

Sketching History

Recently I had the chance to talk to artist, writer, heritage activist, and president of the Vancouver Historical Society, Michael Kluckner, about his graphic novel, *Toshiko* (Vancouver: Midtown Press, 2015) \$19.95 and about the promise of the graphic novel format for engagement in and with history.

The novel is a love story between Toshiko, a young Japanese-Canadian woman interned in the Shuswap area of British Columbia, and Cowboy, a farm boy. When their relationship is forbidden, they take off for the city and attempt to hide out and build a life in Vancouver. Against the backdrop of their relationship, Kluckner is able to explore themes of class and race in British Columbia in the 1940s—the lived reality of internment, the cultural isolation of BC’s hinterlands, pervasive racism.

This topic is rooted, for me, in one of the pleasures of childhood summers when our friend Graham Abbott would visit for a few days and bring along his comic book collection. He shared generously with all of us. To me they were pure magic, not only a new world of superheroes that I little understood, but also an enticing mix of word and image, with dialogue and action—“Argh!”, “Kapow!”—written large. The emotions of Graham’s superheroes was muted with respect to other worlds presented in his comics, including the slobbering lust the men of Riverdale displayed for Betty and Veronica, these feelings rendered for readers in far-from-subtle terms: googly eyes, clouds of hearts, sweat, halos of exclamation marks.

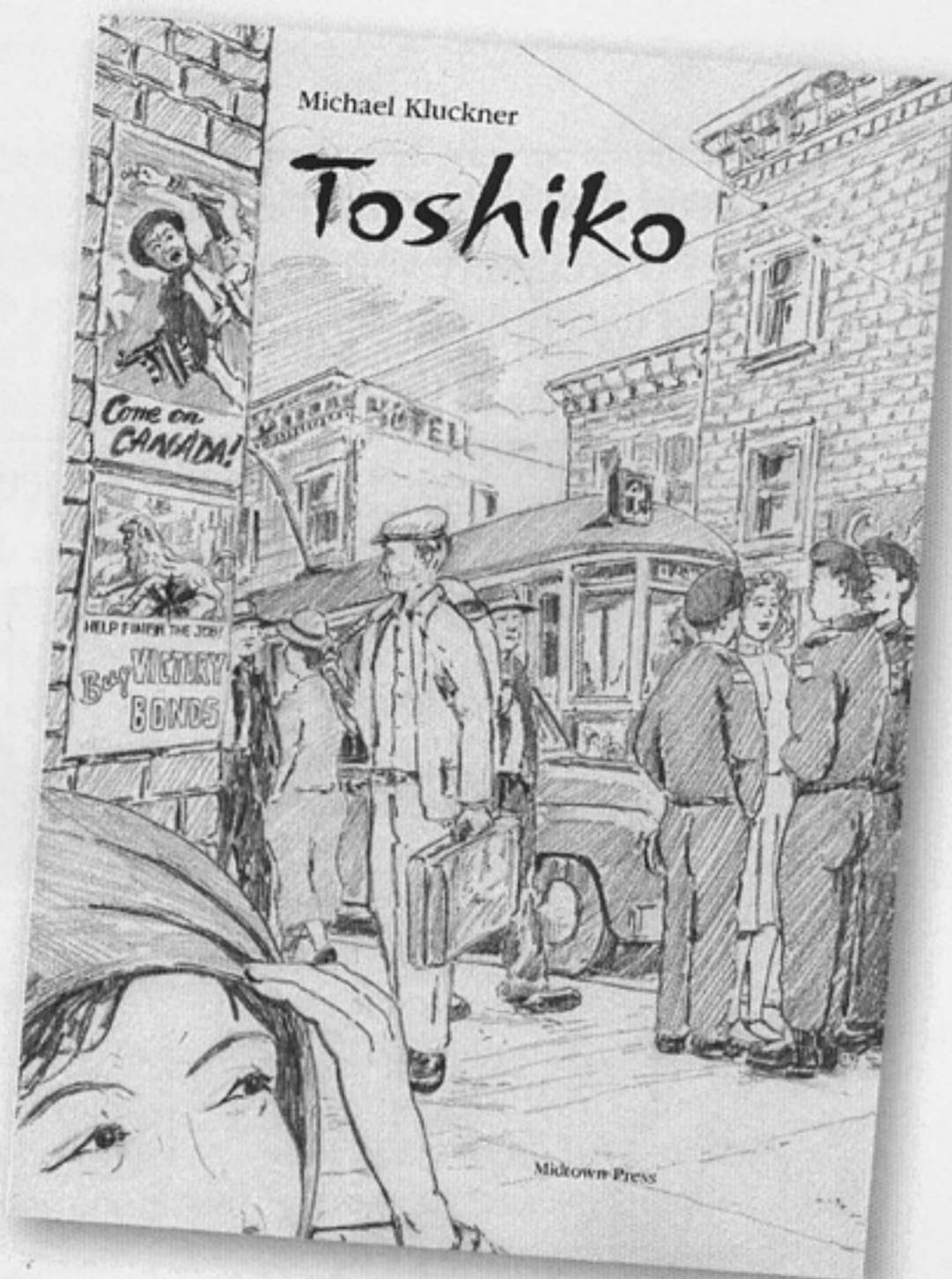
In the years since, comic books

have flourished, and have increasingly taken on worldly topics, and along the way the new form of the graphic novel has grown from them, influenced too by Manga. The graphic novel is a form that appeals to a range of ages, and is one that comfortably hosts different genres as well. Writers such as Kluckner know that the graphic novel is an opportunity to render non-fiction in a new way. It has the potential to reach audiences that purely historical narrative can’t reach as it offers a rich visual world that expands narrative into three dimensions, gives readers many visual cues that lines of black text on a white page simply cannot. Beyond dialogue, human emotion and its many nuances are conveyed through facial expression, body language, and gesture. And humans in many graphic novels live in carefully researched and rendered historical contexts, compelling settings that include historically-accurate clothing styles, detailed streetscapes that include cars, billboards, architecture.

Kluckner describes the puzzle of creating the book as “tremendous fun.” It was “a fascinating challenge to create,” a creative journey that involved not only researching and writing, but also visual plotting. He notes that he “wanted to think about how the story could be told in a way that responds to the needs of an increasingly sophisticated visual culture, even reach large

groups of people whose first language might not be English” and needed to ask himself questions about “how the story could be plotted in a way that goes beyond the usual narrative ‘declamatory’ mode of history.” Kluckner sought to write a story that wasn’t preachy or didactic, a story in which its main character finds out about the world, and as he does so, the audience, too, learns. “This is a very important point,” Kluckner reminds me, “as in a good ‘regular’ novel, the writer ought to show rather than tell. The challenge in a graphic novel, as in a regular novel is to avoid ‘talking heads’ who are making little speeches all the time.”

A graphic novel such as *Toshiko* must tell a great story that moves through time and landscape. The story relies on good design. It must use the page well, unfold so that narrative is served by careful design decisions unseen by readers. Kluckner explained, for example, that he needed to plan, always, for





A telling moment in *Toshiko*: Cowboy profoundly misjudges both Toshiko's aspirations for her future and her deep ties to Japanese culture.

interesting variation on each page, and to make sure that story breaks line up with page endings. He needed to manage the story in order to tell it fully and well, to tell it in a compelling, beautiful visual way, to allow the complexities of history—and the wonders of story—to emerge.

Yet the writer's initial plans often take new directions. Kluckner corroborated what other writers have said about creating fictional characters: once you create characters, they end up taking on a life of their own. "They tell you what they need to do in order to fulfill themselves."

As he wrote *Toshiko*, Kluckner

wrestled with the question of voice: He did not want to speak as a young Japanese woman. "Also," he notes, "I believe that graphic novels—and novels generally—are most effective when they're told from a single point of view rather than by an omniscient narrator; added into that, there was the impossibility (for me) of doing justice to the Japanese-Canadian culture and home life if I tried to tell part of the story through Toshiko's eyes."

Instead, he created a young man, living in a place that was familiar due to Kluckner's childhood summers in the Shuswap. Cowboy is "unschooled, ignorant of the world

beyond his own—has grown up knowing only the drudgery of the farm, the lessons of the church, and the thoughts of a circle of likeminded people. His parents were bigoted and isolated." Cowboy's voice and his perspective are really worthwhile to the ongoing arc of understanding for the reader: the fact that he is ignorant means that he learns things, and as he learns things, so do readers. Kluckner explains, "My acquaintance Dick Mackenzie, born on a farm near Tappen in 1932 (this is in the author's note at the end of the book), described the area as 'redneck' and remembered the Japanese-Canadian children who were still there, on the farm, when he was in his teens; he's sort of the model for Cowboy, although of course he's too young to have graduated from high school in 1944. He still keeps in touch with Fiko Konishi, his childhood friend, who is the last of the Japanese-Canadians who lived closeby."

More than just a story about Japanese internship, it touches on many of the social complexities of the era of WW II in BC and rolls in others, including love, the desire to escape, the power of dreams and the sometimes humbling meeting between dreams and reality. It contains little-recognized historical facts: that Japanese kids from internment camps did leave camps to go to local high schools in Kaslo, and New Denver. Kluckner notes, "Our extended family was on an 'independent permit'—about 1,750 of the 22,000 coastal Japanese-Canadians were able to obtain such permits and live independently in the Interior during the internment period."

In its expansion of the parameters of story, *Toshiko* is an important addition to BC history. Kluckner and the folks at Midtown

press have compiled an impressive array of supporting material for the book, including an edition in French and a comprehensive and interesting teachers' guide that will help educators see the many ways that *Toshiko* supports the new provincial curriculum.

Reviewed by K. Jane Watt, books editor