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ASIAN BUSINESS NEWS

Ring! Ring! Ring! In Japan, Novelists Find a New Medium

Budding Scribes Peck Their Tales on Cellphones; Ms. Nakamura's Hurt Pinkie

By Yukari Iwatani Kane

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TOKYO -- When Satomi Nakamura uses her cellphone, she has to be extra careful to take frequent breaks. That's because she isn't just chatting. The 22-year-old homemaker has recently finished writing a 200-page novel titled "To Love You Again" entirely on her tiny cellphone screen, using her right thumb to tap the keys and her pinkie to hold the phone steady. She got so carried away last month that she broke a blood vessel on her right little finger.

"PCs might be easier to type on, but I've had a cellphone since I was in sixth grade, so it's easier for me to use," says Ms. Nakamura, who has written eight novels on her little phone. More than 2,000 readers followed her latest story, about childhood sweethearts who reunite in high school, as she updated it every day on an Internet site.

In Japan, the cellphone is stirring the nation's staid fiction market. Young amateur writers in their teens and 20s who long ago mastered the art of zapping off emails and blogs on their cellphones, find it a convenient medium in which to loose their creative energies and get their stuff onto the Internet. For readers, mostly teenage girls who use their phones for an increasingly wide range of activities, from writing group diaries to listening to music, the mobile novel, as the genre is called, is the latest form of entertainment on the go.

EXCERPTS

*He laughs at Mai, who is so nervous she can hardly speak.
Her chest starts to hurt.
"What's up?"*

Read more from 'What the Angel Gave Me' and other cellphone novels

Most of these novels, with their simple language and skimpy scene-setting, are rather unpolished. They are almost always on familiar themes about love and friendship. But they are hugely popular, and publishers are delighted with them. Book sales in Japan fell 15% between 1996 and 2006, according to the Research Institute for Publications. Several cellphone novels have been turned into real books, selling millions of copies and topping the best-seller lists. "Love Sky," one of

the biggest successes so far, is about a boy with cancer who breaks up with his girlfriend to spare her the pain of his death. It has sold more than 1.3 million copies and is being made into a movie due out in November.

Many mobile novels are influenced by comic books the young writers grew up reading. That means lots of dialogue and really short paragraphs that fit nicely on a small screen. Huge empty spaces between sentences can convey that the characters are deep in thought.

In "To Love You Again," Shuhei, a high-school boy ushers his childhood sweetheart, Kaori, into an empty science room for a moment of privacy before class when someone locks the door. The following scene goes like this:

*Kin Kon Kan Kon (sound of school bell ringing)
(space)
The school bell rang*

(space)

"Sigh. We're missing class"

(space)

She said with an annoyed expression.

The trick is to envision a movie screen inside your head and translate those images into words, says Ms. Nakamura, the housewife with the sore pinkie.

Mobile novels first appeared about seven years ago when the community-based Web site, Maho i-Land, made it possible for budding writers to turn out stories with a cover page and chapters like a real book. About three years ago, phone companies began offering high-speed mobile Internet and affordable flat-rate plans for transmitting data. Users could then access the Internet as much as they wanted to for less than \$50 a month.



Satomi Nakamura

The now-bustling Maho i-Land has six million members, and the number of mobile novels on its site has jumped, to more than a million today from about 300,000 before the flat-rate plans cut phone bills in half. According to industrywide data cited by Japan's largest cellphone operator NTT DoCoMo Inc., sales from mobile-book and comic-book services are expected to more than double, to more than \$200 million from about \$90 million last year.

Mobile-novel writers like getting instant feedback from readers. That encourages them to keep going or even to change stories to suit readers. Of course, the close interaction between reader and writer can sometimes be too much. A 27-year-old woman, who

wrote a sad love story called "What the Angel Gave Me" under the pen name Chaco, became so popular two years ago that she was getting 25,000 unique online visitors a day. Chaco, who won't disclose her real name, says she felt pressured to update her novel and respond to comments every day to keep readers happy.

"I was getting only one to two hours of sleep a night," says Chaco, a petite, neatly dressed woman. Her phone was ringing with email messages from fans at four in the morning. She eventually moved her Web page off the Maho i-Land's Web site onto a private site where she has more control over the feedback.

The novels with the most online readers also tend to sell well in the bookstores. Starts Publishing Corp., a small Tokyo publisher, was one of the first to take advantage of the mobile-novel genre when a Chaco fan called up and begged the company to turn her favorite story into a book. It sold 440,000 copies. Starts and a few other firms have turned more than two dozen of the most heavily accessed stories on Maho i-Land into printed books selling for about \$9 each.

At that price they are collectibles. Publishers pay special attention to book design. "Clearness," a romantic tale of a female and male prostitute, has a transparent book jacket overlaid on the cover with the image of a bed sheet. To preserve the mystique of the authors, and to protect the privacy of those who write personal experience stories, publishers encourage keeping real identities a secret. Many use one-word pen names like Towa and Mika.

Published authors like Yuzuki Muroi, a 37-year-old known for her blunt essays on sex, love and single motherhood, scoff at the new genre. At an award ceremony for prize-winning mobile novelists last year, Ms. Muroi made clear her disapproval. "What is unfortunate is that your stories are mostly a string of conversation and emotion, and there is almost no setting, scene, or character development," she said.

Ms. Muroi was one of the judges for the contest last year but declined to participate this year.

Still, fans of mobile novels say the best of them are a good read. Maika Oya, a 17-year-old high-school student in southern Japan, says she likes to read dark mobile novels

because they're often based on true stories and "they're more real" than the mobile novels with happy endings. "Deep Love," about a 17-year-old high-school student who has sex with men for money, is still one of her favorites.

Nobody knows how much staying power the genre will have, or whether authors who specialize in writing about their own experiences will run dry.

But some mobile novelists are determined not to let that happen. Chaco, who wrote the sad story of her romance with a boy who died in a motorcycle accident, wants to make a career of writing, and she is trying to improve her style. "I used to write whatever came to my mind without giving it much thought," she says. "But now I think a lot more about story development."

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