



Interview with Natalia Batista
[International Women of Manga](#)

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KENNEALLY: As far back as 1997 and the company's earliest days, Los Angeles-based manga publisher Tokyopop has given prominence in its catalog to women artists and women readers. Tokyopop has deep roots in shōjo manga, stories developed expressly for teenage girls and young women, first in Japan and then around the world. For 2018, Tokyopop is highlighting international women of manga. Featured artist Natalia Batista of Sweden has recently launched an English-language edition of a fairytale with a royal twist.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book. Natalia Batista is a Swedish manga artist, illustrator, and comic art teacher at Serieskolan in Malmö, the most prominent comic art school in Sweden. She was a founding member of the Swedish Manga Artists Collective and publisher at Nosebleed Studio. Her works include the kids' manga *Mjau!*, published in Sweden, Portugal, and the US, and *Sword Princess Amaltea*, set in a fairytale world where queens rule.

While visiting the US West Coast, where she's welcomed the public to a series of manga drawing classes, Natalia Batista is taking a break to share with Beyond the Book listeners her experiences as a rising star in manga. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Natalia.

BATISTA: Hey, thank you so much, Chris.

KENNEALLY: We're looking forward to speaking with you. We have spoken to several others who are featured in the Tokyopop International Women of Manga Year, and your visit to the United States is an occasion to catch up with you. It's interesting to me, at least, as someone who hasn't followed manga very closely – I would have associated it with Japan and with tales of superheroes, so your work stands out because you are, of course, non-Japanese, a woman, writing fantasy for a largely female audience. Was it difficult to find space for yourself and for your books?

BATISTA: I think actually the non-Japanese artists are growing a lot, especially in Europe, and a lot of them are kind of influenced by not only manga, but for



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example, fantasy, sci-fi, books, TV shows. So I think the influences are kind of making the stories wider than just Japanese culture.

KENNEALLY: Is it still nevertheless considered to be a hurdle to get over to be from outside Japan, or are you feeling that all of this has really opened things up to a global voice?

BATISTA: There's still prejudice. Unless you have a Japanese name, there's always going to be people saying you can't do this because you're not Japanese. So for an artist being non-Japanese, I try to overcome that. But at the same time, my work speaks for itself. When people actually see it, I think they can't avoid calling it manga, because I'm so influenced by it. But still there is a flair of something non-Japanese into it, but I like that. I think people like the fact that artists from all over the world can make manga and make it in different ways. I have seen manga from Brazil, from Germany, from Jordan, and all these kind of mangas have different flairs, and I like that.

KENNEALLY: What about the voice of a woman in these stories? How important is that, and how different is that, do you think, from some of the manga in the past?

BATISTA: Actually, the thing with manga is I think it made the whole comics industry in the West more equal. What we saw with manga is that a lot of the readers are female, and a lot of the con goers, the people who go to the anime cons and the cosplay conventions, they are female. A majority of them are female. So in some ways, the fact that manga took place in the comics community both in America and in Europe kind of opened up the comics culture for women in some ways.

KENNEALLY: And your story takes that opening further – opens it wider, I think. The synopsis for *Sword Princess Amaltea* is a mirror image of a timeless plot. A young princess is sent on the biggest quest of her life to rescue a prince in need. But when she does, the prince isn't so willing after all. So essentially you flipped the classic romance and fantasy on its ear. Was that fun to do?

BATISTA: Yeah, it was really fun. My inspiration for it was, of course, all these kind of fantasy TV shows, like *Game of Thrones*. Right when I started making the stories, the whole *Lord of the Rings* phenomenon was in the peak of it. So I was thinking, why can we come up with fantasy stories that are like dragons and mythical creatures, but we can't come up with a story with women as the ruling gender? That to me was a bit perplexing. So I tried to find more manga and comics and stories and books with matriarchies. I know there's Ursula Le Guin who does a lot of those, so I recommend her stuff. But sadly, it's a niche – a small niche or



nonexistent almost. And in manga, it's sadly mostly patriarchal societies in the fantasy genre.

KENNEALLY: That's quite interesting. The US launch of *Amaltea* seems almost ready-made for journalists to get a manga take on the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements as they apply to publishing. But the catch here is that you first published the book in Sweden several years ago, so you were ahead of the curve there. Have all the headlines, though, made any difference to the book's reception in the US from its first days in Europe?

BATISTA: Oh, yeah. I think the whole #MeToo had kind of a prehistory as well. We have been talking about this for a long time, and I think it's been brewing. So I think how people are portraying women in movies, in books, in comics – it's always been something people wanted to address. And when the #MeToo came, it was like a boom, and we're like, yes, let's talk about this now. We need to talk about this now. But I think the idea has been there for a long time.

KENNEALLY: Indeed, at Nosebleed Studio, which traces its origins over a decade ago, a number of women artists involved there. So you've been working this ground for a long time now.

BATISTA: Mm-hmm. And what we try to do is collect artists, but also publish our own stuff. So we are sadly today the only publisher in Sweden who does manga, and it's partly because of you Americans, (laughter) because as Swedish people are too good in reading English – we don't dub things in TV, we learn English from the age of seven – so all the teenagers, they read the English titles, the American titles that get – the imported stuff from America to Sweden. In some ways, it's not financially viable to publish the Japanese titles in Swedish anymore. So what we do is we produce our own stuff, and that's stuff that can't be available in English first, because we are from Sweden, so we make them in Swedish.

But now we're seeing actually a network of publishers – small independent publishers in Europe that are trying to connect to each other to share works of non-Japanese artists that they have in their countries. I have friends in Italy, in Germany, in Portugal who all have their own publishing houses, and they publish European artists, and now they are looking to America as well, wanting to find American manga artists that they can publish in Europe.

KENNEALLY: You're certainly turning a lot of things on their heads, because you've got the story of a world where queens rule and princes need to be rescued. You've got manga coming from Sweden to the United States, rather sort of reversing that trade imbalance, so to speak. And while you are here in California, you're giving



storytelling workshops and manga drawing lessons, and I suppose sort of reaching into your background there as a teacher at the Serieskolan in Malmö, which is a very highly regarded comic art school in Sweden, across the strait and the Baltic Sea from Copenhagen, Denmark. Are you finding at these various events that American readers and would-be manga artists are any different from your students at home? Are they interested in different things? Or is it pretty much what you see when you're back home in Sweden?

BATISTA: The interesting thing is I visited Anime Expo in LA this past weekend, and another interesting thing is that it seems like here in America, the talk about fan art and the copyright issues about fan art – and I know you talk a lot about copyright on this podcast, which I really appreciate – haven't advanced as much as in Europe.

A lot of the conventions in Europe are talking about fan art as something we should limit. Some conventions actually limit it and says you have to have at least 50% original stuff on your table when you're going to sell in the artist alley among other artists. I think this is a good progression. There's even some conventions, like the London Comic Con, who have a comics village where artists can sell their stuff, and they have to sell original works. If they want to sell fan art, which is a copyright gray zone, they have to buy a booth and pay much more money.

I don't see this as much in America so far, from my point of view, at least, and I think that's something that needs to be talked about. Because what I saw at Anime Expo was a lot of great talent, wonderful artists, and when I came up to them and I asked, do you have original works, comics, and they said, yeah, sure. And I'm like, where are they? (laughter) They're not on your table. Yeah, they don't sell here. That's the answer I got. And I get a little bit sad about this, because I want to see the original works.

KENNEALLY: I'm with you there, Natalia. It seems to me disappointing to hear such stories and great for you to be encouraging those artists to get beyond the fan art and to show their own works. It comes to my last question, I think, pretty well, which is just how dynamic the world of manga is today. And I wonder what you think it means for manga publishing and even for manga readers that women like yourself are now finding success and so forth. Are you excited about the future for manga? Do you expect to see it to really change and develop?

BATISTA: Yes. What I see in Europe happening, and I think it's happening in America as well, is the artists are getting on the level talent-wise and storytelling-wise that they can compare to the Japanese artists, and then you're kind of erasing the boundaries between non-Japanese and Japanese manga. Even the Japanese people are appreciating the non-Japanese artists who do manga. They have international



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competitions that they aim for artists not living in Japan, and they still call it manga and they want you to send in and apply with manga works. I think this is a step in the direction of making manga more global.

So I think within 10, 20 years, we'll see manga as a global industry, and we'll see similar industries as they have in Japan – we'll see it in Europe, in South America, in America. We'll see this kind of structure, and we'll see the publishers as productive as the Japanese ones. I think so.

KENNEALLY: Indeed, and efforts like the one that Tokyopop is undertaking to highlight the international women of manga are helping that get to realization even faster.

We have been speaking with Natalia Batista of Malmö, Sweden, who is the author of the *Sword Princess Amaltea*, just out from Tokyopop. We appreciate you joining us today on Beyond the Book.

BATISTA: Thank you so much.

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