

Interview

by Susan Blumberg-Kason



At Home in the World

*Interview with
Leza Lowitz*

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Asian Jewish Life: You have written over a dozen books on a wide range of topics, from young adult fiction to memoir to yoga poetry to travel guides, multicultural mothering anthologies, and many more. Did you always know you wanted to be a writer? And how did you get your start in publishing?

Leza Lowitz: As a child, I loved reading (still do!), and started writing at age eight. I didn't publish my first book until I was thirty, after going to Japan to seek out poets who debunked the myth of the "docile" Japanese woman. Stone Bridge Press published my anthology of contemporary Japanese women's poetry in 1995.

AJL: Your forthcoming memoir, *Here Comes the Sun: A Journey to Adoption in 8 Chakras* (Stone Bridge Press, 2015), is certainly not your first book. Was it more difficult to write this one than the previous books because memoir is so personal? What was the most difficult part about writing this book?

LL: I'm interested in ideas of identity and history. How is culture shaped, and how are we (particularly women) shaped by it? I spent the first part of my writing career exploring these issues as they pertain to my adopted home of Japan. When I turned forty, I decided to turn the lens on myself. All of my more personal books deal with notions of finding home. We all long to belong somewhere, after all.

Yoga Poems: Lines to Unfold By deals with finding a home in one's body. *Yoga Heart* charts the path to finding a home in the spirit. *Jet Black* is an adventure story about a biracial girl seeking to find home in another country, and in herself.



Leza Lowitz

Here Comes The Sun is about finding a home in each other and in the world.

Here Comes the Sun charts my quest for motherhood across two continents, two decades, and two thousand yoga poses. It was definitely the most difficult to write, being so personal. In the memoir (and in my life), I had to ask myself questions many mothers never consider. Why did I want to be a mother? This question led me on a pilgrimage from the U.S. to Japan and to India. *Here Comes the Sun* is my meditation on the answer.

AJL: In your memoir, you explain that it's unusual to adopt in Japan because Japanese culture places such a high importance on lineage. Have you noticed any changes in attitudes about adoption in Japan since you brought your son home?

LL: Japan was closed to the world until 1868, and considers itself a homogenous country, though there are indigenous tribes and races. In Japan, your lineage and bloodline define you. America is still a young country, and it values the individual, celebrates one's ability to

invent or re-invent oneself, regardless as to where one "comes from."

Visiting Amma's Ashram in India helped me understand that bonds do not always come from bloodlines. Even though Amma (the "hugging saint") is not a biological mother, she is one of the most maternal presences I've ever met. That experience transformed me, as did living abroad.

I realized I would never become Japanese, nor did I want to. So who was I? Away from a familiar language and cultural norms that might otherwise define me, I had to define myself. Every day brought challenges, but hitting walls helped me grow in ways I might not have had I stayed in the U.S. I eventually realized I didn't want to have a child so much as to be a mother. And then my child came.

In Japan, people historically adopted for financial reasons — to have an heir or to continue a family line. It is rare to adopt for love. But we did, and more and more others are doing so, too.

When I shared our story, people encouraged me to write a book. In a country with such a prevailing single narrative, I wanted to inspire people to write their own stories. And I hoped that love could be the new bloodline.

AJL: Your young adult novel, *Jet Black and the Ninja Wind* (Tuttle, 2013) was co-written with your husband, Shogo Oketani. How did you come up with the idea of this story?

LL: *Jet Black and the Ninja Wind* was born from a discussion we had after *Memoirs of A Geisha* came out. We wanted to tell a story about a strong Asian woman, not someone shuffling ten

steps behind her man in a tight kimono.

So we wrote a novel about the last living female ninja. You might think of ninja as B-Grade assassins, like I did. But Shogo felt that ninja could have been tribal people who developed secret arts to protect themselves against powerful invading forces. Women were skilled fighters, too.

I was interested in that history; Shogo loved Native American culture. We connected Japanese indigenous lore with the story of some modern warriors—the Navajo Code Talkers. The Navajo and Emishi tribes come together to save an ancient treasure. The legend of King Solomon plays a part in the story, too.

Shogo did the hard work — conceiving of the book, then writing, researching and translating his Japanese draft into English. I did the relatively fun part, editing the book and finding a publisher.

AJL: Do you plan to write more young adult novels?

LL: I have two solo YA books coming out — *Up From the Sea*, a novel in verse about a biracial teen who finds a new community after he loses his family and home to the 2011 tsunami (2016) and *Salvage*, a love story between a Japanese boy and American girl (2017), both from Crown/Random House.

I never imagined I'd be writing for young adults, but reading saved my life when I was a teenager, and I feel blessed to be able to write for teens.

AJL: How did you first decide to move to Japan? Like many expats who stay, did

you go to Japan thinking you would only be there a short time?

LL: I practiced meditation and martial arts as a teenager, and also did my M.A. in Japanese literature. I had a longstanding interest in Japanese culture, but I never thought I'd live here forever — I still don't. I first came to Tokyo in 1989 to edit the anthology of contemporary Japanese women's poetry I mentioned above, on a grant from the NEH. In my mid-twenties, I worked as a journalist and lecturer at Tokyo University. After five years, I was ready to leave. One night I went to a jazz club and saw my future husband across the room. I left anyway; moved back to California. He followed me. Ten years later, he returned to Tokyo. That time, I followed him.

AJL: As a Jewish woman who has lived in Japan for more than 15 years, do you think you have become more conscious of your Jewish identity because you live in a country with a relatively small Jewish community? Does Judaism figure into your everyday life at home?

LL: Living in a foreign country (especially a notoriously “closed” one like Japan) and adapting to another culture with an entirely different set of rules and beliefs, makes you an outsider. The upside of being on the margins is that you become conscious of your own core beliefs and values. Judaism had shaped my inner life in ways I wasn't even aware of until I left home.

In Japan, I missed the rituals that had shaped my childhood — lighting Shabbat candles, celebrating the High Holidays with extended family. But it wasn't until our son came that I found a wonderful Jewish

community in Tokyo. Their values reflected underlying beliefs I wanted to pass down — selfless service, interconnectedness, charity. This helped me appreciate and reconnect to my Jewish roots. And when I did, it felt like home.

AJL: A major part of your work in Japan centers around yoga. Is yoga popular in Japan with locals, or do you see more expats than locals in your studio? Yoga has certainly become more popular in the West over the last decade or two. Have you noticed a similar development in Japan?

LL: When I moved back to Japan in 2003, people told me it was crazy to open a yoga studio in the country of Zen, but I didn't listen. I wanted to offer California-style yoga, partner yoga, community classes for charity, and restorative yoga. I'd been warned that community classes wouldn't fly in status-conscious Japan. Again, I didn't listen.

The yoga boom hadn't happened here yet, so my timing was good. Now, yoga is as almost as popular here as it is in the West. We've been open for twelve years, and have students from all over Japan and the world.

Yoga, like indigenous teachings, teaches that we have an innate unity and connection to nature, to each other, and to the planet. That's a common thread between yoga, ninjutsu, and Judaism, too. All spiritual practices offer a path to help us move from “me” to “we” so we can be at home wherever we are in the world. ✧

For more about Leza, check out her website: www.lezalowitz.com