



Interview with manga author/artist Caly

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KENNEALLY: When it comes to manga, prejudices can abound. For one thing, many readers harbor prejudices about these graphic novels, which originated in Japan more than a century ago. A typical manga plot, according to these fixed ideas, is sentimental fantasy at best and antisocial when taken to extreme.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book.

Prejudging manga would mean missing a great deal in an art form that enjoys a massive global audience. In Japan alone, popular titles can sell many millions of copies. Apart from treasure hunts and battles with monsters, there are manga romances, of course, including the same-sex subgenres called *yaoi* and *yuri*. And women have long played an important part as readers as well as authors.

As an ongoing program celebrating the international women of manga, Los Angeles-based manga publisher Tokyopop has recently published *Breath of Flowers* by Paris artist Caly. Its characters live in a teen world of school sports, school bullies, and classmate crushes. But the story pulls these traditional themes in unexpected and very contemporary directions. Caly joins me now from Paris. Welcome to Beyond the Book. *Bienvenue.*

CALY: *Merci.* Thank you for inviting me.

KENNEALLY: We look forward to chatting with you. We have been following a variety of manga artists in recent months who are spotlighted in the Tokyopop series, International Women of Manga. So it's a real pleasure to have you join us in that series. I suppose we want to ask you first to describe the plot, the story of *Breath of Flowers*, but don't give away too much.

CALY: OK. So its plot is about Azami. She is a young girl who believes in a love story as in fairy tales. She thinks that her Prince Charming is Gwyn, a boy of high school, just a little older than her (inaudible) and attractive. And a good day, according to her (inaudible) declaration, she's going to find him at the exit of the locker room. But she will discover something that will radically change her vision of love.



KENNEALLY: That's right. And I suppose we have to tell people what that discovery is. So this Prince Charming is not exactly what he seems to be.

CALY: Yes, because her Prince Charming is actually a girl. So she have to think about her feelings and change her mind.

KENNEALLY: Right. And Gwyn is a very interesting character, this Prince Charming who is not what he or she seems. She has very emotional reasons for choosing to cross over from being a woman to a man. Tell us a little bit about that and what your objectives were in telling this story.

CALY: So my first objective is to write a fresh and (inaudible) love story, because my previous comic is just about friendship, and I wanted to try another kind of story. So I created the manga that tells Azami and Gwyn, two girls, and I thought, why should it be a boy and a girl? I can write about two girls. It's still a love story. So I have two really strong characters, but two very sensitive, too. (laughter)

KENNEALLY: So you have these two characters – as you say, very strong characters, but very sensitive characters, too. And they really learn a lot in the story. They learn about other people and the surprises that other people can always bring to your life, but they also learn about themselves.

CALY: Yeah, a lot. She – they, both of them – learn about herself, about their feelings, about being a girl or being someone in this society and being in a couple when you are two girls – all these kind of things.

KENNEALLY: Right. So they obviously are struggling with these feelings at an age when those kinds of struggles are so much more important than they ever are at other times in our lives. It's also important that we are at a contemporary moment when definitions of sexuality and gender are very fluid right now.

CALY: Yeah, but I did not imagine my story as a committed story at the beginning. But after the release of the first volume, I realized that presenting a love story between two girls as a normal love story, as it should always be, is a formal commitment.

KENNEALLY: You've been a manga artist for a number of years, Caly. Do you see manga as an important way to reach readers, especially young readers? It seems your book and other books like it are a way for them to reflect on similar situations in their own lives.



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CALY: Yeah, I think so, because from personal experience, I learned a lot of things thanks to my favorite manga – simply about Japanese culture, for example, or vocabulary. Or when you read a manga, you can meet so much characters. Some of them are like you, and others are completely different. But it can help you to understand them.

With *Breath of Flowers*, during signing, I met several young people who could identify themselves to my characters, especially Gwyn, because she is a character who wonders about her identity and who tries to find herself despite who others think it is. And those readers told me that thanks to me, they could find characters like them in a manga story.

KENNEALLY: So you must be hoping, then, that readers will draw some lessons from the plot, from the ways that these two characters, Azami and Gwyn, work out all these problems they face.

CALY: Yeah, I think you could draw lessons, but first of all, I hope readers have a good time reading the story, because fiction can be just for fun. If you learn a lesson or something good, it's better, but you can also read it to have a good time. If there is a lesson to draw, the important thing in my manga to remember is to be yourself and feel good about yourself. Don't let others define who you are. Because if you try to be like how others see you, I think you will under-present yourself and being hurt.

KENNEALLY: As a way to round this out, because we are talking about the women of manga that are featured in Tokyopop, tell us about what it's like to be a manga artist who is a woman. What are some challenges you feel you've faced, and how do you overcome them? I wonder, too, whether the situation is any different in France or in Europe than it may be in the United States or Japan.

CALY: Yeah, until today, I have not seen really a difference as a woman, because my publishers don't make any difference. I could draw any kind of story. So I'm not sure how can I answer to this question, (laughter) because for example, my future new comic will be in another genre of stories. So I could draw and write about whatever I want.

KENNEALLY: Caly, you feel, then, that you're free to write in whichever direction you care to take your stories?

CALY: Yes, exactly.



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KENNEALLY: We have been speaking today with Paris-based artist and manga creator Caly, whose new book *Breath of Flowers* has just been published by Tokyopop. Caly, thank you so much for joining us today on Beyond the Book.

CALY: Thank you so much.

KENNEALLY: Beyond the Book is produced by Copyright Clearance Center. Our co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. Subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts and follow us on Twitter and Facebook. The complete Beyond the Book podcast archive is available at beyondthebook.com. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for listening and join us again soon on CCC's Beyond the Book.

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