

## Wilderness House Literary Review 7/3

Don MacLaren

**Interview with Robert Whiting, author of *Tokyo Underworld***

### **Questions (Q): Don MacLaren**

Answers (A): Robert Whiting

Robert (Bob) Whiting is a critically acclaimed and commercially successful author whose book, *Tokyo Underworld*, I would put at the top of my list for anyone with any interest in Japan – or for that matter anyone interested in U.S. post-war relations in East Asia, with a cast of characters as colorful as any I've come across in either fiction or non-fiction.

His works – written in both English and Japanese – focus on gangsters operating in Japan, baseball and U.S.-Japanese relations. His book *You Gotta Have Wa* was submitted by its original publisher, MacMillan, as an entry for a Pulitzer Prize in non-fiction.

Bob first came to Japan as a young man in the early 1960's while serving in the U.S. Air Force and has spent most of his time in Japan since then.

He attended college at Sophia University in Tokyo, majoring in Political Science, with an emphasis on Japanese politics, writing his thesis on the factions of Japan's Liberal Democratic Party.

He is married to Machiko Kondo, who recently retired from her job with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Her last post, in Stockholm, was as Representative for Scandinavia, an ambassador-level position.

Bob graciously took time while vacationing in Paris with his wife this past summer to allow me to interview him by e-mail. Here is what he had to say:

**Q: Why did you begin to write and when did you first start writing seriously?**

A: 1973. I had moved to New York after spending 10 years in Japan. I was living in Manhattan and was spending a lot of time talking about my experiences in Tokyo. People were less interested in Japanese politics (my field) and other such topics than they were in my stories about baseball and the difficulties imported American ballplayers had in adjusting to baseball in Japan. I was a big baseball fan in Japan and found that looking at the different way the Japanese approached the game provided a window into the Japanese culture as a whole. Friends encouraged me to write a book about it and so I did. Took a year to write 100,000 words. The result was *The Chrysanthemum and the Bat*. It was the first thing I'd ever written and it showed.

**Q: You served in the U.S. military and went to college in Tokyo in the 60's. At that time Tokyo, along with places like Berkeley, Ann Arbor, Chicago, New York and Paris was in a state of revolutionary cultural**

**and political ferment. What are your impressions of that period in Tokyo?**

A: It was exciting. I was there when the students took over the campus of Tokyo University. I also took part in a *Zengakuren* demonstration in front of Shinjuku station[1] demanding the U.S. return Okinawa to Japan. The *Zengakuren* was the big leftist student alliance, famous for their snake dance protests. I was tear-gassed by the Japanese riot police that night. There were some very smart, articulate people leading the student movement. But what got me was when they graduated, they all got jobs in big corporations, working for Japan Inc. They went from being socialists to capitalists overnight. Still, the demonstrations had value. If nothing else, they were a great way to meet girls.

**Q: The last time I looked at your Wikipedia page it stated you were an “informal advisor” to the *Sumiyoshi-kai*, one of the largest crime syndicates in the world. Is that accurate? If so, what does an informal advisor to such an organization do?**

A: This was 1969-1970 or so. I got to know one of the *yakuza* belonging to a wing of the *Sumiyoshi-kai* which ran my neighborhood in *Higashi Nakano*. [2]. He was an enforcer. He collected tribute, or protection payments, if you will, from the various bars and nightclubs in the area. He told me his gang was going to open up a new club in *Shinjuku* [3] using hostesses imported from Southeast Asia. Nobody in the gang could speak English, so he asked me to manage the club for them. They offered me 300,000 yen a month, which was a lot of money at the time. But I already had a good day job with Encyclopaedia Britannica Japan in their Editorial Department that took up a lot of my time, so I turned him down. Also, I did not want to be beholden to *yakuza*. I had seen this particular guy lose his temper one night and almost kill a cab driver for refusing to pick him up. Going to work for someone like him was playing with fire. So, I offered to help out on the side. I wound up writing messages in English for them to show to the girls. “Don’t drink so much.” “Don’t sleep with the customers” or “Please sleep with the customers.” Sometimes I would talk to hostesses for them. That is how I became an informal advisor. They would invite me to their meetings and their receptions. They would treat me to dinner, take me out to their private drinking establishments and set me up with beautiful women - whatever I wanted. But then they started asking me about getting guns for them and I decided to back off. Gun laws are really strict in Japan. You can go to jail for a long time if you are caught with one, and Japanese prisons are extremely unpleasant—no heat in the winter, no dental care. I left Japan at the end of 1972 and never saw them again.

**Q: How well did you know Nick Zappetti – the “*American gangster in Japan*” who is the subject of the subtitle of *Tokyo Underworld*? Did you consider him a friend? (I have to say that though he is a rather unsavory character, in many ways I empathized with him, given that he experienced frustrations similar to those of many foreigners in Japan.)**

A: I ate at his restaurant for years. The ballplayers used to go there all the time. But I never talked to him until fall 1989. You Gotta Have Wa had just come out the previous summer and he approached me one day while I was sitting at a table by myself, with a copy of the book in his hand. He said, “Did you write this?” I said “Yes, I did.” And then he said, “Well

have I got a story for you.” That’s how our relationship started. My agent in New York had told me to write about something other than baseball, and Zappetti seemed a good place to start. So I interviewed him for 20 hours over the following weeks. He told me stories about Rikidozan, Ginza Machii[4] and the Tosei-kai gang of Korean yakuza, his days as a black marketer, the crimes he committed as well as his various love affairs. Then it took me two years to check out and verify everything he said. I had to study the history of the gangs, the black markets and professional wrestling, as well as interview the people in Zappetti’s circle. I also had to finish writing *Slugging It Out in Japan*, a book I had started writing after turning *Wa in*. Then I went back and interviewed him for another 20 hours. I’d never met anyone so willing to talk about the most intimate details of his life. But, as he explained, he had a bad heart and wanted to get some things off his chest before he died. He passed away in 1991 shortly after our last interview. By that time I guess I did consider him a friend. It took me another five years to finish *Tokyo Underworld*. There was a lot of legwork left to do on the other parts of the book.

**Q: You wrote the foreword for the English edition of *Toppamono*, the memoir of Manabu Miyazaki – a person who grew up in a yakuza family, became a student radical in the 60’s, was the prime suspect in the Glico-Morinaga case (a case of kidnapping and extortion in 1984, which has never been solved), subsequently cleared, and later became a journalist and writer. Like Nick Zappetti he sounds like an interesting guy. How well do you know him? What’s he like? Would he be someone readers of this interview might want to sit down and have a beer with (if they could speak Japanese)?**

A: I had a three-hour *taidan* (interview/conversation) with him for a magazine and dinner on a couple of other occasions. He’s soft-spoken, very smart and very cynical about so-called straight society. He said the only difference between yakuza and people involved in banking, the stock market and real estate is that yakuza are up front about the crimes they commit. I remember he said the techniques he learned as a student radical were not all that different from techniques yakuza employed.

**Q: You and the journalist David Halberstam have written extensively on both sports and East Asia. He said your writing on baseball “is applicable to almost every other dimension of American-Japanese relations.” How well did you know him? What was he like?**

A: I knew David quite well. I first met him in Japan when he was researching *The Reckoning*. We became friends and I would have dinner with him and his wife Jean whenever I visited New York, which was once or twice a year. He was the smartest journalist I have ever met and also the hardest working. He told me that the secret to his success was not smarts but the fact that he researched his subjects so thoroughly and that he always did more interviews than his competitors. He said he would start a book project knowing next to nothing about his subject, but then four years later, he would know as much as anyone alive. His wife Jean said the thing he was proudest of was that the American Historical Association praised his books like *The Best and the Brightest* and *The Powers that Be*, for their historical accuracy. So David did his homework. But it also helped I guess to have an IQ of around 160. David was very generous. The list of

people that he has helped throughout his career - fellow reporters, aspiring journalists - is very, very long. He introduced me to my agent, Binky Urban at ICM. She's one of the top literary agents in the U.S.

**Q: You, like Halberstam, Stanley Karnow and Neil Sheehan (all three of whom have won Pulitzer Prizes) have all written extensively about U.S. policy in East Asia, focusing on the dark side of U.S.-East Asian relations. Have you compared notes with these writers? Have you been influenced by their writing?**

A: I've had long conversations with David about Japan and about writing. I didn't know the others. But I've read their books and admire their prose. I also knew J. Anthony Lukas. *Common Ground* was an absolutely masterful book.

**Q: According to a February 17, 2012 article in the online journal *Japan Culture NYC*, your book *Tokyo Underworld* is to be made into an HBO series, with Paul Schrader writing the pilot script and Martin Scorsese producing the series as well as directing the pilot. What is the status of this project?**

A: HBO is no longer involved. Scorsese's people are moving it to another cable movie channel. Negotiations are underway now and the results should be announced soon.

**Q: I've read that the film rights to your book *You Gotta Have Wa* were bought and after the film *Mr. Baseball* (starring Tom Selleck) came out you took the makers of the film to court over some of the material in the film, given that you'd written a lot of what was portrayed in the story. According to what I've read you won the suit. Could you clarify what transpired?**

A: When *You Gotta Have Wa* came out in 1989, Universal Studios made an offer to MacMillan for the film rights. They wanted to title the film "*You Gotta Have Wa*." Negotiations were underway for a selling price (Universal initially offered \$50,000, MacMillan wanted \$250,000). Then, Matsushita bought Universal out, fired the director, the screenwriter and others connected to the project and brought in the Australian Fred Schepisi to direct the film. I was cut out of the project. I heard that one of the writers had visited Japan and said, "Anybody can do this. We don't need Whiting." But then, it came out that during filming the director and writers had kept my books on the set for constant reference and that indeed many of the incidents portrayed in the film were taken from *Wa*. MacMillan and I were discussing filing a lawsuit, when surprise, surprise, Universal offered \$75,000 if I would sign a letter of indemnification. So I accepted. By that time, it really didn't matter to me. In 1987, I had written a film treatment about an American ballplayer in Japan and was going to give it to Universal as part of the *Wa* movie deal. But after that fell through, I gave it to a Japanese *manga*,<sup>[5]</sup> *Comic Morning*, instead. The editors and illustrators there turned it into a long running series, one which netted me over a million dollars. So I was quite happy about the way that things turned out.

**Q: How would you sum up your experiences in Hollywood?**

A: Exhausting. Frustrating. *Tokyo Underworld* was at Dreamworks for seven years, Warner Brothers for two and HBO for two. I have seen over



16 different treatments and scripts for the book ranging from PG-13 comedy to R rated drama. It's a miracle movies ever get made in Hollywood. But I have met some very smart and talented people – Marty Scorsese, Nick Pileggi, Jason Cahill, Paul Schrader, Ron Bernstein. And Harry and Mary Jane Ufland, who became good friends.

**Q: I read that you went to 13 publishers with your first book, *The Chrysanthemum and the Bat*, before it was finally accepted for publication. As it turned out the book became a critical and commercial success. What advice would you have for writers/filmmakers trying to tell stories but who get rejected by New York publishing and Hollywood?**

A: Don't give up. Keep trying. I was rejected by so many publishers it was depressing. But then something good finally happened. I took my manuscript to *Sports Illustrated*, which had a small book publishing department. A young woman working there read it and said *SI* wasn't really in the book publishing business, but would like to publish an excerpt from my MS. Then she said something completely out of the blue: "I know you are having a hard time getting your book published. So here is what I will do. We will hold this until you find a publisher. You can tell the next book editor that you show *C&B* to that *SI* is taking First Serialization. And that ought to grab their interest." Then she gave me the name of a man to call at Dodd-Mead. That was on a Friday. By Monday I had an offer. That was a remarkable act of kindness on that young woman's part. She didn't have to go out of her way to help me; I was a nobody. But she did, and I have never forgotten that. I have tried to follow her example and help struggling writers. The woman's name by the way was Patricia Ryan. She went on to found *People Magazine*. So, you never know what will happen. Just keep plugging.

**Q: Could you describe your writing process? How do you put a book together?**

A: Search for a topic, one that asks a central question, like "What happened to the U.S. Auto Industry?" or "How does baseball reflect the Japanese national character?" Everything else will flow from that. Then start your research. Read as many books and articles related to the subject as you can. Interview as many people as you can who have had experience with or knowledge of the subject. As you progress, you may find the scope of your inquiry changing, which may require new areas of research and more interviews. You might have to go back and re-interview subjects. As you expand your base of knowledge you automatically refine and further develop your thesis—which should, by the way, always be reducible to one simple sentence. Then, about a couple of years in, you will reach a magical point in your research when you realize you know more than the people you are interviewing or those authors whose books you have been reading. That's when you are ready to start writing. In my experience that has come after reading 100 books or so and interviewing about 100 people. That's a useful rule of thumb. Then, you make a detailed outline of each chapter and start churning out drafts, revising and fine tuning as you go. I usually need 10 drafts. I always read the entire final draft out loud, pretending there's an audience listening. That's a surefire way to ferret out weak spots in the manuscript. Then after you have done that, hire a professional editor/proofreader to go over your MS before you send it in.

Editors at the publishing houses may help further improve your book, but also they are usually working on several manuscripts at a time and simply don't have the time to do justice to each one. It's the nature of the business. So make sure you submit as perfect an MS as you can and don't expect too much from your publisher.

**Q: Last year, with the earthquake, tsunami and related nuclear power problems, Japan went through its worst disaster since World War II. After the war Japan rebuilt itself and for quite a while was the envy of the world economically. Do you see Japan recovering from this crisis as it recovered from World War II - and positive changes coming to Japan in the future? Why or why not?**

A: It's a different era. The Japanese received a lot of help rebuilding after the war. The U.S. provided investment capital and took care of Japan's security, so Japan was able to focus on manufacturing and export its way to prosperity while keeping its markets closed to outside competition. Also, Japan had something to prove to the world at the time. Now, domestic manufacturing is in decline because of a strong yen and the country has an aging population, as well as a huge national debt, to deal with. The Japanese are very good at coping with adversity, but the country doesn't seem to have the collective energy it once had. Japan will recover from the disaster and grow but it's hard to see Japan repeating the economic boom times it enjoyed in the 60's, 70's and 80's. There's too much competition elsewhere in Asia.

**Q: There are many foreigners who have spent time in Japan, have a facility with the language, know the history and respect the customs, but feel they are not treated as equals and eventually leave Japan out of frustration. It seems that with Japan's low birthrate and the aging of its population the country would do well to welcome foreigners who work hard at learning its ways. Do you think Japan will ever become truly internationalized? Why or why not?**

A: Eventually. Maybe. Attitudes toward foreigners have changed somewhat. This is indicated in surveys conducted by the *Tokei Suri Kenkyu Jo*, a Japanese government research organization. One of the questions they regularly ask is: "Suppose your child said 'I want to marry a foreigner.' Would you approve or disapprove?" In 1988, 36% of the respondents said they would disapprove while only 28% said they would approve. In 2008, 51% of the respondents said they would approve while only 20% said they were against the idea. That's a pretty big change. And indeed, the number of so-called international marriages has really jumped. Also, the Japanese government has loosened some restrictions on foreign residents. Resident visas are easier to get than they used to be and last longer. And the immigration authorities are much friendlier than they used to be, at least in my experience. There are a number of other examples. *Sumo* wrestling, once an elitist, nationalist sport, is packed with foreign wrestlers. Japan's national soccer team has had several foreign managers. Japanese baseball had four *gaijin kantoku* (foreign managers) not so long ago. Of course, foreigners are still discriminated against in some areas, like housing. Some landlords won't rent to foreigners. Some bars and nightclubs won't let foreigners in. Koreans regularly complain of discrimination, even though the Republic of Korea has become a popular tourist destination for Japa-

nese. That fact Shintaro Ishihara, famous for his anti-foreign views, keeps getting re-elected as Tokyo governor should tell you something. Distrust of the “*gaijin*” - which is a derogatory term for foreigners - is always there, beneath the surface.

**Q: You studied Japanese politics in college. Recently, Japan has gone through a lot of political changes. In 2009 a new government, the Democratic Party of Japan, replaced the Liberal Democratic Party (though for anyone with any knowledge of Japanese politics “liberal” and “democratic” in name only) and since then the DPJ has held power. An architect of the formation of that government, Ichiro Ozawa, has recently formed a new party – breaking off from the DPJ, which he headed earlier. People like Karel van Wolferen (author of the book *The Enigma of Japanese Power*) suggest that Japan needs to radically alter the ties that have bound it to the U.S. since World War II in order to become a true democracy. Do you think this will ever happen? Do you agree with Karel van Wolferen? Do you think that Japan will become more democratic?**

A: Not in my lifetime, to answer your first question. To break the reliance on the U.S., the Japanese would have to kick the American military out and revise Article 9 in the Constitution,[6] which is not an easy thing. And I am not sure that is in Japan’s best interests, given the present geopolitical situation and the rise of China’s power. You could say that Japan needs the U.S. more than the U.S. needs Japan. Japanese have been historically apathetic about politics, as far as I can see, leaving it mostly in the hands of local bosses, who form alliances with other local bosses around the country with whom they share power, funds and positions in the national government. The only time I have ever seen a mass people-based political movement in Japan was during the Anti-Security Treaty demonstrations. Japan is democratic, in the sense the people cast their votes and elect their government representatives, but too often those representatives get caught up in the financial side of politics. It requires vast sums of money to gain and hold political office in Japan and that breeds corruption. Special interests, like construction companies, who donate the most get special favors. So I don’t think Japan’s relationship with America is the problem. The problem is money politics. It is too deeply ingrained in the culture to root out. The Democratic Party of Japan took power from the LDP, primarily because one of the LDP leaders, Ichiro Ozawa, moved his faction (the old Kakuei Tanaka faction known for its corruption) out of the LDP to the DPJ. Another DPJ leader and former Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama is a grandson of one of the original founders of the LDP, Ichiro Hatoyama. His mother inherited the old man’s political fortune, which came from the infamous ultra-nationalist Yoshio Kodama, who plundered China during the war to get it. Those are just two examples.

**Q: At one time the U.S.-Japan relationship was described as “the most important bilateral relationship in the world.” Do you believe the relationship is as important now? What is the future of the relationship between the two countries?**

A: It was U.S. Ambassador to Japan Mike Mansfield who made the “most important bilateral relationship” remark. And I think that is still true because of the military bases the United States keeps on Japanese soil.

But times have changed. The U.S. is still committed to defending Japan (and Taiwan), but, ironically, has to borrow money from China to do it. It's more complicated now. The U.S. government has to get its huge deficits under control.

**Q: The yakuza have been involved in everything from prostitution and drugs to stock market and real estate manipulation. However, they also played a significant role in assisting victims of both the Great Eastern Japan/Tohoku earthquake in 2011 and the Kobe/Hanshin earthquake in 1995. In addition, as you describe in *Tokyo Underworld*, the yakuza played a crucial role in Japan's recovery in the aftermath of World War II. The government response was much slower than the yakuza's in all of these crises. Do you think the yakuza's role in Japanese society serves an important function? How extensive is the yakuza's role in Japan?**

A: Yakuza fill a need in areas that so-called legitimate business is unable to handle. Those areas include prostitution, drugs, loan collection, *jiage*[7] and so forth. In that sense, their role is huge. If people didn't want these goods and services, the role of the yakuza would not be so big. Helping out in times of crisis is a way to keep their customer base operating, and, at the same time, improve their public image. It's good business. When you get past the tattoos, the pinky cutting, the talk about tradition and their argument they make that they benefit society, yakuza are just criminals engaged in doing what criminals all over the world do, committing crimes for profit. Of course, organized crime is more organized in Japan, because group organization is something Japanese excel at.

The 70,000 or 80,000 membership figure reported annually by the Japanese police is multiples of the mafia in the USA (but of course pales in comparison when you consider all the other types of gangs in America). The Japanese police have been cracking down on yakuza ever since I first came to Japan in the early 1960's, but the numbers now are about the same as they were then.

But the yakuza have become more sophisticated over the years. You see them more involved in international finance than they used to be. They have people who can speak English and other foreign languages, people with college educations. Yakuza were involved in the Olympus and Daio scandals[8] for example, and that required some fairly complicated financial maneuvers overseas.

**Q: Your book, *You Gotta Have Wa*, which examines Japanese baseball and the foreigners who play baseball in Japan, has been required reading for those working at the Japan Desk of the U.S. State Department. Why would the State Department make this book required reading?**

A: I have been told by many Foreign Service officials working at the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo that they were required to read "*Wa*," among other books, before starting their Japan assignment, because it provided a simple, easy-to-read introduction to the Japanese culture. This started back in 1989-1990 when the hardcover and paperback editions came out and



Japan Inc. was on everyone's radar. Americans were still trying to figure out what made Japan tick. Michael Armacost, the American ambassador to Japan in the early 90's, told a group of people in my presence at an Embassy reception that he thought *Wa* was the best book ever written about Japan. I don't know how serious he was, but that was a long time ago. I don't know about now.

**Q: You write in both English and Japanese, which do you prefer and what are the advantages/disadvantages of each?**

A: I only write in English. When I try to write in Japanese it looks like the scrawlings of a 10 year old. The *kanji*[9] word processors help, but the end result is still very rough. So when I write for publication in Japanese, the publisher has it translated and then I check the translation. I can read Japanese well enough to know whether the translation is good or not.

**Q: Why did you join the Air Force? Could you sum up your experiences in the service?**

A: I was 19, flunking out of college and having a lot of trouble with my parents, with whom I was still living, in Eureka, California. I wanted to get away, as far away as possible. Since I was about to be drafted anyway, I enlisted. The military sent me to an electronic intelligence school and then to Japan where I worked in a tri-service organization, under the National Security Agency in conjunction with the CIA, which ran the U-2 spy program over China. It was a big adventure. And it was quite an education. I learned quite a bit about American intelligence operations in the Far East. I also learned not to believe everything the U.S. government said it was doing - or not doing.

**Q: What were your first impressions of Japan when you arrived there with the Air Force in 1962?**

A: I was at Fuchu Air Station, a 25 minute train ride on the Keio Line from Shinjuku. It was two years before the Tokyo Olympics. Everywhere you looked there was a building in the process of being constructed or torn down. The bars, restaurants, coffee shops and movie theaters were all packed, as were the trains and subways. The place was exploding with energy. It was a contact high. It was fun just to stand and take it all in. The crowds at rush hour time were enormous. The trains and subways were so jammed with people the platform conductors had to push them in so the doors could close.

**Q: Why and how did you become interested in Japanese baseball?**

A: The Yomiuri Giants, a national institution in Japan, were on network TV every night. The great home run hitter Sadaharu Oh played for them. I watched them all the time because in the beginning, baseball was the only thing I could understand on Japanese TV. Then when I learned Japanese, talking about baseball turned out to be a good way to start a conversation with Japanese. Also, as I began to discover, the game provided an interesting window into the Japanese culture. The year-round commitment, dawn to dusk camps, endless meetings, constant player-coach conferences, sacrifice oriented offenses, organized cheering groups, etc. reflected the M.O. of large Japanese corporations, where the focus was on total dedica-

tion, harmony, order and self-sacrifice. I got hooked on reading the daily Japanese sports papers and that in turn helped improve my reading comprehension in the language.

**Q: What is your favorite book? Favorite movie? Why are they your favorites?**

A: I have to name more than one. Books: *Crime and Punishment*. *War and Peace*. *The Summing Up*. The play *Hamlet*. A book in Japanese, *Kizu* by Yasuharu Honda, about the life of a yakuza enforcer during the postwar era. Movies: *Tokyo Story*. *Nora Inu (Stray Dog)*. *Seven Samurai*. Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet*, *Shane*, *The Searchers*, *One-Eyed Jacks*, *Plein Soleil*. I liked those three books and the play because they tell you everything you need to know about life. *Kizu* was a big help in writing *Tokyo Underworld* because it helped me understand the playing field. The movies I mentioned I connected with emotionally. *Tokyo Story* was a wrenching depiction of postwar alienation in Japan. *Stray Dog* was the most vivid portrait of the postwar Tokyo underground ever put on screen. *Seven Samurai*, what can you say? Every time I watch it I see something new. Same with Olivier's *Hamlet*, which I must have seen over 100 times. The three westerns I named each said something different about the nature of American heroism. *Plein Soleil* was a masterpiece about the nature of evil.

**Q: Who is your favorite writer? Why is he/she your favorite?**

A: Again. I have to name more than one. Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and Maugham. Like I said, their books tell you everything you need to know about life.

**Q: How do you like to spend your time when you're not at work writing?**

A: Dining and drinking with friends. Working out at the gym. Watching cable TV series with my wife: *Breaking Bad*, *Downton Abbey*. *Damages*. *Mad Men*. We spend summer every year in Paris.

**Q: What was your childhood like? Did you have dreams of becoming a writer? Did you ever envision yourself living in Japan?**

A: I grew up in Eureka, California, a small fishing and logging town on the coast in the northern part of the state, not far from the Oregon border. I did not have a particularly happy childhood. My mother was extremely neurotic. She'd been abandoned by her parents when she was 12 and she never got over the trauma. She constantly complained about her lot in life. My father was the quiet, stoic type who retreated to his workshop as often as possible. The word "Japan" was never mentioned in our house. My father had fought at Guadalcanal - perhaps that was the reason why. I only knew of Japan's existence because I had seen the movies *Godzilla* and *Rodan* at the Eureka Theater. But exactly where Japan was, I couldn't say, and I certainly never ever imagined living there.

**Q: How would you like to be remembered in 100 years?**

A: Ha! If I am remembered at all, I guess I would like to be remembered as having made a contribution to cross-cultural understanding between Japan and the U.S.

**Q: You have published a book called *Tokyo Outsiders*, a sequel to**

**Tokyo Underworld, in Japanese. When will the English version come out and what are your plans for future projects?**

A: I am working on an expanded version of *Outsiders* now, one designed for the North American market. I hope to have it finished by this time next year. Maybe I will do one last baseball book after that. I want to tell the world about Yutaka Enatsu, one of the greatest strikeout pitchers who ever lived, who was also a part-time yakuza and wound up in prison.

**Q: Your writings on Japanese baseball have been criticized by people like Professor William Kelly of Yale. Though you addressed this issue in a speech at Michigan State University in the spring of 2006 and a September 29, 2006 *Japan Focus* article, would you care to go into this here?**

A: Kelly and his disciples (Thomas Blackwood, John Thompson) have criticized me for writing about the supposed national character of the Japanese, which they argue does not exist. They may make some good points but they undermine their arguments by distorting what I wrote. They attack me for saying Japanese share innate attributes, when what I have said was Japanese share certain values passed down and modified through generations. However, setting up a straw argument like that so it can be knocked down, I have come to discover, is not uncommon in academia.

Kelly further undermines himself with his faulty research. As I mentioned in my MSU speech and *Japan Focus* piece, he makes a lot of mistakes in his work and the academic journals he writes for don't catch them. They don't fact check the way say, *Sports Illustrated*, or *Time Magazine*, does. A piece he did for the *International Journal of the History of Sport* in 2009 is yet another example. It is full of mistakes, too numerous to go into here. But here's one. Kelly refers to the leeway Giants manager Tetsuharu Kawakami gave to superstar Isao Harimoto to practice and play in his own fashion. But Harimoto never played for Kawakami.[10]

**Q: How did you meet your wife, Machiko Kondo, who was posted all over the world while working for the United Nations? I think it a great situation for a writer to be married to a person who travels the world - spending part of the year with her, part away, while writing all the time.**

A: We worked at the same company briefly in Tokyo. That's how it started. It was a great situation, with her working for the UNHCR,[11] although the round-the-world tickets 2-3 times a year cost a lot of money. I found the best way to write about Japan is to do it in another country. It brings things into perspective. And thanks to her, I was able to live in many interesting places, Geneva, Mogadishu, Karachi, Dhaka and Stockholm, among them.

**Q: Is there anything else you would like to say/express to the public that hasn't been covered in this or any other interview you've had?**

A: I used to like dogs but now I like cats.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 7/3

### Notes:

[1] Shinjuku station in Tokyo is the busiest train station in the world. It was a locus of protests and demonstrations in the 1960's.

[2] Higashi Nakano is a district in Tokyo, part of Nakano – one of Tokyo's 23 wards.

[3] Shinjuku is one of Tokyo's 23 wards. Parts of Shinjuku, like the Kabuki-cho district, are known for their large number of bars, restaurants, *mizu shobai* and *fuzoku* (hostess bars, massage parlors, etc.) These areas are said to have a large yakuza presence and are considered dangerous by many people.

[4] Rikidozan (1924-1963), an ethnic Korean, was a professional wrestler in Japan. Hisayuki "Ginza" Machii (1923-2002), also an ethnic Korean, was a yakuza gang boss, founder of Tokyo's Tosei-kai gang. Both of these characters figure prominently in the pages of *Tokyo Underworld*.

[5] *manga*: Japanese comics, very popular in Japan for people of all ages - many of them (though far from all) are quite literary and sophisticated.

[6] Article 9 of Japan's constitution reads as follows:

*Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes.*

*To accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized. (Constitution of Japan, 1947)*

[7] *jiage*: forcing tenants to move from buildings they inhabit (often with violence or the threat of violence) in order to clear the land and sell it for development.

[8] The Olympus and Daio Paper financial scandals over accounting fraud and purportedly illicit loans have been covered recently in periodicals such as *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*.

[9] *kanji*: one of the three Japanese alphabets (the other two being *hiragana* and *katakana*), based on Chinese written characters.

[10] Robert Whiting continues his response in more detail:

In his 2009 piece in *International Journal of the History of Sport* entitled "Samurai Baseball: The Vicissitudes of a National Sporting Style," Kelly writes this about supposed loyalty and suppression of individualism in Japanese baseball:

*Yet however widely promoted, this corporate rendition of samurai baseball was never accepted at face value. The baseball world, the media that surround it and the fans who follow it received it with varying measures of reverence, scepticism and cynicism. Even the realities of Yomiuri baseball were more complex. Backstage, it was well known that (Giants manager Tetsuharu) Kawakami gave his stars considerable leeway to practise and play in*



*their own fashion. A number of them, such as Masaichi Kaneda and Isao Harimoto, had been poached from other teams, revealing how loyalty was to be honoured only in the breach. Below a surface harmony was little genuine affection and much internecine struggle among players, coaches and the manager. (Kelly, 2009)*

Aside from stating the obvious in noting that life is complicated beneath surface surface *wa* (harmony) in Japan, there are other problems with the above paragraph, starting with the so-called “leeway” Kawakami gave to his stars. When the exalted Kaneda joined the Giants in 1965 as the winningest pitcher of all time (354 wins up until then), he did indeed declare to the press that he was going to continue to train “My Way,” no matter how exalted the Giants were. Everyone expected there would be some sort of clash with Kawakami, who had an oft-stated low tolerance for lone wolves. But then Kaneda showed up in camp and, in fact, surprised everyone by doing more running, throwing, and fielding than anyone else on the pitching staff, already training hard under the notoriously strict Kawakami system, thereby shaming them into stepping up their own routines and making Kaneda look good in the process. Then, there was the way Kawakami dealt with Kaneda after he broke his hand and went on the DL. After several weeks, Kaneda declared himself healed, fit and ready to return to the first team, but Kawakami raised many eyebrows by ordering Kaneda pitch a game on the farm team first to demonstrate that he really was OK. It was the only time in the great Kaneda’s storybook 400 win career that he ever had to prove himself in a minor league game, other than perhaps his rookie year. Many observers believed the farm team dictum was Kawakami’s way of establishing his authority over the hall of fame pitcher, who, in any event, did as he was told, however unwillingly. So much for leeway. As for Harimoto, again, contrary to what Kelly suggests, he never played for Kawakami. He joined the Giants in 1976 after Kawakami had left and Shigeo Nagashima had become the manager.

Finally, Kaneda and Harimoto were not exactly “poached.” Kaneda became a free agent under a system in place at the time that had been instituted by the owners. The system gave players the right to become a free agent and negotiate with other teams at two stages in their professional careers. The first was during the winter following the completion of a period of 10 years of service on the “1-gun” (first team), on a Nippon Professional Baseball club and the second after completing 14 years on an NPB team. It was a way of showing their appreciation to the players for years of service and loyalty, giving them a chance to market their skills elsewhere. Kaneda opted not to leave his team, the Kokutetsu Swallows, at the 10 year stage, instead accepting a bonus to stay on. He decided to leave later, after playing a full 15 years with the team, because of dissatisfaction with a new ownership group, management of the Swallows having been taken over by the *Sankei Shimbun* and Fuji Television. As for Harimoto, he played for the same team – the Toei Flyers, which became the Nittaku Home Flyers and then the Nippon Ham Fighters – for 17 years before joining the Giants. Harimoto, the only NPB player to reach the 3,000 career hit mark, requested the trade after the end of the 1975 season after having become embroiled in a dispute with a new team president, who had referred to the aging star as a “cancer” within the organization.

Kelly also writes about tie games:

*The alleged cultural preference for playing to a face-saving tie is also dubious. It is true that for many decades, professional baseball in Japan had extra-innings limits on its games, unlike MLB, which resulted in occasional ties. However, this was not because it produced a desired outcome (indeed, it is a rather odd injunction for a samurai who is supposed to be defending the honour of his overlord!) but because almost all spectators came to games via public transportation (often the streetcars and trains owned by the team's parent company), and the leagues felt responsibility to ensure that the games ended while the transport was still running. (There were also neighbourhood anti-noise ordinances that limited late-night games.) (Kelly, 2009)*

I don't know anyone who ever alleged a "cultural preference" for ties. But I have heard many American players on Japanese teams, disgusted at the idea of tie games, complain about their teammates laissez-faire attitude towards them. As Warren Cromartie often put it, "These guys say they are happy with a tie because that way at least their friends on the opposing team don't lose face." Also, as the Americans have often pointed out, in the event of a tie there is no post-game "hansei-kai" ("reflection meeting") where criticism and fines for poor play are handed out, as there invariably is after a loss. That's another reason ties are welcomed. Kelly also ignores the fact that the Japanese professional leagues played mostly day games up until the early 1950's when public transportation shutting down was not an issue and still games were sometimes ended in ties. Even now a third of the schedule is played in the daytime but is nevertheless subject to the tie rule.

There is more, but I will leave it for another time. I realize that we all make mistakes but you won't see Kelly's academic colleagues involved in the study of Japanese baseball (and whose own work, incidentally, needs vetting) correcting him.

[11] UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

*You can learn more about Robert Whiting by doing a search for him on websites such as [japanesebaseball.com](http://japanesebaseball.com) (under "Writers") and [wikipedia.org](http://wikipedia.org). A video of a presentation he gave on the yakuza at the Japan Society of New York earlier this year is accessible by doing a search at the website [fora.tv](http://fora.tv).*

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