

MEDIA RESOURCES

Japanland: A Year in Search of Wa

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Karin Muller, a National Geographic filmmaker, photographer, author, and personal friend, has recently completed *Japanland*, a four-hour documentary series that was first shown nationwide on public television in November 2005. The companion book (also called *Japanland*) is in bookstores and has been reviewed by, among others, the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Washington Post*, the *Atlantic Monthly* (by James Fallows), *Outside Magazine*, *Traveler Magazine*, and *Peace Corps Writers on-line*. (Karin was a Peace Corps volunteer in the Philippines after graduating from Williams College.) *Japanland* was also one of the New York Public Library's top 25 books of the year for 2005. Both the book and the video are products of a year that Karin spent traveling, filming, and writing in Japan.



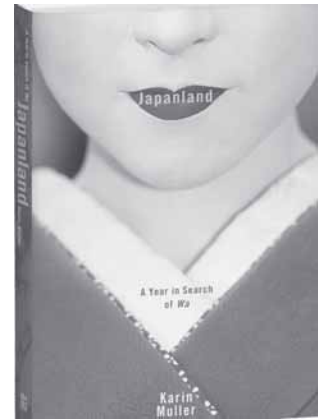
Karin participating in Tokyo's three-day Sanja Festival.

Karin's previous documentaries, *Hitchhiking Vietnam* (<http://www.pbs.org/hitchhikingvietnam/>) and *Along the Inca Road*, premiered respectively in 1998 (on PBS) and 2000 (on the National Geographic Channel and MSNBC). Both have companion books. I first met Karin

when she came to Wellesley more than 10 years ago to talk about her travels in Vietnam, and I still remember it as one of the most engaging programs that we've had on campus. Her personal story and her now many travel tales are truly remarkable.

The *Japanland* book and documentary film series are both insightful and entertaining. Her stories are fast-paced and compelling, yet filled with images and concepts that stay with you for days. Between them, the book and films provide two completely different, yet complementary approaches to understanding Japan. They take a multifaceted look at those pockets of traditional Japan that manage not only to survive, but thrive, within a modern economy, and they examine a nation that is often struggling to find its place within a globalized world while still maintaining (and respecting) many of its ancient ways. Karin's pen and lens also explore and explode many stereotypes about Japan, yet she finds the truths that often lie behind some of these common notions. Through both compelling images and prose, *Japanland* helps us to understand the complex and often contradictory reality of what it means to be Japanese today.

Karin did a presentation on Japan for the *National Geographic Live!* series in Washington in April and recently spoke at a Japan-America Society program in Los Angeles. She currently lives in Raleigh, North Carolina, but travels frequently on assignment for *National Geographic*, most recently to Japan again in May of this year.



The Book

Told with intimacy and humor, *Japanland* relates the story of Karin's immersion into Japanese culture, filled with poignant moments of clarity and hilarious incidents of impropriety. As she seeks out the many unique and sometimes

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obscure subcultures of Japan—including sumo wrestlers, mounted archers, geishas, Buddhist monks, and even the now-iconic workaholic *salariman*—she experiences the great diversity and proud humanity of a nation rooted in the past but looking toward the future. *Japanland* is also a journey of personal growth for Karin as she is forced to adjust and acquiesce to—and comes to appreciate—some of the rigid norms of Japanese society. An independent, thirty-something, single American woman with a strong sense of curiosity—or as Lesley Downer said in her very positive *New York Times* review (October 30, 2005) of *Japanland*, “brash, intrepid and more than a trifle wacky”—Karin draws us into her struggle with the baffling intricacies and idiosyncrasies of her host culture. She emerges on the other side both wiser and more than a little humbled by the journey. See excerpt from the book immediately following this article.

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The PBS Video Series

Visually breathtaking, the *Japanland* videos range far and wide through both the present and the past, from rural Japan to its major cities, exploring both the Japan we know and that which few foreigners get to see. Each of the four half-hour segments stands alone and yet fits seamlessly together as a series on a single topic.

Karin spent an entire year shooting in Japan and managed to capture many of the details and nuances that more conventional film crews often overlook: high-tech assembly lines churning out cars onto country roads barely wide enough to drive on. The world's most punctual train system run by

staff who often calculate change on an abacus. Vending machines that offer everything from batteries to used panties—and condoms that are sold based on the user's blood type. Traditional monasteries

stocked with soda machines and acolytes who excel in both sutras and video games.

Karin brought a unique set of skills with her to Japan. In addition to studying Japanese before embarking on her journey, she had spent the last nine years learning judo. Because martial arts are highly respected in Japan, this opened many unusual, often hidden doors into Japanese life. Her indomitable spirit and sense of adventure led Karin to follow dervish mountain-cults as they undertook shamanistic austerities like fire walking, icy waterfall immersion, and exorcism. She joined a samurai mounted archery team and learned how to handle a longbow on a galloping horse. She filmed the ancient art of swordmaking under a 24th generation master. She made a 900-mile pilgrimage in the footsteps of Japan's most famous saint, and helped light ten thousand floating lanterns during *Obon*, the Festival of the Dead. As a result, *Japanland* provides a rare glimpse behind the *tatemaï*, or external image, to see the *honno*, or true inner character of Japan.

Highlights of the *Japanland* Videos

The price of tradition—and the struggle with difficult decisions...

In 1300 AD there lived a swordmaker in Kamakura, the ancient capital of Japan. His name was Masamune, and he developed a new technique of forging swords that was to change the course of history in Japan. Karin spent three weeks with his 24th-generation descendant, learning the ancient techniques of forging these extraordinary weapons. One day the 24th Masamune will have to

choose someone to be 25th in line, but his

only son wants to be an opera singer. By far the most skilled of Masamune's five apprentices is a Brazilian named Roberto! But is Japan ready to pass

such a revered name and tradition to a swordmaker with a foreign face?

Teamwork—the joy of being just another cog in the machine...

Once a year Tokyo hosts a great festival called the *Sanja Matsuri*. Forty portable shrines—each carrying a kami, or local spirit—are paraded through town for three days. Karin carried a shrine throughout the festival. Thousands of spectators chanted a rhythmic “*ya-shoi, ya-shoi*” while they marched hour after hour. The repetitious sound and palpable energy transformed the simple act of movement into an almost religious experience. Much has been made of the burden of Japan's rigid social structure and endless rules and obligations, but Karin's film shows us that there is a great reward to being a part of the system—experiencing human harmony in the purest sense.



Two would-be samurai warriors racing at a festival.

A 350-year-old tradition that keeps a village warm...

The tiny town of Kuromori in northern Japan lies all but forgotten during spring, summer, and autumn. When winter comes the farmers of Kuromori exchange plowshares for wooden swords, break out tins of face-paint, and re-enact a 350-year-old tradition called winter kabuki. Teenage boys willingly dress up as girls sporting parasols and a thick crust of face paint, and everyone pitches in to rebuild the local shrine, sew costumes, and learn lines. The real heroes of this yearly event are the spectators, who sit in the snow—and sometimes in a snowstorm—for seven hours while listening to the players recite act after act in an ancient form of Japanese that none of them can understand.

Solo sumo and bull sumo...

Everybody knows what sumo wrestling is, but few have ever heard of one-man sumo. Each year on a tiny island of O-mishima in the Inland Sea, the best sumo wrestler in the village goes up against the shrine god. Best out of three. Guess who wins? Just a few miles south another ancient custom still flourishes. Each year twenty bulls—one ton apiece—are pitted against each other in Bull Sumo. The massive animals eye each other, then

slowly close the gap and lock horns. They may stand, unmoving, for an hour. Not so their handlers—teams of up to twelve Japanese men leap around like crickets, pounding their flanks and shouting encouragement. Eventually one bull turns tail and flees, and then the real excitement begins. Several men jump up to grab a passing nose, tail, and ears in a futile attempt to stop a thousand pounds of runaway, horn-tipped muscle.

An unusual place to think about retirement...

The *Yamabushi*—a 1400-year-old cult of pre-Buddhist mountain ascetics—spend the month of August in the sacred Dewa Sanzan mountains. While in training the *Yamabushi* are not allowed to shave, brush their teeth, or wash their clothes. They eat nothing but rice, watery soup, and pickles. They hike throughout the mountains, dressed in white and wearing brass bells that ring with every step. The *Yamabushi* worship stones, trees, mountain summits, lakes, and ancient sites. They are elusive folk, though if you hike deep into the sacred mountains and listen carefully, you may hear the haunting three-tone sound of their conch shells carried on the wind. At night they chant for hours, then seal themselves inside a temple and pour pepper powder and rice husks onto a fire. For fifteen minutes they inhale the fumes, sometimes passing out. This is said to simulate death and eventual rebirth as a sacred being. Karin went through *Yamabushi* training



A member of the Yamabushi, a mountain ascetic cult.

with them only to discover that the participants were mostly *salarimen*, and almost all were about to turn 60. They had come to the training not for religious reasons, but to figure out what to do with the rest of their lives.

The New Human Beings...

It is a fact of life that every generation most everywhere, as it approaches middle age, is surprised and appalled by what the “young ‘uns” are up to. Middle-aged Japanese are so taken aback by the current crop of youth that they have labeled them “the New Human Beings.” They sport

spiky green hair, metal plugs in their eyebrows, noses, tongues, lips, cheeks, and navels, and heavy leather in the heat of summer. A frightening sight, though they are in reality completely harmless. It will be interesting to see what changes this new generation brings to traditional Japan... or how they adjust to Japanese traditions as they get older.

A Valuable Teaching Tool

Karin’s films are uniquely suited to the American college classrooms because they open a window into Japan in a way that is particularly engaging for young people. They are also likely to strike a resonant chord with students who are themselves facing so many choices, opportunities, and unexpected turns in their own lives. And, ultimately, the film will give them valuable insights into the joys and pitfalls of intercultural exploration and the personal growth that invariably comes from taking up such a challenge.

Karin is available in the coming academic year to give a multimedia presentation on college campuses. You can contact her at Karin@karinmuller.com. Further information also can be found at www.japanlandjourney.com, which has some background on the making of the series and excerpts from the book. To purchase the book or the DVD set, see www.japanlandonline.com. Study guides will soon be available for both the book and the films. ●

Japanland: An Excerpt from the Book

The Suit....

I’m jogging in Osaka park, in the shadow of the castle, when a man on a park bench asks me for a light. I don’t have one, of course—but he catches my eye and motions to the seat beside him. He seems harmless and my run is over, so I sit.

He’s in his mid-40s, obviously a businessman, and a successful one at that. His suit is tailored to perfection and has that subtle, expensive sheen. He must have

noticed my appraisal because he starts speaking as though we were old friends. “It was almost four years ago,” he says. “They came into our office and just made an announcement. We were all so ashamed that we couldn’t even raise our heads and look each other in the eye.” He pauses. “They said it wasn’t our fault... the recession... a bad year in exports.... But still...”

He’s somehow lit a cigarette. I’ve been staring at the castle rather than looking at his face. I don’t have to be a Catholic to recognize an open-air confessional.

“I lost my savings, then the house. After that I sent my wife home to her parents with the kids. We all said it was temporary. I went to see them a few times

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but it was too painful and embarrassing all around. Now I just don't bother anymore and everyone is relieved. It was the same thing with my friends. It made it worse that I still looked like them—I suppose it was a reminder that it could happen to them as well.

One day I walked out my door with nothing more than a briefcase and my best suit—as though I was just going off to work. I never went back.”

He's rubbing a spot on the inside lining of his suit, and I can see that the material has started to fray. “I learned to sew,” he murmurs almost as an afterthought.

The lining had developed a tear. He flips it up just long enough for me to see the stitches, tiny and impossibly straight. “I take it off at night so that I don't wrinkle it in my sleep.” He laughs low and without humor. “One night I almost froze to death. It was my first January, and it got so cold. Every third month I save up to have it dry-cleaned, and I have to hide for a night and a day. In between I hang it over a steaming subway grate.”

He used English when he first spoke to me, but since then he's switched to

Japanese. Sometimes I understand his words, sometimes not, but always from his expression, I know exactly what he means.

“Occasionally I buy a cheap ticket and ride back and forth on the train. I can do this because I look just like a businessman. But it has to be during rush hour, when it's the most crowded and uncomfortable. I always stand. Sometimes I catch a young lady's eye.” He smiles. “Life isn't so bad.”

When he walks among the people at the station, nobody notices him. That minor gesture—or lack thereof—makes him feel a part of things. And he reacts like any good citizen when he sees a dirty man in wrinkled clothes sleeping on the ground.

“I will never be like them”.

He's smoked his cigarette to the nub. It's an expensive habit—most homeless look for discarded, half-finished fags but he won't pick them off the street—the telltale dents might give him away.

“I still drink too much, he says sadly. A bad habit I brought with me... When I drink I remember the bars we used to go to after work—the camaraderie, the

mama-sans, the swirling smoke, and lots of noise and warmth. It was always warm in there. I never noticed it at the time, but looking back...”

He can't get another job, despite his expensive clothes. He's not trained for anything else. Stores won't take him because they want young women, and he's overqualified. In some ways the suit is as much a deterrent as if he wore old rags.

And he has expenses. A haircut once a week. The barber doesn't know his situation, even after all these years. He never asks for a discount, and always pays in cash.

The cigarettes are a prop, of course. I am a prop too—a one-time actor on his stage, there only for a single scene. The play: that he is a successful businessman taking a lunchtime stroll in the sun. Only he never gets up to go back to work.

But the suit—that's more than just a prop. It's his dignity—his face.

He's rubbing the same spot over and over with his thumb. It's fraying more each time.

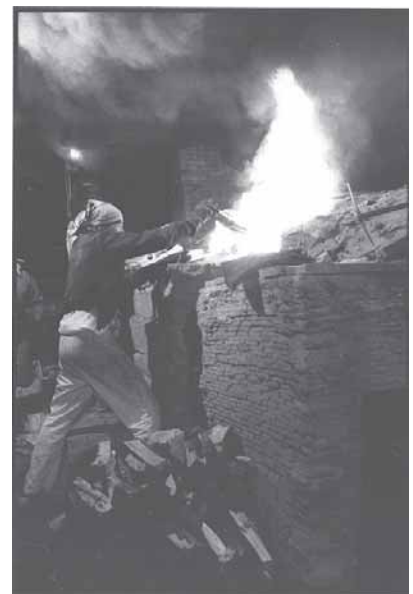
“One day,” he says, still rubbing, “It will be destroyed. And then everything will be over.” ◆

“Ancient Fires to a Humane Future” (continued from page 9)



Koie Ryoji, the recipient of two Oribe awards, working in the Saint John's University pottery studio.

Global Harmony Platter—In 1995, the St. Paul-Nagasaki Sister City Committee asked Bresnahan to create two platters to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, Japan. Each vessel bears an inscription on the bottom: waka-style poem by Father Neal Lawrence, who had been sent to Nagasaki and Hiroshima after the bombings to view the devastation first hand.



Richard Bresnahan stoking the final chamber of the first kiln he built at Saint John's University.