

INTRODUCING : OLD POND COMICS [+ JESSICA TREMBLAY]



JESSICA TREMBLAY IN HER OWN WORDS

Haiku is rather an esoteric form of poetry to devote ones' self to. How did you get interested in the form and when did you start writing your own?

I was twelve years old, the first time I saw a haiku. I was reading a book on whales and there, in the middle of the page, was a haiku by Akutagawa Ryusunake. The poem blew me away! It said so much in very few words. Soon after, I started writing three-line poems. In college, my poetry teacher said my poems looked like haiku. I didn't know what haiku was. I was living in a small town north of Quebec. My teacher asked one of his friends living in Montreal to send him a book on haiku and he lent it to me. The book had an introduction to haiku and a collection of the best Japanese haiku ever written. I knew I had just found my literary vocation. I started studying haiku. However, it didn't occur to me that I, or anyone living in Canada in the 21st century, could write haiku until I learnt in the newspaper that a local poet, Carol Lebel, had just written and published a book of haiku. Until then, I thought only Japanese poets from centuries ago wrote haiku. I started writing haiku and my first book was published in 2003.

How did you get the idea of fusing comics with haiku?

The first time I included a haiku in the comic was for the National Haiku Writing Month, a writing challenge created by Michael Dylan Welch on Facebook, in

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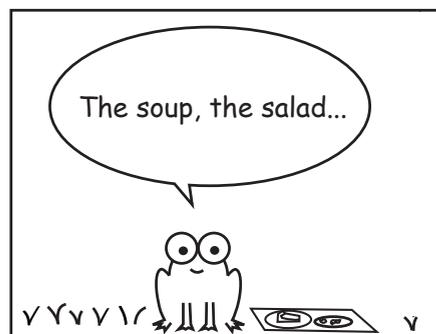
The first Old Pond comic was created in 2007 and was published in *Gong* (journal of the French Haiku Association) a few months later, in 2008.

Created by Jessica Tremblay as a means of sharing her love of haiku in a whimsical, visual format, *Old Pond Comics* features the adventures of Master Kawazu and his young apprentice Kaeru, who is learning to write haiku. The twist? Master Kawazu and Kaeru are both frogs.

In this issue of *The Bulletin*, in celebration of the annual Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival, we introduce Old Pond Comics to our readers.

The Bulletin spoke to creator Jessica Tremblay about her forays into the world of comics and haiku.

Old Pond Comics



*Haiku by Basho



www.oldpondcomics.com

Jessica Tremblay

Old Pond continued

February 2010. The goal of NaHaiWriMo is to write one haiku a day for a month (he chose February because it's the shortest month). I decided that Kaeru the frog would have to write one haiku a day for a month to prove that he was worthy to become Master Kawazu's apprentice. And I would include his haiku in the comic. I tried different approaches: putting a haiku in the first or last panel (leaving two panels for the comic), having one line of haiku per panel, or having the character say the haiku like it was a dialogue. I did twenty-eight haiku-comics in twenty-eight days and the comics were a huge success with the haiku poets of all levels. I quickly discovered that the two genres work really well together. They have lots of similarities. For example, there are three lines in a haiku written in English, and there are three panels in a comic. There's usually a joke on the third panel. And haiku usually have an element of surprise at the end. Both in comics and haiku, you've got limited space, so you have to keep things pretty simple, just keep what's essential.

How did you get started?

I'd had this idea for Old Pond for five years before I actually did the first comic. I thought "I can't draw" so I put the idea aside. I was hoping one day I would meet an artist or a graphic designer that could draw it for me. One day, I discovered my computer had a simple drawing program. I thought "I'm gonna see if I can draw a frog." I drew a frog and the first *Old Pond Comics* was born! The comic was published a few months later, in 2008, in *Gong*. Drawing on a computer works really well for me. Three years ago, I learned Adobe Illustrator which is what I use to draw the comic today.

Have you always had an interest in comics and/or poetry?

I've always been a big fan of newspaper cartoons. When I was young, I would cut them out and collect them. I loved how they told little stories in only three panels, with a beginning, middle and end. I loved how the drawings complemented the writing and added so much with the expression of the characters, etc. My favorite comic character is Woodstock, the little bird from *Charlie Brown*, and he doesn't even speak! (Well, not real words, anyway.) I think if you can do a funny cartoon without using any words, then you are a true comic master! Cartoons are like visual haiku. My favorite poems are short and image-based. I love poems by E.E. Cummings.

I understand that you don't just write when the mood strikes you, but you actually set yourself challenges, or tasks . . . tell me about those . . .

I'm still very critical of my artwork. When I first started, I decided to post one comic a week, on Monday, and that gave me plenty of time to edit, change my mind, hate the comic, etc. To shut off my inner critic, I realized it was best to work under strict deadline. In 2010,

I enrolled in the 24-Hour Comics Day challenge during which you have to write twenty-four pages of comics in twenty-four hours. I did the twenty-four comic strips that became the prequel to *Old Pond Comics*: how Kawazu met Basho and inspired him to write his most famous haiku. When you commit to a challenge, you have no choice but to post the comic whether you like it or not. It's good discipline. I join 24-Hour Comics Day every October and every February I create one haiku comic a day during National Haiku Writing Month.

The two characters in your comics are frogs. What is the significance of the frogs and their names?

Kawazu means "frog" in ancient Japanese. Master Kawazu claims to be the frog that jumped in the pond and inspired poet Matsuo Basho to write his most famous poem "old pond / a frog jumps in / the sound of water!" (The name *Kawazu* is in the original poem: *kawazu tobikomu... a frog jumps in*). Shortly after meeting Basho, *Kawazu* opens his own haiku school.

Kaeru means "frog" in contemporary Japanese. After visiting different haiku schools, *Kaeru* finds Master *Kawazu* sitting in a pond and decides to study haiku with him. *Kawazu* loves the traditional rules of haiku (17 syllables, season words, etc.) while *Kaeru* is intrigued by modern haiku and will later break the rules. This difference of taste and opinion will create friction between the Master and his student.

You've won some awards and accolades – tell me about that . . .

In 2008, my haiku *late for work – / cherry petals / in my hair* won Best B.C. Poem at the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival Haiku Invitational and was sculpted on a haiku rock that can be seen at the VanDusen Botanical Garden (in the cherry grove).

I also won a second prize in the international section of the *Main-*

ichi in 2007 and third place in the Kusamakura competition in 2009.

What is your goal with Old Pond Comics?

The goal of *Old Pond Comics* is to get more people interested in reading and writing haiku. A teacher in Vancouver is already using my comics to teach haiku to her students.

You write haiku in English and French, what about Japanese?

Learning Japanese is something I've always wanted to do. I would love to visit Japan one day and be able to read (and perhaps even write) haiku in Japanese. I plan to take Japanese lessons this fall and I will write comics about it. Master *Kawazu* will ask *Kaeru*, who only speaks amphibian, to learn Japanese so he can better understand the essence of Japanese haiku.

Besides Gong, where else has your work appeared?

Old Pond Comics is published in *Frogpond* (journal of the Haiku Society of America), *Notes from the Gean* (online) and on my website www.oldpondcomics.com. It is also featured in the teacher's guide *Lighting the Global Lantern* written by the President of Haiku Canada Terry Ann Carter and illustrations of *Kaeru* the frog appear in *Le haiku en herbe* (including on the cover), a haiku guide for schools by Isabel Asúnsolo published by Editions I'rioli in 2012.

I don't imagine that haiku OR comics is a day job. What do you do when you're not cartooning and writing haiku?

I'm a library technician during the day. I create the comics in the morning and in the evening I take classes in web design, eBooks, digital publishing, and transmedia. I would love to bring *Old Pond Comics* to the next level, perhaps as a short animation film, interactive book or game.

Kaeru means “frog” in contemporary Japanese. After visiting different haiku schools, Kaeru finds Master Kawazu sitting in a pond and decides to study haiku with him. Kawazu loves the traditional rules of haiku (17 syllables, season words, etc.) while Kaeru is intrigued by modern haiku and will later break the rules.

Do you have any advice for aspiring cartoonists?

Don't get it perfect, just get it done! The comic doesn't need to be perfectly drawn, it just needs to be funny. XKCD is one of the most popular web comics... and it's just stick figures. Focus on writing a good joke and making people laugh. Your artwork will improve with practice.

What about people who want to try their hand at haiku?

Start by reading a lot of haiku, especially the traditional Japanese poets. Join a haiku group (the Vancouver Haiku Group meet every third Sunday at the Britannia Family Resource centre. Contact angelan@telus.net for more information). On Facebook, the page NaHaiWriMo is a community of haiku poets who write one haiku a day all year long and is a great place to share haiku.

Can you give a plug for this year's Cherry Blossom Festival?

Monday April 22 at 6.30pm, there will be a workshop “Learn haiku with Michael Dylan Welch” at the Vancouver Public Library Central Branch. Admission is free. You have until June 3rd to submit a haiku to the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival Haiku Invitational (www.vcbf.ca). ♦



VANCOUVER CHERRY BLOSSOM FESTIVAL

2012 WINNING HAIKU

British Columbia

alone at the airport
a cherry blossom
on my suitcase

Marianne Baharustani, Vancouver, BC

Canada

morning tai chi—
all the prams
slowly turning pink

Lin Geary, Paris, Ontario

United States

cherry petals falling
the pond's oldest koi
slowly surfaces

Michele L. Harvey, Hamilton, New York

International

school for the blind
every fingertip sees
a different pink

David Terelinck, Pyrmont NSW, Australia

Youth

old cherry tree—
a spider weaves its cobweb
between two flowers

Cristina Ailoeai, age 14, Botosani, Romania

HAIKU AT THE 2013 VANCOUVER CHERRY BLOSSOM FESTIVAL

Vancouver loves its flowering cherry trees - all 40,000 of them! While they bloom from March through May, the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival invites you to celebrate their beauty with your haiku. The ephemeral nature of the blossoming of cherry trees teaches us all to celebrate life now. Similarly, haiku captures a fleeting moment in time with deep awareness and subtle appreciation. We encourage both budding and seasoned poets to join other poets from around the world in honouring our awe-inspiring cherry trees. The festival welcomes haiku submissions that capture the essence of cherry blossoms while honouring our relations to each other and the natural world.

Winners will be published by Haiku Canada, Ripples and on the VCBF website. Top poems in five main categories (Youth, B.C., Canada, United States, and International) will also appear on TransLink SkyTrains and

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