



Interview with Sophie-chan

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KENNEALLY: Enormously popular in Japan for more than century, manga today is a global publishing phenomenon, with millions of fans in Europe, the Middle East, and North America. While the audience for comic books in the United States lies primarily with boys and men, manga titles in Japan have long enjoyed a significant audience among girls and women. Women artists, too, have figured prominently, writing and drawing stories of adventure, romance, and fantasy.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series, I'm Christopher Kenneally for *Beyond the Book*. For 2018, Los Angeles based manga publisher TOKYOPOP has thrown a spotlight on the international women of manga. One of the featured artists is Safa Al Ani, as known as Sophie-chan, who began drawing and writing manga stories when she was seven years old. Sophie-chan gained a global following after posting drawing instructional videos on your YouTube channel, eventually attracting over 33 million video views.

In April TOKYOPOP will release her latest book the second volume of *Ocean of Secrets*, telling the adventures of Lia, a teenaged orphan who was lost at sea and rescued by runaways on a magical ship. Sophie-chan was born in 1990 in Iraq, and she joins me now from her studio outside Toronto. Welcome to *Beyond the Book*, Sophie-chan.

CHAN: Thank you, Christopher. Thank you so much.

KENNEALLY: We are looking forward to speaking with you and marking TOKYOPOP's International Women of Manga Year for 2018. As I mentioned in the introduction for people who may not be familiar, manga is a very special artform, one with its own traditions and history, and in particular a history of women as artists and creators. We're looking forward to hearing more about your own experience as a manga author. I guess my first question to you would be, so what led you to become such a creator in the first place.

CHAN: Yeah, so I loved writing stories since I was 11 years old. I loved drawing, as well so I found something that combines both, which is comics, which in Japanese is named manga. So the manga style was my favorite since I was very influenced by the animated TV shows that I used to watch when I was a kid. Also I kept holding onto that dream, when I was a kid, of having my own published manga book, so I feel that's what



really led me to becoming one. Even though I graduated from school and I went to engineering, but it was there in the back of my mind that I wanted to become a manga artist.

KENNEALLY: Well, we certainly suggest, and we strongly urge, in fact, our listeners to check out your YouTube channel, because there are a number of videos there that not only are the instructional videos for drawing manga characters, but there are some that are very deeply biographical and that tell your stories you just alluded to. You've lived a life around the world and had to make choices over and over about whether you would become an author – a manga author or not. As you say, you did choose to become an engineer, but clearly you couldn't stay away from this artform.

CHAN: Exactly, yeah. The environment didn't help as much, and back in the days, manga is not even a career choice that you can go to. Like there weren't even schools around or universities to actually study manga. So it was very challenging for me to actually pursue that dream. But even after I graduated engineering, I still wanted to do that, even though I didn't study. It's just the support that I had from my followers made me realize that maybe I can.

KENNEALLY: Well, it's a real talent you have. I guess I want to ask you about manga as an artform. You mentioned that you were inspired by your experience as a reader and as a viewer of animated series that were based in anime – animated manga. But for people who are listening who may not be such fans of manga, can you explain what it is about the form that they might not appreciate and that you really would tell them they should be looking for the next time they encounter manga?

CHAN: Well, I'd say for me, I really love the style and emotions that you can portray through that form of art. It extends to many categories, just like movies, for example, and some of them are not appropriate, or may not be suitable for younger audience. So there are so many themes that you can go to if you are into fantasy, adventures. You can see a lot of animated series and manga about that. If you're into crime or, for example, thriller, then – or horror, for example, you can still go there. So it caters so many tastes, just like movies.

KENNEALLY: And what are the stories that interest you most? You can tell us about your own work, but it seems that you're attracted to the adventure and to the fantasy that is so popular in manga.

CHAN: Yes, that's what I write about, as well. It's just I'm really in love with fantasy. It's always about the kingdom in a far-away land in a fairy tale that I love to tell. And even the type of stories I used to write when I was a kid, it was all fantasy. I do



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sometimes enjoy some psychological thriller as well as drama, which is why I have some drama in my manga, as well.

KENNEALLY: In fact, I was going to ask you about that drama because it really focuses on the women characters in your book. I guess that's not surprising as a woman yourself, but what's it like to create characters – women female heroes?

CHAN: Well, the first volume features a female character, while the second one features a male character. So people always think that the whole story is going to revolve around just one woman, but in fact, it's just more than one character, and the first one happens to be a woman. But I have a very strong connection with Lia because this was the very first character I made, and that was like seven years ago, so to me Lia has been where I've started off with this book. So in terms of the personalities, I have Lia and Moria in the first volume, and they're both strong lead characters. Lia developed some strength and bravery from her friend, Moria, who showed determination and heroism, as well, in the first volume. So I'd say Lia is the type of girl who would sacrifice her life for the people she loves, and stand in the way of danger to protect her people.

So in the first volume there is a strong bond of friendship and respect between the two characters, which is something I've always found to be beautiful.

KENNEALLY: Indeed, it sounds it. I was thinking that if you've been working that particular character for seven years, you must feel like you know her like a friend.

CHAN: Yeah, and it's like we've grown up together, like we've started off somewhere, and then we're growing up with time, so it's just – I feel really connected to Lia.

KENNEALLY: This second book in the *Ocean of Secrets* series is coming out in April, and it will be welcomed, I'm sure, by your fans online because as we mentioned, you've done a series of instructional drawing videos on YouTube. I think there's something like more than 400,000 subscribers and over 33 million video views. So you must be quite happy with that. But did the reaction surprise you, and why did you choose in the first place to create instructional videos?

CHAN: Well, the reaction, of course, it did surprise me. I never expected to reach that much. I have posted the video after watching a few drawing videos out there, and thought, I'm giving it a try. My art wasn't that great, but somehow it went viral and I kept posting. So after posting a few drawing videos, some people were asking for tutorials, so I gave it a try again, and they liked them. One of my tutorial videos has three million or four million views, and it's still getting lots and lots of views, so that really makes me happy.



I can tell you this whole YouTube decision impacted my career, and where I am today, so if it wasn't for that enormous support maybe I wouldn't have believed in myself that much. I needed all that encouragement and excitement from my fans to continue this journey.

KENNEALLY: And it does give you an idea, too, of just how popular this form is and the more people read it, perhaps they, like you, dream about becoming manga artists, themselves.

CHAN: Yeah, there's so many I know, and so many cases I've seen where their art gets really well and they actually progress and they do – they even branch out to different forms of art, but still, they started where I've started, we both wanted to do the same thing. So it's a beautiful community out there, I love them.

KENNEALLY: As we mentioned in the introduction, you were born in Iraq, you've lived in several different countries, and now have emigrated to Canada. How do you think all those experiences in your real life have influenced your work?

CHAN: Well, I left Iraq when I was five years old, and I spent the majority in the Middle East, and some time in Africa. Then four years ago I came to Canada. So I feel that I've been introduced to so many cultures and people, some different environments. So since my art follows the Japanese style, I can't say it did express all of these experiences, but I believe the emotions were fully portrayed in both the artwork and the story.

KENNEALLY: And that would be important because it sounds to me like you really deeply care about your fans, you deeply care about the art, and you care about these characters.

CHAN: Exactly. It's one way of writing better story is experiencing more and knowing how characters would react or feel to certain events, so that's how I think about it.

KENNEALLY: We look forward to reading the latest instalment of *The Ocean of Secrets* and want to offer you congratulations again. We've been speaking today with Sophie-chan and marking the International Women of Manga Year for 2018. Sophie-chan, thanks so much for joining us on *Beyond the Book*.

CHAN: Thank you so much, Christopher for having me here.

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Beyond the Book co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Join us again soon on *Beyond the Book*.

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