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Multilingual story collection preserves language and tradition

Mari Okumura and Gina Valle partner to bring Canadians a collection of multilingual stories

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TORONTO — *The Best of All Worlds*, a new book developed by Dr. Gina Valle, founder of Diversity Matters, was launched on October 4 with the hopes of promoting diversity in language.

It is a collection of 7 of the best stories that were selected through the Rainbow Caterpillar Multilingual Kid Lit Award sponsored by Rainbow Caterpillar Multilingual Bookshop in Toronto.

What makes this book unique is that these 7 stories were originally written in their author's native languages respectively Arabic, Farsi, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish, and translated into Canada's two official languages, English and French.

The original language of the story along with English and French translations are compiled on each page.

We spoke with author Mari Okumura who wrote the book's Japanese piece *The Wonderful Furoshiki* and organizer Gina Valle.

Nikkei Voice: Tell us a little about yourself, what do you do?

Mari Okumura: I'm a nursery school teacher at Ikebata nursery school, and do volunteer work at Children's Art Studio on weekends. In the studio, I'm teaching art in Japanese to children. Since I'm Japanese, I try to introduce Japanese artists such as Taro Okamoto or Yayoi Kusama as much as possible.

NV: What has your life been like in Canada?

MO: It's been five years since I started living Toronto. At first I got a working permit called "Live-in-caregiver Program". This is a program for people who want to work as caregivers in a family. I applied for permanent residence status after that.

NV: What made you start write the piece *The Wonderful Furoshiki*?

MO: Actually, it was not originally made for the book. I'd been baby-sitting a girl for almost three years. At the end, I had to say good-bye to her and go my own way. Then I felt like expressing the feeling of "I love you" to her, so I started to write it. We'd been together during a very important growing phase for her, from 2 years old to 5, and I thought she would have a feeling of loss

if I suddenly went to live apart from her, since we became sort of family each other. I could've simply bought something for her, but instead, I just wanted to make something for her by myself visualizing our memories. In my piece, two objects, a furoshiki and a kappa show up, which are exactly related to what we used to play together. We used to play with a furoshiki, and she enjoyed listening to a story of kappa. That's why I put these two in my piece to enchant her.

NV: How was your piece selected to be a part of *The Best of All Worlds*?

MO: At around the same time as I wrote the piece, one of my friend told me that a book store Rainbow Caterpillar was running "Multilingual Kid Lit Award" and said, "Why don't you apply for the award?" Then I submitted it, and thankfully got an honorable mention. It was picked up to be one of the collections of the book after that.

NV: What do you think is the importance of multiculturalism and multilingualism?

MO: I think we can take advantage of the characteristics of this country. We can feel and experience various kinds of cultures on a daily basis, but it's not that easy in Japan. Also, I would say it's important to recognize where



ILLUSTRATION COURTESY GINA VALLE

Pictured here is an illustration from Mari Okumura's piece 'The Wonderful Furoshiki' that is part of 'The Best of All Worlds'.

we originally came from, and what language they originally speak back home. But this is only my opinion. The most important thing is to be happy, so I think we don't have to be too sensitive about that.

Nikkei Voice: What inspired you to publish this book?

Gina Valle: When children see their languages and cultures reflected in books, the community is proud and feel that a part of their lives are valued in Canada. This book is the first of its kind

in Canada. Seven stories in 7 languages, translated into English and French. All original, including the illustrations.

NV: You said it took 18 months to publish this book. What kind of difficulty had you gone through in the process of publishing?

GV: We needed to select the stories according to all the winning entries, find illustrators, have each story edited then translated into English and then into French; choose the illustrations,

find graphic artists who loved the project as much as we did; commission someone to do the book cover; ensure that each language received equal distribution in the book; find funding when our principle funder did not come through, so in the end we had divert our energies to fund raise and that was frustrating; find a cost effective way to print and distribute because Amazon and Indigo wanted the book at a discounted price and given how much it cost, that was not an option.

NV: What was the reaction of readers so far?

GV: Since the book is so unique, everyone loves it. We launched at a fabulous branch of the Toronto public library. The Alliance Française has organized several events. The authors have been given several interviews in their respective communities. The Toronto Public Library placed a large order for their libraries in Toronto. We are very happy about the reaction. Two of our contributors are Syrian-Canadian, so that is something I am particularly proud of given the situation with Syria and the refugees.

NV: I think this book really fits in Canadian culture, since Canada is a country of multiculturalism, and it consists of people from all over the world. And it really express the importance of having diversity. Do you have any ideas to publish this book in another country as well?

GV: If the book does well and readers enjoy it, I will consider doing other books, but for now

the answer is no. The book can be sold in other countries. A colleague who left for Iran took several copies to show administrators at their schools and government, so here is a genuine interest to get this book into the hands of children, their parents and grandparents, schools, French immersion, ESL.

NV: What can we do to preserve disappearing languages?

GV: Speak your language at home with your family and your friends. My children speak three languages and at the dinner table, we speak three all the time. Model for your children, even if it feels awkward, push yourself to make an effort so that the language means something to the next generation. Take them to movies in your mother language. Buy books and magazines, go to festivals and cultural events showcasing your culture and language. Canada is amazing for that.

As the website of At One press says, 2015 marks fifteen years since UNESCO established the International Mother Language Day "to promote unity in diversity and international understanding, through multilingualism and multiculturalism."

This book will make you think about the importance of valuing multicultural diversity, and passing down traditions to future generations.

The book is available at <http://www.atonepress.ca/>, or you can also visit the Rainbow Caterpillar bookshop (165 Lauder Ave., Toronto).