I had no intention of becoming an academic but I could not pull myself from my situation for various reasons. I did not start writing in Japanese until after I had finally broken away from America and gone back to Japan. I was in my mid-thirties.

*A True Novel* is my third novel. All my novels have been called “experimental,” though, actually, my literary taste itself is shamelessly conventional. I think my work is considered “experimental” because I’m more conscious than other Japanese writers that I’m writing Japanese literature in the Japanese language. I always try to do something with the form.

*Light and Darkness Continued*, my first novel brought to a finish an unfinished classic. I wanted to challenge the Japanese literary establishment by finishing, in his very style, the last unfinished work by Natsume Soseki, a writer who died nearly a century ago and who has long been considered the greatest novelist of modern Japan.

*An I-Novel from left to right*, my second novel, is a fictionalized autobiography, a cherished genre in Japan. Unlike typical Japanese novels that are printed vertically, it is printed horizontally, with many English expressions interwoven into the Japanese text. A good opportunity to brush up one’s English!

*A True Novel*, my latest novel, is usually considered to be the most readable

and entertaining among the three. Yet, it can also be described as “experimental” because it is a reflection upon the history of modern Japanese literature as the novel itself re-enacts that history by absorbing and transforming European literature.

4. Joseph Conrad, the Polish writer who was educated in French, finally chose English for his narratives, probably because it was the language of the crew on board the ship he was working. Kazuo Ishiguro, an English writer who is a descendant of a Japanese family, also chose English. Why did you prefer Japanese to English and French, for your writing? What was the reward?

I now see the tremendous advantage of being a writer in the English language. English is the first universal language in the world to cover the entire earth. And with the present advance in technology, it will become an even stronger universal language as more and more well-educated people will be reading directly in English.

I was just an ignorant person during my formative years, that is, while I was growing up in the United States, immersing myself in reading Japanese literature, and had no such world perspective. I never consciously chose Japanese over English. I never even imagined that a Japanese person could write in English. Now that I am thoroughly conscious of the tremendous advantage of writing in English, I often ask myself what would have happened if I were less ignorant and had put all my time and energy to acquiring the English language when I came to the United States. I think I might have been able to turn myself into a decent writer in the English

language. But then, I'm sure I would not have been so bold a writer as I think I am or, at least, hope I am, now.

Conrad was born in Poland but travelled the whole world on British ships. I'm sure he thoroughly understood the advantage of writing in English. In the case of Kazuo Ishiguro, I don't think he had any realistic choice because, he does not read Japanese or if he does, he does not read it fluently. He is English, linguistically speaking.

5. From our distant point of view, Japanese literature seems predominantly masculine, except for the, not yet so well-known but marvelous, case of Murasaki Shikibu, who is not only the first novelist in the whole world, but for many great writers—Angela Carter, Marguerite Yourcenar—probably the best. Your book, on the other hand, re-writes one of the most important classics ever written, *Wuthering Heights*, by Emily Brontë. We can imagine the non-conformist woman, Minae, in search of a new image for a woman in Occidental mirrors, in order to create a new space in Japanese literature. Would you say this to be true?

You might be interested to know that, in pre-modern Japan, any kind of story telling was considered feminine, not because those stories were written by women, but because they were written in the vernacular, Japanese language. All prestigious texts—all official documents, religious studies, and scholarly treatises—were written in the Chinese language. And those were considered the masculine texts. No women wrote in Chinese, except for an extremely small number of obscure women poets.

This bi-polar structure disappeared in modern Japan. Writing in the

vernacular language became the norm, and writing stories in the vernacular language, that is, writing novels, soon became a prestigious activity. And, as is always the case with any prestigious activity, women's participation was neither welcomed nor valued. Modern Japan produced many women writers, but no woman writer was given much credit except for maybe one or two. Today, such a patriarchal prejudice no longer characterizes the Japanese literary scene, but that is no cause for celebration. Women writers are now well respected, but, sadly, the act of writing novels itself is no longer respected as it once was.

Nonetheless, when I started writing *A True Novel* and decided to give it the present title, I thought it would be fun if a woman writer claimed with a straight face that she has finally come up with *the* "true novel" in Japanese. You see, ever since Japan opened its doors to the West, Japanese novelists' persistent aspiration was to somehow come up with a "true novel," that is, a novel that came as close as possible to an imagined ideal based on the nineteenth century European novel. They always felt they fell short of writing such a novel, a novel with a strong plot, complex structure and numerous characters. I wasn't thinking about how my claim to having written such a novel would be perceived outside Japan. I did not expect the novel to be translated; I was trying to be a bit naughty vis-à-vis the Japanese novelists of the past. That was all.

6. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the English-Caribbean author Jean Rhys imagined the life of the "madwoman in the attic" in *Jane Eyre*, the novel by Charlotte Bronte. As far as we know, you went further in the process of re-writing an existing work from the point of view of a "stranger." You also dealt with the whole structure of the novel, by altering the relationship among the

different elements of the book. Would you describe your process? How did you begin and continue?

Jean Rhys and I do have something in common. We both tried, in one way or another, to re-write a famous story from a neglected character's point of view. Bertha is a neglected character in *Jane Eyre* and so is Nelly in *Wuthering Heights*.

Even as a girl, I had always been intrigued by the role of Nelly, the maid, in *Wuthering Heights*. Nelly's obvious role in the novel is that of a narrator. She is placed on a different level from the other characters because she is the one who observes what takes place before her eyes and who later recounts what she had observed. Yet, if you follow the story attentively, she also plays a significant role as a character. What she does or says affects how the story unfolds. She is the one who tells the jealous Heathcliff that he "could knock (Edgar Linton) in a twinkling," and that he is "fit for a prince in disguise." She tells him, "Who knows, but your father was an emperor of China, and your mother an Indian queen, each of them able to buy up, with one week's income, *Wuthering Heights* and *Thruschcross Grange* together?" Nelly speaks these words out of kindness for the dejected orphan, but the reader senses how they are fuelling Heathcliff's pride, ambition and vengefulness. She is the one who, thinking it a duty of a good servant, betrays Catherine and Heathcliff, making it inevitable for Edgar to challenge Catherine to make a choice between the two men – something Edgar should never have done. And, most importantly, Nelly is the one who ultimately brings about Catherine's death.

When Catherine, angry at both men, but more at Edgar for challenging her to make the choice, locks herself up in her room for three nights, refusing to eat, Nelly does not report this to Edgar though she knows how desperately Catherine wants Edgar to come and apologize to her. Instead, Nelly tells Catherine that Edgar is “among his books,” implying that Edgar is not at all concerned with Catherine’s state of well-being, which, Nelly herself knows, is a falsehood. Already delirious, Catherine begins to lose her mind even further. When Edgar finally comes to her, it is too late and Catherine is damaged, both physically and mentally, beyond salvation. Edgar rebukes Nelly. Catherine even cries out: “Ah! Nelly has played traitor.... Nelly is my hidden enemy—you witch! So you do seek elf-bolts to hurt us.” Catherine never recovers and dies within a year.

Yet Nelly does not reproach herself. Not even once. Not even a word of admission of guilt. If one starts to think about it, she is rather monstrous as a character, decent in every way, except for her total lack of sense of guilt in bringing about Catherine’s death. I think this is because Emily Bronte, who was born in 1818, could not be bothered to draw a maid as a full character. Nelly remains a decoy to the plot. Yet, this lack of any sense of guilt in Nelly can also be read as an emotional suppression of a jealous soul. Nelly, after all, is only several years older than Catherine. They were brought up somewhat like siblings. The reader never knows what really goes on in Nelly’s mind and perhaps neither does Nelly herself. Yet her constant disapproval of Catherine, which gives further poignancy to Catherine’s devilish charm, may not only stem from her common sense wisdom, but also from her deep resentment. That may be why she does not even admit to the fact that she played a critical role in bringing about

Catherine's death.

I took it from there and turned my maid into a problematic character who consciously tells a story that is not the whole story. She is implicated in the plot and she knows it. She can even be considered the main character of the novel. After all, I am writing about the changes in post-war Japan where maids quickly disappeared as the pre-war class structure rapidly dissolved. Maids acquired a face and became humans.

As for the change in the whole structure of the novel, I added yet another narrative layer, turning myself into an author embedded inside her work who tells the story she has heard from Lockwood, who himself tells the story he has heard from Nelly. I like the complexity that resulted from this added layer, but the change was originally a by-product. I wanted to write a novel in Japanese that is inspired by *Wuthering Heights*. At the same time, I wanted the novel to have such an authentic feel to it that the Japanese readers, however aware they are that they are reading a work of fiction, just cannot stop thinking that something like this must have actually taken place in the Japan they know. In other words, my priority was to make the story truly believable and that priority led me to include the extra layer with my appearing in it as its author.

I also incorporated as much of my dear memories as I possibly could from my own childhood, simply for the pleasure of it. I basically was not trying to replicate *Wuthering Heights*. I even consciously avoided reading *Wuthering Heights* while I was writing *A True Novel* so that I wouldn't get caught up in the game of trying to figure out how to replicate the novel.

For example, *Wuthering Heights* is a novel that has a mythical quality with its beautifully symmetric structure. The story doesn't have to take place in the late eighteenth-century Yorkshire. It could have taken place anywhere in the world and it could still be told in a similar way and still be magical. Its specific location and history are almost irrelevant. That may be why the novel has such a wide appeal to readers across the world in many languages. *A True Novel* is not at all mythical. If anything, it is prosaic. I did not want the specific location and time to be irrelevant. On the contrary, I wanted them to play a central role because my novel is about the history of modern Japan. Love between my Catherine and my Heathcliff is an accident of history. Romantic but born out of a specific location and time. I am glad I worked without expecting my novel to be translated into different languages. Otherwise, I might have tried to make the historic context less relevant – which would have been bad for *A True Novel*.

7. In introducing your novel to an American audience, you talked about melodrama. Indeed, that is another Occidental vision of the Japanese that has become common place: the geisha immortalized by Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* and her many descendants. What is the importance of the melodramatic tradition in Japanese literature and in your work?

I personally love Puccini. Though he surely didn't know it himself, I think he had a wonderfully uncanny and even humorous grasp of the temperamental difference between Japanese and Chinese women. *Madame Butterfly* waits, wails and dies. *Princess Turandot* chops men's heads off. How hilarious! Accuse me of Orientalism, if you like!

Let me get back to your question of melodrama. Not all novels have melodramatic qualities in them. However, all memorable stories, I think, have melodramatic qualities in them. This is certainly true of *Wuthering Heights* and, of course, its off-spring, *A True Novel*, whose characters include a near supernatural hero, an *Übermensch*. Plot summaries of these novels will look very silly. That is why, in writing such a novel, the novelist must take great care with how the story is told. Her obligation to literature is to make sure that every sentence conveys the reality of the situation so that what might otherwise turn into a melodrama remains a depiction of human truth. The difficulty in having such a novel translated is that, even if the novelist succeeds in the task, the translator must also succeed in that task once again. One false adjective, either too facile or too emphatic, and the novel crumbles down into melodrama. Just one false adverb, and the entire novel is ruined. A novel with melodramatic qualities, because it tends to be a page-turner, may appear easier to translate than other kinds of novels, but the contrary is true.

One word about the romantic traditions in Japanese literature since you mentioned it. Before the introduction of European literature, a romance between a man and a woman was not the predominant literary theme. It was only one of the various literary themes in Japan.

The most predominant one in Japanese literature before the introduction of European literature was the reflection on the four seasons. It is in fact such a ubiquitous theme, not only in literature but in all of Japanese culture, that it usually degenerates into a cliché. Yet, in the rare moment when it is well

executed, I believe the reflection on the four seasons offers an extraordinarily fecund soil for literature.

When you are talking about the four seasons, you are actually talking about the passing of time, and when you are talking about the passing of time, you are actually talking about death—not only of humans but also of all things living, including the nameless worms and weeds. And it is only by being brought close to death can we humans truly celebrate life.

In my novel, I've tried to exploit this literary heritage of Japan by constantly evoking the force of nature.

8. Adrienne Rich wrote that, while *Jane Eyre* presents the relationship between two real human beings – Jane and Rochester, *Wuthering Heights* is about the struggle of a mutilated soul—a woman's soul, for recovering her male half, as if Catherine and Heathcliff were two separated halves from the same whole. Can it also be said of your novel?

The answer, I'm afraid, is no. As you know, there is a famous scene in *Wuthering Heights* where Catherine, who is almost in a state of trance, confesses to Nelly, “(Heathcliff) is more myself than I am.... I am Heathcliff.” The development of the story up to that point is so strong that these simple sentences carry a resonance that's almost biblical. I've included these lines in the original, hard cover version but then took it out when the novel came out in the paperback version—the version on which the translations are based. I did not think these lines belonged to my novel. As I said before, my *True Novel* freely deviates from its source of inspiration and I thought I should respect the integrity my novel acquired as

it deviated more and more from the original.

9. By choosing to write in the Japanese language, you are choosing an audience. How do you feel about your choice? How does the audience feel about your choice? Is Japan that reads your book the one you write for?

That question is a difficult one to answer. The Japanese society I knew as a young girl was, I think, one of the most literary societies in the world. Everybody, even children, in the middle-class was reading great novels of Japan and Europe. People were amazingly well-read. And now, that society is turning into one of the most mass-culture oriented societies in the world, even more than the United States. When I envisioned myself as a writer in the Japanese language, I was thinking of the kind of readership that existed when I was a young girl, which is now fast disappearing. All I can say is that I am grateful that there are still many Japanese who appreciate my kind of writing.

10. Regarding melodramatic stereotypes, do you think *A True Novel*, beside rewriting Emily Brontë's work, follows Tanizaki's portrait of family tensions in *The Makioka Sisters*? Do you find any dialogue between the two works?

I am very glad you brought up Tanizaki. He was one of the writers I was highly conscious of when I was working on *A True Novel*. I greatly admire Tanizaki as a novelist and I believe his *Makioka Sisters* is one of the highest achievements of modern Japanese literature. However, I did not

pick up the melodrama from *The Makioka Sisters*. I think *The Makioka Sisters* is intentionally non-melodramatic. In fact, that seems to me to be the whole point of the work. After all, the main episodes center around a series of arranged marriages, which is not a way to go if you are looking for melodrama!

*A True Novel* has been compared to *The Makioka Sisters* for two reasons. One is their sheer length. Both novels are very long. Second is their description of the upper-middle class life in Japan, especially the lives of women. That is something most of the post-war writers stayed away from due to their leftist ideology. They loved to dwell on poverty.

As for myself, I learned more specific things from *The Makioka Sisters*, such as how logical Tanizaki's simple sentences are, how they carry you without your knowing it. And he throws in so many proper names—the names of places, of companies, of schools, of train stations, of restaurants and so forth. I thought, WOW, this is a great way to give the text a heightened sense of reality. So I put in lots of proper names in my *True Novel*. As I said, I did not expect the work to be translated into so many other languages. Such is the irony of life!

11. There is a problematic item in your novel, that may also be a classic Japanese problem in melodrama: the female as the victim who suffers the rigidity of social structures. Is the pre-war social structure still alive now-a-days in Japan?

It is true that, despite the post-war constitution that gave Japanese women full equal rights, Japanese women still encounter gender barriers if they

have high ambitions and seek leadership positions. Yet, a foreign traveler with perceived notions of Japan would be surprised to find how liberated the Japanese women are. Especially now that many of them work, they have a wide range of options where their private lives are concerned. The pre-war class structure is gone and they can marry whomever they please. Moreover, not getting married, not having children, getting divorced even if they have children—all are now socially acceptable options. Out of wedlock children are still rare compared to the Western countries, yet premarital sex is now more the norm than the exception.

I think the problems a young Japanese woman faces today is different from the ones she faced in the past. In the past, there was a conflict between what she wanted to do with her life and what the society dictated. Now, a young woman does what she wants to do with her life, but what she wants to do with her life is so much dictated by the rampant mass culture around her that she often ends up doing silly things.

12. Would you please talk about your ancestors, especially about your grandmother, who was, if we are not mistaken, a geisha?

Oh, the story is so complicated that I could write a long novel about my geisha grandmothers! Please note that I said “grandmothers” and not “grandmother.” You see, when I was very little, there were two old women in our small house who, I gradually found out, were both former geishas, one insane, the other not.

One was my father’s step-mother. My father’s real mother died

immediately after giving birth to him, so my grandfather, who was well-to-do, married his mistress, and, as is often the case with mistresses, she was a retired geisha. She became insane because of the syphilis she got from my grandfather, a medical doctor!

The other was my mother's real mother. She led such a tortuous life, ultimately eloping with a young man twenty-five years her junior—my grandfather—that my mother wrote a novel about her. I edited the novel and wrote the final chapter for it. It's a remarkable tale and sold well for a novel by a 78 year old first author. In *A True Novel*, I combined the two grandmothers to make one grandmother who is, of course, a former geisha.

13. What is your opinion on the direction Japanese literature has followed, from the beginning of the eighth century to Murakami's success?

I believe Japan was lucky in two ways.

First, the country was lucky in its geographic location. It was close enough to China so that the Japanese people were introduced to writing relatively early in history, that is, by the fourth century or so. Yet, it was far enough from China so that it was not engulfed by the Chinese civilization and could thus develop its own vernacular literature. We enjoyed an extraordinary high moment during Heian Period when *the Tale of Genji* appeared, as you know, and we continued to be blessed with good periods, with an amazing variety of literary genres: diaries, essays, epic stories, popular stories, different forms of poetry, plays,

among others.

Second, the country was lucky in its escape from colonization by Western powers. (It colonized its neighbors in turn). This made it possible for modern Japanese literature to flourish, for, if the country had become colonized, the Japanese language could not have developed into the language that we use today. It would not have been taught at the universities and it would very probably have descended into a mere local language. From, let us say, 1887 onward to the mid 1910's, Japan produced what I think are fascinating works of literature because the language was in the process of transforming itself into a new language. Even afterward, it periodically produced great works. However, I am sorry to say that, by the mid-seventies, that is, as Japan became one of the richest countries in the world, Japanese literature was already well in its decline. People talk about the death of literature all over the world but it is perhaps more dramatically true in Japan than in most other places. Literature has become just one of the mass cultural products, produced and consumed by the masses.

14. Throughout history, Japan, more than any other Asian country, was, for Westerners, a place of exoticism. What is your opinion on the new cultural obsession, the merchandising of the Japanese culture, evident in some North American movies?

On the one hand, I think it's just a passing fad. I'm sure Hollywood would move on to some other cultural fetish once it thinks it has marketed enough of Japan. On the other hand, however, because Japan had already attained

an exceptionally high level of capitalism by the time it opened its doors to the West, the country does have many exotic cultural heritages that can be merchandized for the world market. The more economically developed a society, the more division of labor there would be, and hence the more need for artisans and specialists that would inevitably lead to a greater variety of refined cultural products, from pottery, lacquer ware, rice paper, sushi, kimono to kabuki dancing.

15. The manga—a Japanese medium now known worldwide—is really popular in Japan and in many Asian countries like Korea and China. In your point of view, does it affect the habit of reading or offer a happy, informal entry to reading literature?

I enjoyed reading some *manga* when I was a young girl. There were many good *mangas* but all the truly great ones were very much culturally bound to the Japanese society. I've never read the recent *mangas* that have wide readership around the world, so I'm not qualified to say anything good or bad about them. I just think life is too short even to try to find out!