

Japanese wizardry

Education, Literacy and the Harry Potter Effect

Wednesday 4 June 2008

Moderator: **Barbara Ischinger**, Director, Education, OECD

Yuko Matsuoka Harris, Publisher and translator of the Japanese Harry Potter books, Say-zan-sha Publications, Ltd.

Japan has successfully exported *Mangas* and game consoles to the West, and in this flip of culture, Japanese publisher **Yuko Matsuoka Harris** explained the trials and tribulations of introducing a very Anglo-Celtic tale to the broad Japanese public.

While his means of travel on a broomstick might be sustainable, if not always stable, the session ignored the carbon footprint of the worldwide Harry Potter “industry”, currently estimated to be worth US\$15 billion, to focus rather on the issues of translating the hugely successful saga, which is now published across the world in 65 languages.

Cultural differences can create enormous problems for translations, ranging from descriptions of gesticulations to names that produce anagrams for convoluted messages. A slide-show that accompanied the discussion included a photo of a spectacularly thumb-marked Potter book, spiked with sticky post-note interrogations on almost every other page, testifying to the long labour of transforming the work into Japanese without losing any of the original magic.

A former professional conference interpreter, Ms Harris inherited a small publishing house in Japan from her late husband. It was shortly after his death, during a visit to the UK, that she first heard of Harry Potter, months after the publication of the first book in the series, and before the character had met with global interest. A friend suggested that this was a book worth the risk.

After two months of negotiations, she won the publishing rights for the Japanese translation of “Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone”. It took countless long days and late nights, and a lot of help from friends, to reach publication a year later.

Asked what the main challenges were, Ms Harris cited the frequent descriptions of body language, like “goggling eyes” and “thumbs-up”, which are unknown in Japan. Names were also an issue, for example, Professor Sprout, who teaches plants. He finally became Professor Soporoutu. Food names, too, were a problem. She recalled stumbling over lemon sherbet—until a British friend sent her a kilo of the stuff. Then there were all those anagrams.

But the book was published a year later. Within a month, and with no advertising, 30,000 copies flew off the shelves. The figure spiralled to 500,000 after just six months. Ten years and seven books later, total sales now exceed five million.

Ms Harris said that 50% of Japanese Potter fans said the book had encouraged them to read more literature in general, and Potter readers among children claimed they received higher marks at school. She was convinced the success of Harry Potter had encouraged children to read more, and not just because Harry's cousin Dudley, who spends most of his time watching television, is portrayed as obese and mean.

GT/MB