My Creative Writing Process and Cultural Anthropology: What Sparks the Flame of Mental Associations

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Abstract
This paper examines my writing process in an attempt to determine how my knowledge of cultural anthropology informs the fiction I write. Although I have always assumed that what I have learned from this field significantly impacts my writing, I have never explored the connection in any depth. Receiving the JASCA Award gave me an opportunity to seriously examine the relationship of cultural anthropology to the stories I write. In the end, however, many facets remained unclear because the flow of thought vanished whenever I drew too close. Stories are something which I bring into being yet which also come into being of their own accord. As such, even though I am consciously involved in the writing process, I am often mystified by the way my brain works.
Still, through this exploration, two things became clear: First, what enables me to write is a chain of mental associations triggered by a vivid image leaping unbidden into my mind, and second, those associations, which spread like fire once ignited, are deeply connected to my cultural anthropological studies and
fieldwork. I hope this paper will shed light on how individual experience is involved in the process by which the human brain gives birth to stories, a creative process that is, in a sense, universal.

**Key words**: story, mental associations, fieldwork, *Moribito: Guardian of the Spirit, The Beast Player*

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I Introduction

When I learned that I had received the Distinguished Scholar Award from the Japan Association of Cultural Anthropology, I was not only surprised but also puzzled. Why was I chosen, I wondered. Was it really appropriate to accept such an honor? My bewilderment and doubts were dispelled, however, upon hearing the reason. The award recognizes not only achievements in the field of cultural anthropology, but also a recipient’s contributions to society. The selection committee thought my work as an author had conveyed to a wide audience the potential inherent in the knowledge and creativity of this field. I was overjoyed by their assessment.

Since my authorial debut thirty-one years ago, I have worn the hats of both an author and a cultural anthropologist. In recent years, however, I have concentrated almost exclusively on my creative writing. To receive the award in recognition of my work as an author and its contribution to cultural anthropology was therefore an unexpected delight.

I confess, however, that my joy was somewhat dampened when I learned that I was required to write a lecture paper to mark the occasion. I had no research results to compile into a treatise on my own writing process as I have never studied it, and to elucidate how cultural anthropology influences my writing would also represent a formidable challenge, although the topic would be a natural choice considering the reasons I had been selected for this honor.

Drawing up plot outlines has never been part of my writing process. Instead, I am impelled to write by images that leap unbidden into my mind. As such, there is much about my writing process that I myself do not understand. This fact impedes the objectivity of any attempt to analyze the stories I have written. And to try to produce a
meaningful research paper through a hasty review of literature in the field of narratology, which I have never studied, would be futile. At best, the result would be a superficial analysis. I therefore concluded that the only course left was to reexamine works I have written so far and explore their relationship to what I have learned through cultural anthropology.

Unfortunately, however, I could not cite details from my fieldwork in Australia or draw upon the content of my research for this paper. Due to underlying health conditions, I have had to exercise extreme caution to avoid contracting COVID-19, and the risks involved precluded attempting the long train ride from my home in Yokohama to my office in Abiko. I could only strive to do my best despite the lack of access to my field notes and other material that might have helped me remember.

Due to the above circumstances, the end result may seem far removed from what one might expect from a Distinguished Lecture, resembling instead notes from an unusual form of fieldwork—an interview survey of myself. Although it is nothing more than a record of the creative activity of a single author, Nahoko Uehashi, I offer it in the hope that it may serve as material for understanding the process through which stories are born.

II Summary and Background of My Life as an Author

1 Awards, Animations, Readership

I debuted as an author in 1989. The cumulative circulation of the entire body of my works in Japan, including e-books, up to June 2020 amounts to about 11.8 million copies, and many of these works have been translated into other languages, including Chinese (simplified and traditional), Korean, English, German, French,
Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Swedish, and Macedonian.

My works have received numerous awards. These include: the Japan Association of Writers for Children Newcomer Award for *Tsuki no mori ni kami yo nemure* (O God, Sleep Ye in the Forest of the Moon) published in 1991; the Noma Juvenile Literature New Face Prize, the Sankei Children’s Culture and Publishing Award, the Robo no Ishi Literature Award and the Iwaya Sazanami Literature Award for *Seirei no moribito* published in 1996, as well as the American Library Association 2009 Batchelder Award for *Moribito: Guardian of the Spirit*, the English translation of the same book published in 2008; the Japan Association of Writers for Children Award, the Robo no Ishi Literature Award\(^1\) and the Iwaya Sazanami Literature Award\(^2\) for *Yami no moribito*, published in 1999, as well as the American Library Association 2010 Batchelder Honor for the English translation *Moribito II: Guardian of the Darkness* published in 2009; the Robo no Ishi Literature Award and the Iwaya Sazanami Literature Award for *Yume no moribito* (Guardian of Dreams) published in 2000; the Iwaya Sazanami Literature Award for *Kokù no tabibito* (Traveler of the Void) published in 2001; the Shogakukan Award for Children’s Literature and the Child Welfare Literature Award for *Kami no moribito: raihō hen* (Guardian of the God: The Book of Coming) and *Kami no moribito: kikan hen* (Guardian of the God: The Book of Returning), both published in 2003; the Noma Children’s Literature Award and a nomination for the Sankei Children’s Culture and Publishing Award for *Koteki no Kanata* (Beyond the Werefox Whistle) published in 2003; the Japan Booksellers’ Award and the Japan Medical Fiction Award for *Shika no ō* (The Deer King) published in 2014; and a Michael L. Printz Award Honor and a Batchelder Honor Award from the American Library Association, as well as the Global Literature in Libraries 2020...
Translated YA Book Prize, for *The Beast Player*, originally published in Japanese as *Kemono no sōja* in 2006 and in English in 2019. In addition, as an author, I received the 2014 Hans Christian Andersen Literature Award.

*Moribito: Guardian of the Spirit* and *The Beast Player* have both been adapted for manga publication as well as for animated television series, which were produced by the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK), Japan’s public broadcasting channel. The Moribito series was made into a live action television series to commemorate NHK’s 90th anniversary, and *Shika no ō* (*The Deer King*) will soon be released as an animated feature film.

I am often viewed as a writer of children’s literature, but I never write with a particular genre or age group in mind. I believe that anyone who wants to read my books should be able to, regardless of how old they are. All the editors and publishers with whom I work understand this and ensure that my books are produced in formats accessible to three different age levels. For elementary school children, phonetic *hiragana* pronunciations are added to difficult Chinese characters for ease of reading; for young adult readers, my works are published as easy-to-carry paperbacks with fewer *hiragana*; and for adults, paperback versions with no *hiragana* are produced.

Partly thanks to this approach, my readership spans children in the lower grades of elementary school up through people in their eighties. Publishers’ data on the distribution of sales in each age group are confidential and therefore cannot be shared here, but the trend for all my works is the same: people in their forties and fifties account for the largest share of sales, followed by people in their thirties and then their sixties, with women slightly outnumbering men. While some of these people may have purchased the books to give to their children or grandchildren rather than to read themselves, the trends in age
distribution and gender conform to the age and gender of participants at my talks and book-signing events and of people who send me fan letters.

2 Memories of Childhood

I was born in Tokyo in 1962. My father was a painter, and my mother, an open-hearted homemaker. My younger brother was born six years after me. The doctor warned my parents that I might not live to enter kindergarten due to a congenital heart murmur, a pronouncement that caused them a great deal of worry. Fortunately, the heart murmur disappeared as I grew older, but being sickly, I spent much of my time at home.

I still remember the joy I experienced each night when my mother read to me, the thrill I felt when my paternal grandmother, who had a gift for storytelling, shared tales that she had learned as a child, complete with actions and gestures, and the hours I spent watching my father creating his colorful paintings. Perhaps because of this, I always believed I would one day become a writer.

As may be true for many people, my childhood memories come back to me as images accompanied by smells, emotions, and the angle of light. When I was little, for example, my mother often carried me on her back. Just thinking of this conjures up a picture of her sitting me on top of the baby sling laid out on the wide shelf of the futon closet, then turning away from me to hoist me onto her back with an exclamation of yokkoisho (heave-ho). A shaft of bright afternoon light, subtly different in hue from morning sunshine, slants through the window beyond the silhouette of her head, and I inhale the fragrance of her neck and hair.

That is how my memories are stored. Similarly, when I write stories, my mind is filled with images complete with smells, emotions,
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and the angle of light. In fact, I think that, in the act of remembering, my brain may even reconfigure my childhood memories as story-like images. This thought first occurred to me when I realized that one of my childhood memories is of a scene in which I am looking at myself from behind. I must have been three or four. We were still living in the Shitamachi area of Tokyo, and as far as I can recall, that image is linked to my first memory of fearing death.

I see myself walking beside my grandmother, holding her hand. Suddenly overwhelmed by the thought of dying, I look up at her and say, “I’m scared to die.”

“Don’t worry,” my grandmother reassures me. “When we die, we’re reborn.”

Ah, I think. So Mother will die before me and be reborn. And when she grows up, I’ll die and be reborn as her baby. What a perfect system.

Although my grandmother’s response filled me with relief at the time, as I grew older, the doubts that rose in my mind could not be dispelled by her explanation. Why are we so afraid of dying, despite knowing that death is inevitable? Why can’t we just accept it? This question continues to intrigue me.

In retrospect, it was my curiosity about this issue that eventually led me to the study of history. When I was in elementary school, my mother often took us to stay at her mother’s family home near Lake Nojiri in Nagano prefecture. One year, the whole family was harvesting bamboo shoots together when my uncle found a piece of Jōmon pottery. Placing the fragment in the palm of my hand, he explained to me what I was seeing. The sight of the eponymous cord marks imprinted on the surface sparked an image of someone’s fingers pressing a rope into the clay, and it suddenly hit me that its maker had died thousands of years before. The alarming sense of desolation that overtook me remains sharp in my mind. I was shaken
by the realization that this is what death means and that sooner or later I too would die.

But I was not only afraid: I was fascinated. I was drawn by our connection with the distant past through the countless generations that have been born into this world only to die. Although I still dreamed of becoming a writer, this experience sparked my interest in the field of archeology. When I confided my newfound aspiration to my uncle, he told me that to be an archeologist, I would need to do graduate studies. That was probably the first time I thought about going to graduate school.

3 Exposure to Western Children’s Literature

It was during my adolescence that my vague dream of one day becoming a writer developed into a concrete desire to write a specific type of story. The catalyst was my encounter with Western children’s literature, which enchanted me.

Sometimes I feel there is a gap between conventional notions of what constitutes “children’s literature” and my own definition. Not having researched the topic, I can only speak from my impressions, but comments from readers that are prefaced by words like, “For a children’s book, this story…” suggest that they regard books for adults as “real” literature in its consummate form, as opposed to children’s books, which they assume are written specifically to be easier for children to read. In their eyes, children’s literature is “consummate” literature from which some essential element has been subtracted.

Some stories are written specifically for children, and some authors devote their lives to writing such stories. Other authors find that, after faithfully depicting whatever emerges from the womb of their mind without modification, the end result happens to resonate with
children and adults alike. If there is some consummuate form of literature—some “end goal” to be attained in story writing—I believe success should be judged upon whether a particular story takes the shape intended for it, regardless of which approach an author uses.

Within the Western children’s literature that captured my heart, I found rich worlds exquisitely woven from vast foreign landscapes, human emotions, and the imagination. These left a very different impression on me than modern Japanese novels, which strove to depict the essence of human nature within the narrow radius of daily life. That impression remains engraved on my mind and continues to shape the stories I want to write.

Of the many books I discovered during this period, those by Rosemary Sutcliff and J.R.R. Tolkien altered my life profoundly. I slipped effortlessly inside Sutcliff’s *The Eagle of the Ninth*, fusing with the protagonist—an eye-opening experience. The historical novels I had known up to that point read like explanations of the past written by someone living in the present. In contrast, *The Eagle of the Ninth* let me live and breathe inside the story. Despite never having been there, I inhaled the fragrance of deep Roman-era forests in the British Isles, caught the metallic scent of copper pots, saw the flickering light of bonfires. When I reached the end, my brain was burning with a feverish excitement that made me wonder what the act of reading really was. I sensed within *The Eagle of the Ninth* a power distinct from style or the fine techniques of literary expression; a force that transformed the words into a single coherent whole, creating another world and sucking the reader inside it—and I was seized with an intense longing to write such stories myself.

*The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien has the same power. The author’s imagination gives birth to another world, one so captivating, the reader becomes a part of it. The world is outside us, but to
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Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* has the same power. The author’s imagination gives birth to another world, one so captivating, the reader becomes a part of it. The world is outside us, but to perceive that external world, we internalize our impressions of it and then reconstruct it in our own way. Similarly, “reality” is something perceived by individuals. My encounter with the works of Sutcliff and Tolkien showed me that by capturing the essential features of perceived reality in their descriptions, writers can pull others into a world of their own creation.

There were two other elements in their works that captured my heart. One was the vastness of their worlds and the other was the diverse cultural backgrounds of their inhabitants. The protagonist of *The Eagle of the Ninth*, Marcus, a Roman soldier, is discharged after being injured in a battle against local tribes. He meets an indigenous slave whose family was killed by the Romans. Surprised by their cultural differences, the two young men struggle to bridge the gap, slowly building a friendship. This enthralled me when I first read the book in my early teens. None of the Japanese books I had read up to that point had depicted characters from divergent cultural backgrounds searching for a way towards mutual understanding. In retrospect, it’s obvious that what attracted me to this work were elements closely related to cultural anthropology.

Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* enthralled me for the same reason. It portrays friendships forged among hobbits, humans, elves, and dwarves, characters of vastly different origins who refuse to bow to the one who would bind them all under his rule, choosing instead to renounce the power to dominate and thereby ensure that the world’s diversity can be retained.

At the time, however, I had never heard of cultural anthropology. Instead, the common thread I discerned within these works was “history.” I was intrigued by how these worlds were portrayed as changing with the flow of time and dreamed of writing three-dimensional stories plotted upon the horizontal axis of a vast
imaginary world and the vertical axis of the flow of history. To make this dream a reality, I entered Rikkyo University, convinced I needed to study history.

4 My Encounter with Cultural Anthropology

Although I intended to major in Western history, my attention was drawn to cultural anthropology during a course given by Takashi Tomosugi in which he introduced Masao Yamaguchi’s 1971 monograph *Afrika no shinwateki sekai* (The African Mythical World). I was both surprised to learn about the kinds of myths to be found in Africa and ashamed not to have realized that African peoples would have their own myths, something that should have been obvious. Yamaguchi’s portrayal of the African mythical mind intrigued me. Even more than the myths themselves, I was fascinated to discover ways of thinking I never knew existed and by the fact that cultural anthropology was capable of describing those ways of thinking so vividly.

At the time, the university’s history department offered geography courses as well, and I studied both cultural anthropology and geography under Machiko Aoyagi, Masatoshi Konishi, Shun Sato, and Hiromitsu Umehara. For my undergraduate thesis, I researched childbirth taboos in Japan, while for my masters, I did fieldwork in Miyakojima, Okinawa and Aogashima, Tokyo, writing my thesis on the concept of menstrual pollution and avoidance of women.

Far from having forgotten my dream of becoming a writer, I believed that studying cultural anthropology would enable me to create the kinds of stories I wanted to write. The fact that it involved going out into the field and learning through experiencing another culture was a significant attraction. I wanted—and knew that I needed—to step outside the familiar sphere of my everyday life and
become aware of things I had never noticed.

Since childhood, I had lacked confidence in my physical health. Perhaps because of my congenital heart condition, running made me anemic, and I often got sick when I pushed myself. To compensate, I became almost excessively careful not to overexert myself. My delicate constitution, however, restricted the breadth of my experience, and this made me impatient. I could not hope to write meaningful stories about other worlds and their peoples without stepping beyond my familiar life in Japan to learn about how people elsewhere lived. I was convinced that if I could just leave behind my safe, protected environment to conduct fieldwork on my own, something major would shift.

Yet I was not sure if it was right for me to keep pursuing my dream, especially once all my friends started graduating and getting jobs. Although I was covering my school fees through part-time work and scholarships, the fact that I was still dependent on my parents for my living expenses made me feel guilty, and I wondered if I should look for work after completing my masters. At the same time, I wanted to continue my studies. The words of my master’s thesis supervisor, Shun Sato, stayed in my mind. “Your thesis may not be perfect,” he told me, “but there’s something special about it, and it would be a shame not to continue on to do your doctorate.” With my parents’ encouragement, I decided to stay on for a year as an auditor in the doctorate program and use that time to decide which path I should take.

Around the same time, I submitted my debut novel Seirei no ki (The Sacred Tree) to Kaisei-sha Publishing Co., Ltd. I later learned that the person in charge of submissions from unknown authors was a famous editor named Michinori Aihara. It was he who answered the phone when I called the publishing company, my heart pounding so
violently I was sure it must jump out of my throat. Mr. Aihara warned me that the publisher received so many unsolicited manuscripts, it might take him several months to get around to reading my work, but if I didn’t mind waiting, I should send it in.

Half a year passed, and still there was no word from Mr. Aihara. I assumed that he must have read the manuscript and judged it unworthy. If so, this meant I had no talent as a writer. I therefore applied for the doctorate course, committing myself to life as a scholar, sustained by part-time work. It was only after I had been accepted that I received a postcard from Mr. Aihara saying that he sensed talent in my work and asked to meet me. At our first meeting, he explained that the company could not publish such a long novel by a new author, and in the end, it was reduced by 140 pages before being published. Yet having one book published was no guarantee that I could make a living by writing, and as I also wanted to pursue my studies in cultural anthropology, I began research on Aboriginal Australians for my doctorate.

This choice was greatly influenced by my supervisor, Machiko Aoyagi, who specialized in Oceania and urged me to do fieldwork overseas. I was interested in acculturation and wanted to research the kind of acculturation experienced by people living in a colonized territory. Although eager to get started, I was at a loss as to how to enter areas where Aboriginal people lived. By chance, I noticed a flyer for an internship program posted on the university bulletin board inviting students to teach Japanese culture in schools abroad as unpaid volunteers. I applied and was sent to a small town called Mingenew in Western Australia. The year was 1990.

Thereafter, while teaching at university, I continued to visit Western Australia to interview Aboriginal people about their lifestyle, compiling this research into a paper which I submitted as my
doctorate thesis under the title *Yamaji: aru chibō no aborijini no esunikku aidentiti no meikakuka to iji ni tsuite* (The Yamaji: Concerning the Clarification and Maintenance of the Ethnic Identity of Aboriginal People in a Certain Area) for which I received a PhD. Eventually, I became so busy as an author that I resigned from my position as a university professor and became a *tokunin kyōju*, a post similar to a senior fellowship, so that I could focus more on my writing.

**III My Story-Writing Process**

In sections III and IV of this paper, I have adopted the form of a dialogue in which I ask and answer my own questions about where I derive the inspiration for, and how I write, my stories. This method may seem like an awkward attempt at an interview survey, but I chose it because it is easier to capture what comes into my mind in this way than through the literary style of a research paper. I hope you will read it as though listening to a conversation.

1 **What Inspires Your Stories?**

When I try to describe the moment that a particular story first surfaced in my brain, I find that my mind has already turned it into an anecdote, perhaps because I’ve described it so many times in interviews. I’m sure that my fans must be bored by now with hearing how the idea for *Moribito: Guardian of the Spirit* first came to me.

Even the setting is no longer clear. It may have been while I was watching a movie, the content of which I’ve since forgotten, or even while watching a trailer, but when I try to recall the moment that inspired this story, my impression is that I was watching the previews on a rental video. A scene of endangered passengers fleeing from a
bus flashed across the screen. Among them was a woman leading a child by the hand. At that sight, I felt an urge to write a story about an older woman on a journey to protect a child. Yet this is merely what my memory of that moment has become. I can’t recall anything else about it.

2 Why Did the Image of a Middle-Aged Woman Protecting a Child Inspire a Story?

The only answer I can think of is that I’m drawn to stories in which adults protect children. When I write about something I like, the story begins to move of its own accord. Perhaps it’s only natural, but this feeling of attraction is more important than any other factor. I’m not the kind of author who can create stories at will. It’s extremely rare that the seed of a story I feel compelled to write drops into my mind, and it’s close to a miracle when such a seed germinates and comes to fruition as a published book. There have been many seeds that never took root in the soil of my mind or that withered before reaching maturity.

I think one reason I’m attracted to stories where grown-ups protect children is that I like to write about how people develop over time. Adulthood is the state children reach after many years of acquiring experience, so by pairing an adult with a child, I can depict how the passage of time affects people. The issues that children face are often ones that adults overcame in the past, or ones they wish they had dealt with differently. By helping others, people can change such regrets into something else. The sight of adults facing challenges and struggling with uncertainty helps children realize that even after they gain experience and grow up, they’ll still encounter problems they can’t solve on their own. There are so many things in life that we can’t do anything about; even so, sometimes others come to our rescue.
That’s probably why I like writing about such scenarios. That and the fact that I’m attracted to the very act of reaching out to help others. People caring and wanting to do something for one another—that is what moves my heart.

Four years ago, my mother died, followed by my father in April of this year. With their deaths, I was made acutely aware that the happiness of others is the source of my own happiness. Each time I told them that one of my works had won an award or was being made into a movie, my parents’ faces glowed. With flushed cheeks and a tremor in their voice, they would invariably exclaim, “That’s wonderful! We’re so happy for you!” The joy of such moments is so exquisite, just recalling them brings tears to my eyes. The same thrill rushes through me whenever I see the faces of my editors light up at the news that a story they’ve worked so hard to send off into the world has won an award.

Of course, recognition for my works makes me happy too, but that kind of joy begins and ends inside me. It can’t compare to the joy of bringing happiness to others, which has a completely different quality. For me, it’s things that make others happy that are truly worth doing, and that’s probably why I’ve always written about people who try to help others.

3 If It’s an Idea You Like, Can You Write a Story about It?

No, it doesn’t seem to work that way. Even though I was strongly drawn to the idea of a middle-aged woman protecting a child, that alone wasn’t enough to start writing a story. For me, stories are three-dimensional. Only when the first element that sparks an idea is joined by others does a story begin to quicken and start to grow.

It seems that I’m not the only writer whose stories are born this way. Japanese author Yoko Ogawa describes a similar internal process
in her book *Monogatari no yakuwari* (The Role of Stories).

Having just poured all I had into a long novel, there was nothing left inside, and I felt as if I were standing alone in the middle of a dark forest. No matter how many books I’ve written, I never know where I’ll find the seed of a novel. It’s not a logical phenomenon; rather, it always catches me unawares, in a very quiet moment. All I can do is wait patiently. (Ogawa, 2007: 58)

Her description captures my own experience perfectly. After pouring everything into writing an epic work, I feel drained and empty, as if I were all alone in the middle of a barren wasteland. For me too, the seed of a new novel never emerges logically, but instead takes me by surprise. That the kernel of a story comes upon her in a “very quiet moment” is just like Ogawa.³ In the episode to which she was referring above, the first glimmering came while she was looking at an album.

A photo caught my eye: a rustic house with a traditional tiled roof perched within a bleak landscape in County Donegal in northernmost Ireland. Within its frugal interior were two brothers, both over ninety years of age. … Suddenly a question filled my breast. What kind of life, I wondered, did these two men share in that rough land of stony fields and brutal weather. The texture of their well-worn clothing, the appearance of their sunken, toothless mouths, the coarse wrinkled skin of their hands—as I looked at these things, I began to feel they might become a novel. (Ogawa, 2007: 59)

At that moment in time, the story was no more than an inkling, a
hint of light in the darkness. It was only sometime later, while talking on the phone with a friend about an unrelated subject, that Ogawa glimpsed another ray of light. Her friend’s son had a weak heart and needed to lean on his mother as he slowly climbed the stairs to their apartment. One day, a stranger came and carried the boy up the flight of stairs on his back. It turned out that he was a former pilot who suffered from multiple sclerosis. When Ogawa heard this story, a vivid image rose in her mind of a man carrying a boy on his back as he climbed a shadowed flight of weathered concrete stairs. Along with that image came all the details of their lives, an experience close to a hallucination.

Walking beside them, the boy’s mother was suffering too. She longed desperately to save her son from this life-threatening illness and battled daily with her fear that death might take him from her. The joyful shouts of children playing innocently in the courtyard of the apartment building rose faintly in the air. Such was the arbitrary fantasy that rose in my mind, but the details all came in a rush. In my case, when a vision like this pops into my mind, it’s a sign that it will become a story.
Because stories are written with words, I used to think that the inspiration for them would begin with words too. But that’s not the case. Something has to emerge first, before a story reaches the stage where it can be put into words; otherwise no words will come. For me, the words always seem to come later. (Ogawa, 2007: 61-62)

Her experience so closely resembles mine that it makes me want to shout, “Yes! Exactly!” In my writing process too, words are always preceded by an image—a slice of everyday life such as we see around
us all the time, one that arouses strong impressions, like a movie scene, except that it plays out inside me.

It’s this slice of everyday life that’s important. The joyful shouts of children playing innocently in the courtyard; the dusty scent of the old stairwell, the sun highlighting the dry concrete where it emerges from the shadows; the rhythm of footsteps slowly climbing the stairs; the awareness that beyond the man and the boy lies the courtyard where children, whose lives are so different from theirs, are playing. The pair inhabit a world where the daily lives of many others, unrelated and distinct, share the same moment in time. And the complexity of how this impacts their minds leaps into Ogawa’s thoughts along with this vision.

This is the same moment that a story comes into being for me as well. I think that Ogawa and I—and probably many other people—internalize scenes with various, not-yet-articulated connotations that suddenly blaze forth when triggered. Ogawa’s novels are triggered by scenes common to many people’s experience, so those of you who are reading this will doubtlessly be able to conjure up similar images: you’ll be able to hear the joyful shouts of children in the distance, smell the stairs, and even feel what the protagonists are experiencing in that moment.

The scenes that trigger my stories, however, don’t exist in daily life, which may make them harder to imagine. With *Moribito: Guardian of the Spirit*, for example, I saw a woman in her thirties dressed in worn clothes. She carried a spear in one hand and gripped the hand of a very determined-looking boy with the other. They strode along what looked like a wide thoroughfare of hard-packed dirt. Dust swirled with each step, suggesting that it had not rained for some time. Densely forested mountains towered in the distance and above them spread blue sky. The expression in the woman’s eyes, the texture
of her skin, the brittleness of her hair, the smooth sheen of her spear handle darkened with use—all these things flashed through my mind in a single instant.

But that alone did not make a story. Just as it took a phone call to release a flood of images for Ogawa, I also needed another stimulus. It was only sometime later that the story gave its birthing cry. I awoke one day from a nap with the strange thought that a spirit had laid its egg inside the boy. I have often pondered why this thought came to me, but I still don’t know the answer. It just did.

As with Ogawa, everything came to me at once, like a spark igniting a grassfire. Suddenly, I knew. The people of the boy’s world believed the creature that had laid its egg inside him was a spirit, but for the creature, laying eggs in humans was merely an instinctive behavior, the way brood parasites like the cuckoo lay their eggs in the nests of other species. Unknown creatures from another world are feared and despised, yet they may also be seen as a source of blessing. The boy’s bloodline had to be kept pure and undefiled. For him to have been tainted in this way contradicted the country’s nation-building myth and thus threatened the ruler’s authority and the system underpinning it. The woman who saved the boy was an outsider, unfettered by the norms of his society.

The boy’s terror when faced with the inescapable impact of the world’s assumptions and values on his fate, his horror at his predicament, which arose from no fault of his own, his grief and loneliness, the exquisite beauty of the woman’s act in risking her life to save him: all these feelings gripped me, shaking me to the core. Ah, I thought, now I can—I want—to write this story!

First, there is an image that makes me want to write. When this initial image meets a thought powerful enough to expand and animate it, the two are transformed into something that breathes
with a vitality that was absent when they were separate, triggering various components which spread rapidly, giving birth to a story.

According to Ogawa, two images—the elderly twins and a man climbing the stairs—split the darkness, setting off a chain of other images that included the city of Vienna, a translator, the Holocaust, a maternity clinic, and a flower shop. It was from these associations that the novel grew (Ogawa, 2007: 64), and fans of her works will recognize them as being true to her nature. Thus, the novel was nurtured by elements within Ogawa to which she was already attracted.

Similarly, the elements described above that nurtured the birth of *Moribito: Guardian of the Spirit* are very true to my nature. These include the concept of defilement, the alteration of myths and legends, the binding forces generated by a community, the injustices that impact our lives, the ability of the outsider to objectively view the shared assumptions of different peoples and thread a path along the borders between multiple communities, the transience of this world, the universe and all creation which remain untouched by political scheming, and finally, the redemptive beauty of how, despite our insignificance within the immensity of the universe, we nevertheless help and care for others. Clearly, these elements, which I have repeatedly depicted in my works, are all related to cultural anthropology, the field I have studied for so many years.

Interestingly, in both Ogawa’s and my case, the series of images that shapes a story’s framework is revealed all at once. That it unfolds so quickly there’s no time to even think indicates that these images already existed within our minds as familiar points of interest. When I began writing *Moribito: Guardian of the Spirit*, for example, I had already researched the concept of defilement for my master’s thesis and, through my fieldwork in Australia, had also been pondering the
struggle of people who belong to multiple communities at different levels and the repeated rewriting of historical events to suit particular circumstances. Once a switch in my brain flipped, this chain of ideas manifested with a speed faster than conscious thought.

IV My Writing Process and Cultural Anthropology

From the previous section, it is clear that my study of cultural anthropology is deeply related to the initial phase in a story’s birth. Below, I explore how I write stories, paying close attention to the process’s relationship to cultural anthropology.

1 The Creation of the Story World and Cultural Anthropology

Some of my readers assume that because I’m a cultural anthropologist, I use ethnographies and other materials to plot out the details of a fictional world before I begin writing a story. In fact, however, I never fix a story’s setting in advance. Instead, the first image that comes into my mind—whether of a person, a landscape, the quality of light or the smell of the wind—already comes complete with a picture of the world. I merely describe the scenery and the people exactly as I see and feel them.

When I’m writing, it’s as if there are two of me. One is inside my head watching the images that appear and responding to them without understanding where they’re coming from. The other stands apart, gazing at those images from a bird’s eye view and pondering what they mean while struggling to capture them in words that others can understand. In the case of The Beast Player, for example, when I first began writing, I saw a girl lying in bed, alone in a dark room before dawn. I was the girl, the protagonist Elin, yet I was simultaneously observing her from a distance.
As Elin, I listened to the pattering of the rain on the roof and the sound of thunder rolling in the distance, waiting anxiously for Elin’s mother to come home. When she finally returned, it was growing light outside. I could see her dark silhouette, hear her walk to the sink in the dirt-floored kitchen and wash her hands, then come to the futon beside mine. When she slipped under the covers and pulled up the quilt, a strange, sweet odor wafted towards me. Instantly, I knew where she had been.

I could see her standing inside a rock chamber, up to her waist in a large pool stroking some enormous creatures. Only their backs were visible above the surface of the dark water, and their scales were covered in a viscous substance that gave off a sweet smell.

Immediately, the mind of the other “me,” the observer, was flooded with questions. That’s the odor that was on my mother’s hands. It clings to the skin and doesn’t wash off in water. Why are the creatures’ hides so sticky? Does the viscous membrane protect the scales? The thought that the membrane protected the scales made me wonder what would happen if the nature of it should change.

In this way, I continued to write one line after another. Until I began, I had never imagined such creatures or considered the role they might play in the story. Nor had I seen any of the other details, but once these images began to appear, a series of ideas that matched what I saw unfolded rapidly.

This is not only how my stories begin, but also how they continue to evolve; if the images cease, I can’t write any further. It is only because a picture of the next scene arises while I’m describing the previous scene that I can keep on writing. While many internal elements, such as my memories and thoughts, combine to produce a chain of associations that are inherently my own, all the knowledge I have gained through cultural anthropology also appears to be directly
involved. For example, if the image of a character with a certain cultural background emerges in my mind, an idea of how that person would behave in the situation comes quite naturally without having to research it.

Intriguingly, I have no sense of conscious involvement in the unfolding of these ideas. Normally, I wait desperately for an idea to come, worried that I may never write again. Then, without warning, my brain suddenly takes off of its own accord. When I’m writing the climax, in particular, my brain feels like it’s actually buzzing. Time passes swiftly, and when I’m done, I feel so depleted and dizzy that I can’t even stand. The sensation is overwhelming. It’s as if everything I have written up to that point comes roaring down like an avalanche, and from its midst the story rises up like a living thing, moving of its own accord and pulling me along with it, forcing me to write nonstop.

Reading through the finished manuscript, I find myself wondering who wrote it, but that’s because I exercise no conscious control over the flow of my brain once the ideas have been triggered. Some people with whom I have shared this experience know immediately what I’m talking about, so I assume there are other writers who experience a similar phenomenon.

This is why I never write a plot outline or develop a setting before I start writing. I’m afraid that if I attempt to draw up a plan and put it down in words before the images speak to me, I could stifle the power of the burgeoning story. During the initial stages, a story is sensitive and fragile, trembling as it emerges into the world, and I fear that if I reach out to touch it in the wrong way, I might snuff it out.

This is also why I never tell my editors about a story that’s in progress. Only when it’s finished and I have revised it to the point where I can show it to others do I pick up the phone and contact the
editor in charge to announce, “It’s done!” Sometimes they’re so startled that they ask me what I’m talking about.

For the same reason, I never write serial novels for magazines. Although a magazine carried one of my stories once, it was one that I had already finished, and we simply divided it into installments. I can’t promise to write a story series on demand because I never know whether I will finish a story that I’ve started. This doesn’t seem to be a problem of skill. Having written for many years, there are issues I can resolve through my writing skills alone. But when it comes to seeing a story through to the finish, the most crucial element has nothing to do with my ability to write. The only way I can describe it is to say that my stories are “born.”

Take, for example, this scene from Moribito: Guardian of the Spirit where Balsa, a female bodyguard, describes the country of her birth.

If you travel across the Misty Blue Mountains and keep going north, farther and farther, you will come to a country called Kanbal. Unlike your country, Kanbal doesn’t have good fields—only mountains covered year-round in snow, and some steep, rocky slopes. The people survive by planting tough grains and potatoes and raising goats on the mountainsides. The huge eagles that live on the cliffs feed on mice and goats, or other animals that fall to their deaths. They especially love the marrow inside the bones, and they’ll drop them from great heights to crack the bones open and get the marrow. I can still hear the sound of the bones hitting the rocks, echoing in the valley—crack, crack. That’s what Kanbal, my homeland, is like. (Uehashi, 2008: 148)

Before I wrote this scene, I was aware that Balsa came from a northern land, but I only had a vague image in the back of my mind
of what that place was like. As soon as Balsa began speaking, however, a scene emerged before me: a blue sky above rugged mountains topped with perpetual snow and the rocky outcrops of a northern kingdom. I felt the cold wind, smelled goats’ wool, and heard bones smashing against the rocks below. When I reached the state where I could even hear the crack of the bones, I had begun living and breathing within that world, and I began to sketch in words all that I saw, heard and felt there. As similar scenes exist in the real world too, I didn’t create this unusual landscape from scratch. I simply depicted the scenery that appeared to me as Balsa’s homeland. In my mind, Balsa’s appearance must have matched that of someone raised in such an environment.

Once the landscape of a world has come to me, I sometimes read ethnographies of areas with similar topography, but I have few memories of doing so while writing the Moribito series. The exception was the fourth book in the series Kokū no tabibito (Traveler of the Void) for which I read Ekkyō (Border Transgression) by cultural anthropologist Ikuya Tokoro. Sea nomads appear in Kokū no tabibito, an idea inspired by the image of a boy diving in the turquoise sea that I had carried with me since watching a documentary on the Sama years earlier.

As I pondered the fate of Chagum, the main character of Kokū no tabibito, a young prince destined to bear the fate of his country, I recalled people like the Sama who traverse borders at will, challenging assumptions about what defines a nation, as well as such people’s position in society, which is far too complex to be viewed romantically. It was while immersed in such images that I began writing Kokū no tabibito, and I read Tokoro’s Ekkyō to dispel my unconscious biases about sea nomads and gain a deeper understanding.
Once a story begins to move, I often research the lifestyles of peoples engaged in certain occupations or whose circumstances resemble those of the characters in my mind to prevent any preconceptions from distorting my perspective. This is the work of changing what already exists inside my head in order to develop the story.

I also pay attention to occupations in relation to the natural environment. For example, while writing *Shika no ō* (The Deer King), which features reindeer herders, I read such books as *Tonakai ni notta karyūdotachi hoppō tsungu-su minzokushi* (Reindeer-Mounted Hunters: An Ethnography of the Northern Tungus Peoples, Tugolukov, 1981) *Tonakai yūbokumin, junkan no firosofī – kyokuboku roshia kamuchatka tankenki* (Nomads of Reindeer, Philosophy of Cosmic Cycling: An Account of an Expedition to the Far North, Kamchatka, Russia, Irimoto, 2007), *Yūboku – tonakai bokuchikumin Sāme no seikatsu* (Nomadism: The Lives of Sami Reindeer Herders, Tei, 1992), and *Tonakai bokuchikumin no shoku no bunka shakaishi: nishishiberia tsundora nenetsu no nariwai to shoku no hikaku bunka* (A Cultural and Sociological Survey of Reindeer Herder Food: A Comparison of the Occupations and Food of the Nenets of the Western Siberian Tundra, Yoshida, 2003). In addition, I consulted Shiro Sasaki, honorary professor at the National Museum of Ethnology, via email, and many experts on medicine and lichens. During the writing process or after a draft is finished, I frequently turn to specialists in different fields in this way to make sure that what I have written is plausible.

Although my stories take place in imaginary worlds, I don’t see this as an excuse to neglect such details. I know the danger of bending the systems underpinning the cultural, ethnological, occupational, medical, and ecological aspects of a society to fit a story. I write
fantasies precisely because the power of the imagination can give these stories a luminance different from real life, but I’m also aware that if I distort the natural order of things to make a story work, I risk losing key elements.

It’s because our lives are bound by certain conditions that we experience pain, grief and joy. If I alter any of the phenomenon that cause those conditions, the story will crumble. Stories often present a particular problem and then portray the characters’ efforts to overcome it, but I never write stories in which the “problem” is a psychopath. It is problems arising from the plight of existing within a particular world that drive me to create a story, and my interest appears to be rooted in the state of that world, including the state of everything animate and inanimate within it. The story world into which the protagonists are born is where they must live, the place that generates all the pain, grief and joy they experience.

Again, it’s probably because I view story worlds in this way that I don’t decide the setting before I begin writing. I fear that if I try to describe the details of a world before the story starts to move, the setting will be reduced to a “stage.” Similarly, I don’t draw up a plot line because I’m afraid that characters who should emerge already living and moving of their own accord might only move in line with the rules I made.

When I listened to the life stories of Aboriginal Australians during my fieldwork, it seemed to me that a whole world existed inside each individual. It was as though I was observing the interaction between this inner world and the outer world inhabited by many others going about their lives. Similarly, when I give birth to a story, it feels as if a world that exists inside me flows into the external world. This can be terrifying because it exposes who I am, but that fear is precisely what motivates me to continually re-examine and refresh my inner world.
If I care so much about remaining true to reality, you may wonder why I don’t write realistic fiction instead of fantasies. I think one reason is that I’m too particular about the real world; so much so that I can’t write about it. I deliberately avoid using elements from Aboriginal culture in my stories. Once I began conducting fieldwork, I could no longer use words representative of a particular people or culture without considering every element they encompassed. Learning what it means to have one’s image portrayed by “others” caused a major shift in my perspective and made me keenly aware of how many factors must be considered when attempting to depict people who exist in the real world. I’m not the type of person who can ignore such factors when I write, and I find it impossible to strike a balance between them and my story-writing process.

Another reason why I don’t write about the real world is simply that this isn’t where the scenes that impel me are found. While there are similarities, the places I see, and the people who live in them, exist only in my mind. As I pursue the phenomena embedded in these compelling images, worlds emerge that are utterly different from our own: worlds where enormous shellfish gently exhale clouds into the sky, where huge beasts with dazzling silver fur soar through the air, where foxes turn into humans and slip from their world into another dimension known as the Pale. This torrent of images, interwoven with people’s daily lives, brings with it the giddy urge to write, precipitating the birth of another world. These are the type of stories I want to write, the kind I have loved reading since childhood.

2 Fieldwork and Writing Stories

The books I discovered and fell in love with as a child showed me facets of this world that I had never realized existed. My desire to write such stories—ones that give us an outside view of the world in
which we were born and raised, even if just for a moment—has never died.

A story world is conceived within the mind of a single individual. Yet even so, if the events unfolding in that unfamiliar world are powerful enough to sweep us into the characters’ hearts and minds, they can make us feel as if we’ve never viewed our own world that way before, and that, I believe, is extremely meaningful. Reading such stories draws our attention to previously unquestioned assumptions, an experience that resembles fieldwork.

Of course, as the anthropologist Kazuyoshi Sugawara pointed out (2013: 323-344), there is a fundamental difference between ethnographic fieldwork and fiction. Reading a novel can never be a substitute for actual experience. Yet stories about characters in other worlds can let people like me—a reader born and raised in Japan for whom the Japanese way is the norm—leave behind their preconceptions and explore their relationship to the external world, creating an opportunity to consider their world in a new way. It is in this sense that reading stories reminds me of fieldwork. And that is another reason I was drawn to the study of cultural anthropology.

In his paper for the 2016 JASCA Award, Hiromu Shimizu wrote as follows:

What I sought in studying cultural anthropology was that through the long journey of living among different (other) cultures and then returning to our own, the anthropologist will be consciously “unlearning” and reconstructing their self by acquiring a new perspective and way of thinking. The world seemed obvious before the journey, in other words the world into which we are born is the common-sense and obvious world that we unconsciously naturalize. Through this journey, we relativize, distance and
critically reconsider our own culture which has been rubbed into us and indoctrinated us to think in a certain set way. The greatest appeal I found in anthropology was that it would (supposedly) teach us techniques to nurture and exercise power. The power to change oneself, to change the way we look at our everyday world, and naturally transform the way in which we involve ourselves with people and the world around us, that is, the power of critical imagination and vision. (Shimizu, 2016: 25-26)

I was drawn to the study of cultural anthropology for the same reason: I wanted to reconstruct myself. And the experience of working in the field did indeed change me.

Awareness that I was living in a world I had “unconsciously naturalized” helped me to develop the habit of observing myself from the outside, which in turn affected my creative writing. It isn’t easy to step outside one’s unconsciously naturalized world, and in many cases, it was only thanks to fieldwork that I became aware of certain things.

Fieldwork also offered invaluable opportunities for firsthand experience. I was able to accompany hunters, for example, and observe the way they kill, skin and dress game, to encounter the smells and sensations of that process, to witness the expressions on the hunters’ faces as they worked. This then enabled me to describe the process in a way that would have been impossible if I relied on my imagination alone. In addition to such individual episodes, fieldwork required me to share the daily life of people who were experiencing pain, joy and internal conflict within a multicultural society. Through this, the challenges and the dilemmas they faced were transformed from abstract concepts into living images accompanied by raw emotion. Doing fieldwork thus allowed me to see through different eyes.
As a writer, however, there is a danger that the urge to describe this newly acquired perspective will take precedence over the actual story. My debut work *Seirei no ki* (The Sacred Tree) was written before I undertook fieldwork in Australia, when everything I knew about indigenous peoples had been learned through books. After it was published, I undertook my first field trip to Australia during which I listened to the life stories of Aboriginal Australians in a small rural town, witnessed their daily lives and learned about their struggles. In doing so, I felt that I was gaining a view of indigenous peoples that was quite different from the one I had held while writing *Seirei no ki*. For the first time, I realized how challenging and even frightening it could be for these men and women to follow traditional norms when they had to work in mainstream society and share the commonsense and daily rhythm of the majority.

My second novel, *Tsuki no mori ni kami yo nemure* (O God, Sleep Ye in the Forest of the Moon), was written while reflecting on my past self. It depicts the dilemma of a people who adopt rice cultivation along with related customs and traditions. Although I received an award for this work, I couldn’t help feeling that it was written from the stance of a scholar, that I had failed to heed the force that animated it. I decided to quit writing stories based on a consciously chosen theme and instead to wait until the urge to write rose within me and surrender to it. *Moribito: Guardian of the Spirit* was the result.

When we first experience something, powerful emotions can overwhelm us, and the experience itself is still raw and immature. Gradually, individual experiences weave themselves together, maturing and deepening until they are transformed into something that can nurture a story naturally. For my own story-writing process, however, I also need a “scholar’s mind.” The incomprehensible,
violent, almost physiological sensation of the story being born must achieve a natural balance with the objective view of the scholar who sees through the lens of accumulated knowledge and experience and years spent pondering different subjects.

My experiences in the field are also useful when depicting the details of the story. Unlike knowledge obtained from books, things encountered during fieldwork appear within a chain of trivial details and events, and it is these that make a story come alive. Fieldwork is the experience of daily living, and little details linked with scenes from daily life are stored in my memory. These slip into my mind while I am writing, making depictions of people’s lifestyles and the thoughts of my characters, as well as townscapes and other scenery, seem real. Densely detailed descriptions of a fantasy world can become tiresome, but I find that when I write based on impressions from lived experience, it results in just the right amount of description. Details from daily life that permeated my mind and body while I was immersed within, and buffeted by, voluminous waves of constantly changing information, serve as guides that show me how to capture each scene in my writing. The “whole” picture, which I absorbed mentally and physically during fieldwork, reveals itself within the story, shedding light on the road I must take.

As Noriko Ogiwara, a fellow author and friend, writes in Fantaji no DNA (The DNA of Fantasy, 2006: 96), “Reading cannot surpass actual experience. But what we experience through reading can become the knowledge we need to internalize the experiences we have acquired.” I think my stories are woven through the constant repetition of experiencing things in life, reading books, internalizing my experience, creating, and then experiencing all over again.
3 Why I Write About People Who Straddle Boundaries

A theme that runs through my work is depicting the problems that stem from the actions of people who are just trying to live with integrity. This is related to having witnessed through my fieldwork how actions intended to improve things often result in painful outcomes. My experience of living with Aboriginal Australians in a rural town is also why I tend to write about people who straddle different worlds. The sight of people engaged in both mainstream society and the traditional ways of their kin, people who love and hate both and who consequently have their own unique perspective, is deeply engraved on my mind. While life for these people can be a struggle, they also have the power to effect change because they serve as a bridge between two worlds. Personally, I think that people like this, who know the loneliness of not belonging to either world and who, for that very reason, realize that diverse positions and perspectives exist, are very special.

I like stories that are not driven solely by the thinking of the main character but instead convey the voices of people with different perspectives and social status. Although inevitably one perspective will dominate, I prefer to avoid a fixed point of view, probably because in my fieldwork I always sought to reassess what people of a particular social status said and did in view of what people of another social status said and did. I want to portray why it’s easy for a particular interpretation of justice or view of life to become fixed within a culture and what happens when it does.

I also tend to incorporate multiple perspectives even within the same scene. This was something I did without realizing it until my work was first translated for publication in English. To my surprise, the American editor told me that the way I leaped from one person’s mind to another made her dizzy and asked me to please do
something about what she called “head jumping.” The translator Cathy Hirano and I discussed how linguistic differences can change the way a reader responds, and I was intrigued to learn that when she read such passages in the original Japanese, she didn’t feel any discomfort, but when she translated them into English, she would notice that something felt odd.

Hirano was born in Canada but came to Japan to study, attending International Christian University in Tokyo and later marrying a Japanese. Having lived in Japan for several decades doing wonderful work as a translator, she also, in a sense, straddles a border between two cultures, and the things that catch her attention when translating are fascinating. In preparing to write this paper, I contacted her by email to ask her about cultural differences that she struggles with when translating. Below with her permission, I share some of her reply.

When I translate, I notice a difference in the way Japanese thought flows as compared to English. For example, a sentence that comes at the end of a paragraph in Japanese, often feels more natural in English if placed at the beginning of the next paragraph or even moved all the way up to the beginning of the original paragraph. Similarly, sentences within a paragraph get the content across more clearly in English if their order is rearranged. English often flows linearly from A to B to C to D, whereas my impression of the Japanese thought process is that it seems to revolve around a central point which is hinted at but not clearly stated. Japanese literature retains a vagueness, yet the meaning comes across through the “feeling” created. If this is translated into English literally, however, the point is lost and the reader is left frustrated. (From an email to the author, May 19, 2020.)
As I read her email, I pondered the fact that despite such differences in the flow of logic and thought between two languages, if a translation succeeds in getting the content across, stories written by a Japanese author can entertain people from another culture.

I had the honor of receiving the Hans Christian Andersen Award as well as five different literary awards for my works in the United States. The jury for the Hans Christian Andersen Award was made up of a diverse group of people from Russia, Venezuela, Austria, Korea, Cuba, Italy, the United States, Iran, Sweden, Turkey, Spain, Malaysia, Switzerland, and Canada. That people from such a broad range of cultural backgrounds enjoyed and valued my works makes me ponder the universality of storytelling.

I have done my best in this paper to faithfully describe my story-writing process, but the attempt has made me acutely aware of how little I understand the workings of my own brain. To be so dependent on something I can’t understand is a cause of concern, and it means that, as an author, I live with constant anxiety. Each time I finish a new work, I wonder if I will ever be the channel for the birth of another, yet to try to make a story happen is futile. Consequently, for the last thirty-one years, I have lived with the fear that I may never write again. Despite this, to realize at the end of a day that I’ve managed to write several pages fills me with the joy of being alive.

V Conclusion

In this paper, I explored the relationship between my writing process and cultural anthropology. On reflection, I realized that a story first comes into being the moment an individual image in my mind connects with something generated by a group. My keen interest in the impact of the emergent properties of a collective on the
lives of individuals triggers a chain of mental associations that results in the birth of a story.

For *The Beast Player*, the trigger was the similarities and differences between a swarm of honey bees and human societies. For *Shika no ō*, it was the resemblance between the ecology of viruses and germs inside and outside the human body and the interactions among different ethnic groups. In both cases, the realization of how the individual was connected to the group sparked mental associations that led to the story’s birthing cry. The state of mind that first drew me to cultural anthropology and the place where my stories are born are thus deeply interconnected.

While writing this paper, it became clear to me that these mental associations play a crucial role in shaping the unfolding story, and also that they are closely related to everything I have learned in the field of cultural anthropology. Having listened to presentations by many different scholars and having read numerous ethnographies, I find that the image of a particular character sparks corresponding images of that character’s homeland, along with its climate and natural features and the lifestyle of the people who live there.

Strangely, if I try too hard to “use” the knowledge I have gained, those passages stick out, distracting the reader. Instead I try to avoid thinking about cultural anthropology during the writing process. Even so, the various facets of cultural anthropology, which are now an inseparable part of me, permeating my subconscious, naturally shape and color the story.

It became clear as well that fieldwork, which is like experiencing another world, also plays an enormous role in my writing. It is rare to get the opportunity to step out of one’s familiar lifestyle and live for an extended period in another culture, and that experience has left me with things I could not have gained in any other way.
worlds that I depict are real enough to convince readers they must exist somewhere, it is thanks to having experienced other worlds through fieldwork.

In closing, let me touch upon stories, a topic which continues to enthrall me. In his paper for the JASCA Award, Mitsuru Hamamoto wrote:

…the human tendency for narratives is quite extraordinary. Even if we know perfectly well that something is a work of fiction, at no more than a moment’s notice we can be drawn into the world of a narrative and be left hanging in suspense by the actions of the main character and swing between hope and despair, no matter how we tell ourselves that such a character is not for real. The fact that our minds seem to be designed to receive and make sense of narratives with ease, and be entranced by them, and to give meaning to the narrative connections that exist between events, suggests in itself that narratives have coevolved as adaptive tools. (Hamamoto, 2015: 20)

I agree with Hamamoto completely and feel this last sentence is particularly important: “The fact that our minds seem to be designed to receive and make sense of narratives with ease … and to give meaning to the narrative connections that exist between events, suggests in itself that narratives have coevolved as adaptive tools.” It is probably the workings of this narrative-mind that generate the conditions described in this paper through which my stories are born despite my lack of conscious understanding.

If the human brain is designed to excel at storytelling, then if authors adhere to a story line that unfolds in their minds, it will likely follow a pattern where readers can guess what happens next. In fact, I
think this is usually the case. You would think that an obvious plot line would be boring, but instead such stories often become wildly popular. Clearly, certain story patterns have a broad appeal.

When I obey the urge to tell a story, I deliberately go with the flow even if I notice that it is following a conventional story pattern. I might deviate slightly or play with it a little so that the reader does not notice, but I am careful not to let these tweaks manipulate the direction the story wants to go. While some stories lose their appeal when we can guess what will happen, others do not. Personally, I have always been attracted to those that leave me deeply moved, despite knowing how they are going to end.

Many of the stories I have loved since childhood, including the oral traditions passed down by my grandmother and Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, remind me of the legends and folktales once told by professional storytellers. Although I know what is going to happen, I want to hear them again and again, and I listen with eager anticipation. Despite their familiarity, each time I read or listen to them, I discover something new.

Perhaps such stories guide the author and the reader into a similar narrative-mind, generating an unconscious resonance at some deeper level. And perhaps this is why such stories are so enduring, continuing to survive through changing times. The stories I treasure have both this enduring quality and something that makes me want to return to that place again. I think that “something” is probably the appeal of the story world itself and of those who populate it. Sometimes people criticize the fantasies I write, saying that the worlds depicted there are just daydreams, that the characters are not real, but I believe that is one of the powers of stories—the ability to present a vision of how the world and how people can be.

Although I have written at length about my writing process, I fear
that I have failed utterly to capture the essence of the stories that I love and that exist within me. Just as a person’s charms can never be fully conveyed in words but only truly appreciated through spending time getting to know them, so too, a story must be read in its entirety, along with every detail, even those so trivial we might not notice them, to appropriately grasp its appeal.

Stories are woven with words, but what cannot be adequately expressed in words can be entrusted to the reader (the other). The long journey of a person’s life, the light that person sees falling through the trees, the inexorable passage of time revealed by ruins encountered along the way—when such details merge into a single whole that flows inside the reader, then, for the first time, the story expresses something that can be felt by others. Then, and only then, can it communicate the dream of what could be. These are the kind of stories I have longed to write all my life—stories that capture the shape and allure of things that can only be conveyed through stories; stories that make the reader forget, even temporarily, the “here and now” of daily life and transport them, hearts beating with excitement, through strange, subtle worlds rich in color.

Although what I have written in this paper can hardly be called scholarly, I believe that cultural anthropology seeks to identify and extract connections between people that are too nebulous to grasp yet which we consider precious. I shall therefore conclude my paper here, consoling myself with the hope that if it is read with such magnanimity, the reader may still find within it something worthy of interest.

**Acknowledgements**

Many people have helped me become what I am today. I would like to express my profound gratitude to my academic advisors Machiko
Aoyagi, Masatoshi Konishi, and Hiromitsu Umehara, the professors for whom I served as an assistant, Koji Akino and Makoto Matsudaira, my doctorate thesis advisors Yukio Toyoda, Kazuaki Kurita, and Sachiko Kubota, and my senior at graduate school, Akiko Naito.

Notes

1) The 2001 Robo no Ishi Literature Award was for the first three volumes of the Moribito series: Seirei no moribito (Moribito: Guardian of the Spirit), Yami no moribito (Moribito II: Guardian of Darkness), and Yume no moribito (Guardian of Dreams).

2) The 2002 Iwaya Sazanami Literature Award was for the first four volumes of the Moribito series: Seirei no moribito (Moribito: Guardian of the Spirit), Yami no moribito (Moribito II: Guardian of Darkness), Yume no moribito (Guardian of Dreams), and Kokū no tabibito (Traveler of the Void).

3) Yoko Ogawa and I are both members of the selection committee for the Kawai Hayao Prize for Stories and sometimes have opportunities to enjoy informal conversations.

4) In their work *Memo from the Story Dept. Secrets of Structure and Character*, Hollywood development executive Christopher Vogler and producer and screenwriter David McKenna, point out that Steven Spielberg, George Lucas and Francis Coppola among many others were influenced by mythologist Joseph Campbell’s theory of the monomyth, a universal story pattern he called the “hero’s journey.”
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