

On Writing, Love and Judaism in Japan

Interview with Tracy Slater



Melissa Uchiyama, an American residing in Japan, grabbed a chance to meet with author and fellow American, Tracy Slater. Tracy is the author of *The Good Shufu: Finding Love, Self and Home on the Far Side of the World*, (G.P. Putnam's Sons). *The National Geographic Traveler* issue named the book a "great new read". She is also the founder of Four Stories, an award-winning literary series bridging Greater Boston's nightlife and arts community and Tokyo's, too! They met, along with Tracy's young daughter, over iced coffee and the luxury of found time.

In *The Good Shufu*, readers learn of Tracy's inner workings, experiences, and revelatory surprises as she moves from liberal, well-planned, girl-about-town in Boston, to a woman navigating a completely foreign landscape and social construct, both in the day-to-day, and in her budding relationship with Toru, the man with whom she negotiates many decisions and moments that shape her identity and the life they create together.

Melissa Uchiyama: Congratulations, Tracy, for all of the warmth and momentum your book is gathering. You write about some overarching themes—being a foreigner here in Japan, experiencing fertility issues, eventually becoming a mother, but is there one overall theme this book captures/explores?

Tracy Slater: We can rigorously, perfectly plan our life. But sometimes, as I found, when that plan goes awry, against our best efforts, we end up in a place that is better for us than what we would have figured or planned.

MU: Isn't that indicative of culture shock, too? The cues and behaviors that would normally work quite successfully no longer apply in the new culture. You truly cannot plan.

Using the four named stages of culture shock as chapter markers seems to be a powerful tool which helps to ground the reader not only in time, but to the emotional and conceptional development of the story.

The dialogue especially seems well-remembered, perhaps written verbatim. How much were you journaling then? How much of these details and conversations did you entrust to your memory?

TS: I know there are a lot of opinions and viewpoints about how truthful

memoir is and how truthful it should be. I try to make everything in the book as close to as I remembered and experienced it. The little funny English things that Toru said, those I wrote down at the time. When I could, I checked the accuracy with other people who were in the scenes... there were a couple of minor scenes that I had happening more closely together. Just for narrative consistency, I tried to make the memoir as close to the actual experience as I could.

MU: It really reads quite authentically. Did writing this change how you



Tracy Slater

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Interview

by Melissa Uchiyama

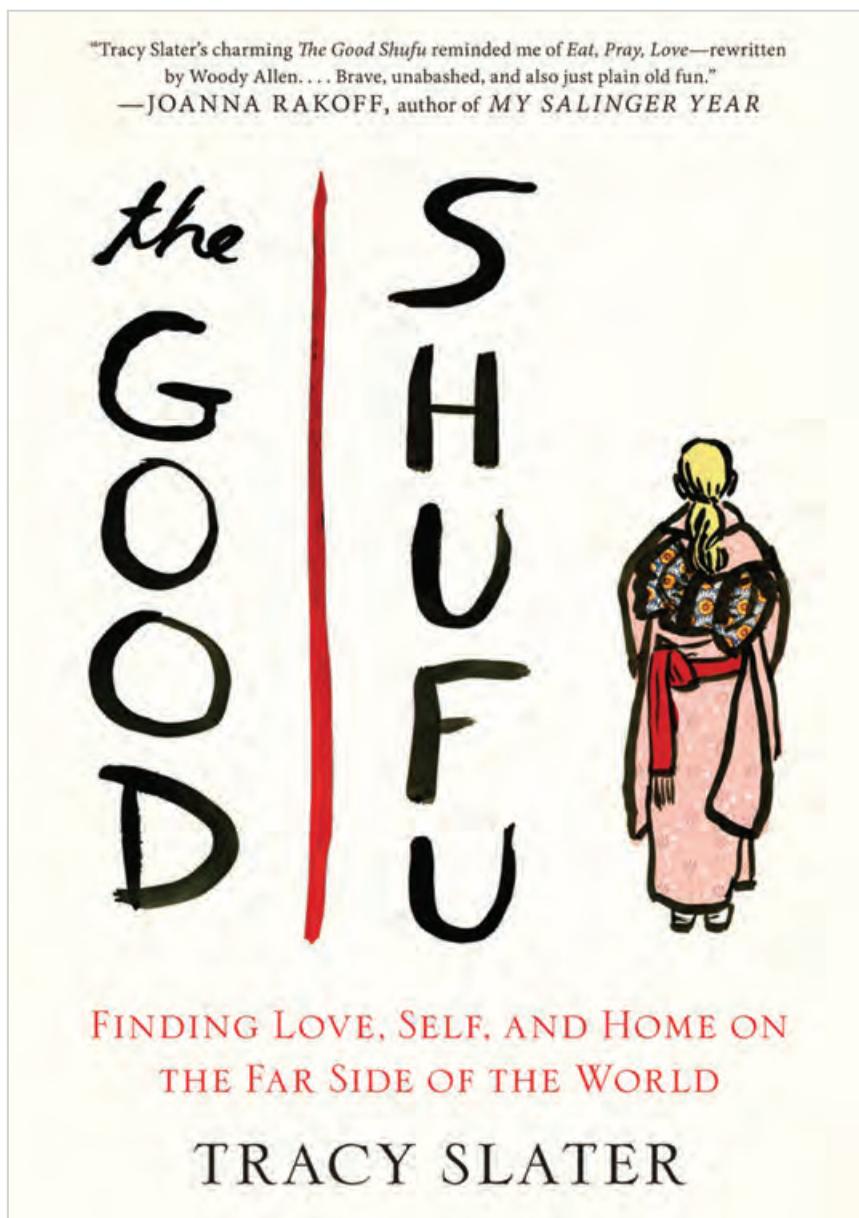
remember or perhaps how you journal now? Are you looking forward to writing the next book, or more essays, where you realize, “Oh, I need to record all of these things?”

TS: I’ve noticed myself sometimes narrating things as they happen and I feel very mixed about that. I’m excited about working on another book project, but in another way, it bugs me. I don’t want to be narrating my life; I want to be living my life, especially with my daughter. Is it worth it to be splitting off, on one hand, narrating, and on another hand, experiencing it? You never get back your kids’ childhood.

MU: I wonder how it was to take a very personal man, in a personal family, in a very personal culture where people just aren’t usually invited in and people meet out, and uncover all of the feelings and nuances of language, out to the world, in memoir. You also have your own family in Boston, and you reveal a lot about them. Were there surprises or discoveries?

TS: Writing about Toru for publication was easier than I thought it might be. He didn’t actually read the whole book. He’d spend two seconds reading, and then say, “Okay, you read it to me,” I’d spend about ten seconds reading to him, and then he’d say, “Okay, it’s fine.” I made sure I read him all of the parts he might be sensitive about and he was fine with almost all of it. Writing about his father was a little more sensitive for him. I felt mixed about never having read it to Toru’s father. He was dying while I was writing the book. He knew that I was a writer and that I wrote some things...

MU: Is it okay to share if you think overall, it honors the person? Or is it okay to be truthful because the truth is the truth?



TS: My family is very generous, but if they could choose, they’d be happy to not have another writer in the family. I’m not willing to ruin a relationship with someone I love over a book.

MU: That’s something your daughter will see (when she is older and reads your work), your fairness in presenting this culture, your family, and any potential divides. Maybe that changes the way you write, too, having a child? There is continuance. There is, also, the question of how much do we disclose about our children.

You’ll be a lot more public when it comes out in Japanese! You’ll interview

on NHK and be famous at your daughter’s preschool! How exciting to be at this launching place, knowing that the Japanese translation is right around the corner, and *The Good Shufu* has already been so well-received.

TS: My publisher did a superb job of getting it in the right hands. My editor also helped me tremendously. See, my training was academic, but I did not want to write academically; I wanted to write a book that was enjoyable, a book in which a reader would get caught up. That is my very favorite quality of reading, but my academic background and ability was not going to help me. I’m not trained as a creative writer. My

editor pointed out where it was too much of an explanation, and not enough of a narrative. This is what changed in the various drafts of the book—creating a book that would appeal to people who weren't looking for an academic read. I hope that some readers feel there are some parts that are thoughtful, while also enjoying a story to get caught up in.

MU: It sounds like you are doing that. Kirkus Review says, "The book truly finds its legs when the couple reunites in America, as Slater chronicles how she began to acclimate to Toru's country... The author certainly makes the telling of it work." It sure sounds like you grew as a writer in moving the story forward. What is another way in which writing TGS helped you grow as a writer?

TS: I love reading writing where there is nothing extra. There's no extra language, no extra description, and it's still so evocative. That's such a balance to me and a way to honor the power of language and to play with the imagination. When I began writing about this experience, I didn't even know that was something I liked about writing. I could have pointed to books that did this, but I would not have known how to articulate this. It's something I try to move towards in this book and I still have a way to go. This book gave me an opportunity in which to practice. That's not something you're trained as an academic to do.

MU: I feel like it's in every culture, and certain writers are really known for this, but I feel like Japan is really good at cutting off what is not needed, like in ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arranging, knowing the essence of something, but getting it down to bare bones, it's most beautiful, simplest essence.

TS: That is something beautiful about

Japanese esthetics. That very sense and style put into words.

MU: In moving away from home, one misses out on family, misses out on them being with your daughter, all of the things we have pain over, holidays, the sense of community as a writer, as a thinker, etc. What, in terms of your Jewish community and writerly culture, have you gained in terms of community in being here?

TS: I have a number of friends here who are writers and they are so important to me. These friends are foreigners but they are also writers. It is so nice to have something that I can have in common with people in any part of the world. There's a way in which the writing community is much smaller, obviously, than in Boston, but because it's smaller, it's a little bit more intimate and that's nice. Meeting you, say, is so exciting. It's so nice to know someone is a writer, but there are so many writers in Boston, it doesn't make that person special. That is one nice thing.

Also important for me to remember, there's so much that is hard about being away from a literary community. It's so easy to say, "Gosh, think of all the things I could be doing in Boston right now—the literary festivals, this and that, but I also think I might not have the publishing career that I have now. I don't think I would have gotten published, frankly, if I did not have the Japan experience. It's important for me to remember that... I owe Japan! It's so easy to say, "Oh if I were doing something different, things would be... Oh, if I were in the US, this would be better..."

My editor requested, "Can you add something about Japan being [your] home?" No, because it's not my home. Toru my home, but Japan's not my

home. I'll never feel like Japan's my home. "How do I honor that and also honor what she was getting at, which was a sense of closure," I wondered.

MU: It's exciting that your daughter will have both. Hopefully she will have both places that feel like home.

TS: Right. I feel like being in Japan has deepened my Judaism. Being here has strengthened my connection to my Jewish identity, has given me a desire to practice my religion in a way I never planned. Now, I'm not going to go out and join an Orthodox shul, but I definitely want to celebrate the Jewish holidays in our home; that is almost entirely, if not entirely, due to being in Japan.

MU: Do you have any funny stories of making a Shabbat or Chanukah or using a makeshift Japanese ingredient because you didn't have what you needed?

TS: I did, before my daughter, Toru's father always wanted me to make Jewish food. Toru asked for the Jewish meatballs! Also, we ended up going out to Chinese food on Christmas. We go out to Chinese food every year on Christmas because that's what we do in America.

MU: You know what works well? Grinding fresh wasabi as horseradish on Passover.

TS: Ooh, I love horseradish!

MU: It's not the pink Manischewitz, but it's good. 🌸

Melissa Uchiyama lives in Tokyo with her husband and two children. She has contributed to a number of blogs, books and publications. To read more of her work, visit her blog at <http://melibelleintokyo.com/>.