

「翻訳教室」の講師である金子靖氏が、2007 年に来日したパウエル書店 (<http://www.powells.com/>) 社長のマイケル・パウエル氏と英語で行った対談記事です。

## An Interview with Michael Powell

by Yasushi Kaneko

*In early July, 2007, Michael Powell appeared at the Tokyo Book Fair, and spoke to Japanese booksellers about Powell's Books, running a book store, and the challenges of bookselling in the 21st century.*

*While in Tokyo, Michael had the good fortune to be interviewed by Yasushi Kaneko, an editor at Kenkyusha, one of Japan's oldest and most established publishing houses. In addition to editing and publishing English-language books and dictionaries, Mr. Kaneko writes articles and does translations for various media and lectures on English education at universities and bookstores. In 2004 Kaneko instigated and led the movement to save the popular bookstore, Aoyama Book Center, which had been forced to close its doors. He is also a frequent customer of Powell's.*

KANEKO: Book lovers, not only in Portland but all over the world, including Japan, greatly admire you and your bookstore, Powell's. What prompted you to go into the book business instead of becoming an author or a scholar?

POWELL: It would have been fun to be a scholar but there are many authors in the world... I don't think we necessarily need another one. I went into the book business because it looked like an opportunity that I could do well in. I went into the antiquarian and used book business, and I enjoyed the hunt for the books in attics, basements and shops... anywhere that they were. It was like a treasure hunt. Learning what customers wanted to read was a test of my brain also, just like being an author or scholar. Being able to anticipate by buying the right books and learning when I made a mistake. It was always a business, but also a game.

KANEKO: Encouraged by friends and professors, including novelist Saul Bellow,

you opened your first bookstore in Chicago in 1970. You opened your store, with astounding success, when you were a University of Chicago graduate student! I admire you! But I am quite sure you have gone through a lot of hardships. Please tell us about the trials and tribulations of opening your own bookstore.

POWELL: I don't know that they were trials and hardships. You made mistakes in selecting books sometimes because you bought things that people didn't want, or you might make a mistake about price or something, but no major mistakes. It was not an instant success, it grew slowly over time. But because it grew slowly it gave me time to learn, which is what I needed to do so I could have more skills as the business grew. I'm trying to think if there was some particular hardship, but it never seemed like it. It always seemed like fun.

KANEKO: Now, your staff regularly writes very intriguing and suggestive introductions or reviews for newly arrived books. In addition to that, they have done a lot of amazing interviews with great writers like Stephen King, John Irving, Salman Rushdie, Julian Barnes, Zadie Smith, Richard Powers, Paul Auster, and many many more. We can read them on your shop's web site, [Powells.com](http://Powells.com), for free.

Your staff must have extensive knowledge about books and publishing, beyond even the first-rate newspaper columnists on books. Do you think bookstore staff should have such extensive knowledge about books and publishing?

POWELL: Yes. We work to find young people — but not always young — who love books, are knowledgeable and want to learn more. Many of our staff have been with us a long time and have learned a great deal about books. Some of them might have been writers before they came to me, so they have skills in writing and interviewing.

I like to communicate a passion for books, so we don't sell other things. In this country it's common to sell DVDs and CDs. We don't do that. We want to concentrate on books. I want to convey, online and in the stores, that we have a passion for books and we love books. If you're shopping with us online you're shopping at a bookstore — not like Amazon, a warehouse.

The people in the bookstore share the passion as a reader that you have. They

like to communicate their intelligence, but also their love for books. I think it's important to have that, because then the customers know that they are in a place where books are really valued. It's not just selling soup or something. It's a special passion and opportunity for people to be able to sell books. We want to keep that sense in the company.

KANEKO: We are now living in the dot com business world. Major dot com companies dominate in their fields. Needless to say, in our book business, dot com companies, with Amazon.com listed first, rout their competitors. Japanese real and online bookstores also feel the threat of Amazon and world-wide online bookstores. How do you feel about this situation? Please tell us your opinion as owner of what is basically a real and independent bookstore.

POWELL: For us there are two threats with competing online, and we've been successful at them. One is we were in very early. That wasn't an accident. We're a company that likes to be innovative, so I encourage my people to be thinking all the time about new things and new technologies. So when someone came up with the idea of being on the Internet in 1993, I was eager to do that even though I did not know how it would work out. In '94 we did go on the Internet. We were in early and that gave us time to learn how to grow with the Internet.

We're not as big as Amazon — not even close — but we compete with them. Half the books we sell on the Internet are new books, and those books are sold at full price. No discount. Amazon discounts and has all that marketing skill and market penetration, but people will still come to our store and buy books. It isn't all about price. For many people price is very important, but for some people other things are important.

Conveying that knowledge, doing interviews, supporting the blogs and podcasts — doing all the things one can do on a website, and do it creatively and with style — so it's not just boring. Or just paid words. The staff can convey their passion for books. It isn't a big staff. We compete with Amazon; they have more janitors than we do staff, but we win awards for excellence. That's because a few good people can do wonders on the Internet.

KANEKO: Yeah, I am a frequent customer of Powells.com. And I really love to buy from your online bookstore the first editions with authors' signatures. For

example, I bought Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*. I cherish that book.

POWELL: You can buy a signed Murakami. They're probably all sold by now.

KANEKO: Really? I should have bought one! In Japan, Murakami seldom signs his books. They're really valuable!

POWELL: Too late. (laughs)

KANEKO: In 2004, a popular bookstore, Aoyama Book Center, was forced to close its doors. But we publishers and customers who love bookstores collected signatures to keep the shop in business. Happily, Aoyama Book Center went back into business with the strong support of many publishers and customers. We are really proud of our action. We were able to establish that the combined voices of book lovers can sometimes save bookstores and the jobs of their staff. But the situation bookstores and their staff face today is no better than before. And unfortunately quite a few book shops always feel the threat of closing down.

What is the situation in the U.S. like? Do you think you Americans are also in a shaky situation like us?

POWELL: Everyone, not just America. France, Germany, everywhere it's the same problem. Part of it in our country is the size of the competition — Borders, Barnes & Nobel and Amazon. Rent and other challenges. In the US many bookstores have closed. A few have been saved, like your Aoyama Books, by customers who refuse to let them close and raise money to help. But you're right, the situation hasn't changed. The store that was in trouble before will continue to be in trouble unless they find a solution to their problem. I don't have an easy answer for that.

We have different cultures, traditions and laws we operate under, but we have one similar problem. Technology is disrupting everything — publishing, distribution, authorship, readership — everything is impacted by new technology. That's the same all over the world. Each, within our own tradition, has to find an answer to how we work with these new technologies, because if we don't then we are history.

KANEKO: We should greatly admire and respect every bookstore and their staff.

We shouldn't treat only the bookstores with a good sales record with undue favor. I think one of the most important things is for us publishers to admire all of the shops and their staff, and create a good situation and conditions for them to work in. To my surprise, however, recently an executive at one of the leading publishing houses said to me and bookstore employees, "I just only buy from Amazon, because the local bookshops don't have a wide and attractive assortment of items." He said such things many times right to our face! I couldn't believe that. Of course, I often use Amazon, but as a publisher and person who is in charge of book business, you can't say such things, at least to bookstore staff, if you want to encourage and support them.

As owner of a prestigious bookshop, what do you wish us publishers and editors to do for bookstores and staff?

POWELL: It's an interesting comment. You say we should greatly admire every bookstore and their staff. I'm not sure that's accurate. I don't know about Japan, but in the US there are many bookstore people who say they will open a store and decide which 10,000 are the "best books" and if nobody buys them it's because they're too stupid. I ask who is stupid — the person who offers books nobody wants, or the one who is more engaged with what the customers are looking for. It doesn't mean you shouldn't be selling important books — you should not sell only manga or romance novels — but too many booksellers have been arrogant in their belief that they know what is the right book and the right way to approach customers. But there are many excellent bookstores with excellent staff.

I believe that publishers and staff can do a great deal to support bookstores. I will speak only from the American experience because I've only begun to learn about Japan. But making authors available, helping with promotional materials and in-store events. Having business practices so bookstores can select the books they want.

I understand it's common here for publishers not to ship frontlist books to the stores? I think that's a terrible mistake. Bookstores ought to be challenged to be creative, pick good titles and test themselves against the market. But if they only take what publishers or wholesalers send, they really are nothing more than clerks. They're not exercising their brain or their judgment. The publisher says,

"Take 200 copies," when you know you can only sell 10. I think publishers have to treat booksellers as full partners; and booksellers have to treat publishers with respect. I think there has to be mutual respect.

Sometimes that doesn't happen and you feel it. I don't want to say you feel arrogance, but rather the condescension of one to the other. You don't feel like you're in partnership. We all have the same thing at stake here — our livelihoods and businesses — and if booksellers can't sell, publishers have nowhere to go. If publishers cannot produce in a manner which supports bookstores, there will be no one to sell their books. There has to be a true sense of partnership here. In the US that's not the tradition. Fortunately, we have more businessmen as publishers now. It's interesting. We've lamented the loss of the old family publishing firms but the truth is they weren't very good at what they did. Now the new professionals may be colder, but they're also more alert to being innovative and supportive because they're concerned about being able to sell more books.

KANEKO: Here in Japan some famous bookstore employees, such as Kumiko Taguchi, who is the deputy manager of Junkudo Ikebukuro — one of the biggest bookstores in Japan — really admire Powell's. While being involved in the drastically changing situation surrounding books and bookstores, they are proudly aiming to build or rebuild the best bookstores for their customers. Will you please give your advice to them?

Some bookstores here are closing, but they have to open new ones. Can you give advice to them?

POWELL: I cannot easily give advice to Japanese booksellers because I don't know the situation or the world they work in. To the extent we work in similar worlds, I think the use of technology is going to be more and more important: inventory control, information to the customer, information to staff, making the right decision about the right books to stock and how long to stock them and when to reorder. Using technology is going to be an increasing challenge. And technology is expensive. The brain is free but computers cost money. So that part is difficult. Good technical systems are very important.

And a passion for books so the staff feels empowered and permitted to speak to the customers in a knowledgeable way. Being centered on books. I've been in

many stores now where selling DVDs and CDs are important to the success of the store, but sometimes it feels more like a supermarket rather than a bookstore: the noise from the music, the visuals. It doesn't feel like the books are getting the respect.

KANEKO: Many bookstores, especially the ones in the big cities, hold regular events on their premises in order to attract customers. By holding such events, such as authors' talk programs or readings or signing events, one can expect customers to come to one's shop and make purchases there. Many bookstores in Japan are now doing so, and I believe Powell's is also doing the same thing. Do you think it is necessary for bookstores to do this? I am afraid that holding some events at bookshops sometimes increases the burden of work for staff.

POWELL: It's absolutely true that it increases the work for staff. There's no work-free way to do this, but is it necessary? I'm not sure it's necessary, but it builds a more loyal audience. Why do you come to my website? Because you read the author interviews and blogs. Of course that takes time and money to do that. The same thing about coming to the store for an author event. Sometimes only 15-20 people come, but sometimes 200-300. It is a way of building a link to the customer, because customers like to see the author and hear the words. Sometimes that's very disappointing because often they're not very good speakers.

I think the problem is that it's difficult for stores to get authors; authors don't like doing this very much. It's tiring and expensive. The hard part is building a reputation. You can't just do a little bit, because then you'll only get local authors and they won't attract large numbers of people. But if you work hard at this you can build a reputation. Portland, Oregon was not a place authors went to because it was too small. They went to San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, but not Portland. It took us many years to build a reputation. Now authors want to come.

KANEKO: It is now said that people don't read books as much as they did, say, 20 years ago. In Japan, certainly the total sales of books have been gradually going down, and the number of bookstores has been decreasing every year. Are you suffering in the U.S. from this problem? Do you think there is something we

can do to prevent such a situation?

POWELL: That's a cultural issue as much as anything, and an issue about what the schools are doing to encourage a passion for reading in young people. If the schools are not doing that a bookstore cannot affect that. In the US the number of books being sold has increased slightly. It's not going down — except in the last six months it went down some. I don't know if that's just a short term or long term trend.

Publishers are publishing more and more titles. We call it "throwing spaghetti against the wall." Throw more books out there to see what will stick. It becomes a defeating exercise of publishing more and more to keep the business flat. The business in the US is flat, if not down.

KANEKO: As a book lover, do you have some favorite writer or writers? What do you think of Japanese writers?

POWELL: Since I've been entertaining Japanese visitors, I've been making a habit of reading Japanese authors. Unfortunately, I have to read in English so only the translations. I'm a big fan of Murakami, but also Kobo Abe and Kenzaburo Oe.

KANEKO: I have heard that you are an enthusiastic follower of Haruki Murakami's work. Will you tell me about the sales of Murakami's books at Powell's?

POWELL: It helps a lot if he signs them (Laughter). His sales are very good. We have about four shelves of Murakami books. Most of his have been translated and are all in print, and the sales are excellent. I have many staff people who are very passionate about selling Murakami titles. I'm sorry it all comes down to Murakami. There is also the Ryu Murakami. I've also read *Coin Locker Babies*, which I thought was wonderful. I haven't met him.

KANEKO: Do you have some other Japanese writer whose works have sold well?

POWELL: Mishima, the classics — *Tale of Genji*, Abe and Oe — but not very many have been translated. I assume there are many, many. I think there are a

lot of mystery writers in Japan and some of those are now being translated because there's such an appetite worldwide for mysteries, so I see a lot of Japanese mysteries. But not enough books get translated.

KANEKO: Motoyuki Shibata, who is a superb translator and prominent scholar at University of Tokyo, really loves Powell's and often buys from you. Prof. Shibata has suggested that Murakami is making a great impact on modern American literature, and authors like Richard Powers and Aimee Bender are now writing great, original stories under the influence of Murakami. Would you kindly comment on this?

POWELL: I don't know that I can speak to his influence because I don't know enough about the writers and what are their influences. I know he's much read by writers. Murakami writes short stories for the New Yorker magazine. That's a very popular magazine in the US, and a few times a year he'll publish a short story there. The intellectuals read the New Yorker quite a bit, so I'm convinced they know his work very well. To the extent it influences them I don't know.

I know some people don't like Murakami because they find him too cold. His last two books, *Kafka on the Shore* and *After Dark*, are warmer and I think Americans will find his characters more attractive. He also seems more confident and relaxed in the last few books. He's not going for fireworks, he's going for a tighter story. He's becoming a better writer and I'm sure he's an influence because he speaks in a style that is very 21st century.

KANEKO: What do you think is the most important thing for bookstore employees? Knowledge of books? Being good at serving customers? The ability to make plans to sell the books on as large a scale as possible?

POWELL: They certainly have to have customer skills. We find it important to train employees to have good customer service skills so they can help customers. People tell me all the time that my employees are very helpful. And a positive attitude. In America sometimes people who work in shops are not very nice; I'm sure in Japan they're all wonderful but in America sometimes they're not very nice. It's important to find people who have good customer service skills. You have to have that and then you have to have some knowledge of books because you'll look like a fool if somebody is looking for *Moby Dick* and you think

it's a cookbook. Then people won't trust you. Why should they trust your books if your people are stupid? They have to have all those things.

KANEKO: You said at the talk session at the Tokyo International Book Fair on July 7 that "The biggest challenge is to sustain new changes." I am quite sure all of the listeners there were really moved and encouraged by your positive and enthusiastic comment. Around 1979, you and your father created a bookstore with a unique recipe combining used books and new books, hardcover and paperback, all on the same shelf. I think the style was viewed as unorthodox in those days. And around 1994, you promptly explored the selling of books by making the best use of internet technology, which had just emerged then. You've always been creating challenges to sustain new changes, and you succeed wonderfully in meeting them. We really admire you! Please tell us what the source of this positive energy is.

POWELL: I've always believed that connecting the author and the reader was our primary mission. For me, this meant all authors and all readers. No matter when or where they are. Having this view of our task opened so many opportunities and challenges that one lifetime is not sufficient.

KANEKO: You said that your personal challenge is to have bookstores selling books not only written in English, but also in other languages. That's truly great! Someday, in the near future, I really hope that people all over the world will get books written in various languages — of course including Japanese — from Powell's.

POWELL: In America we have not done a good job of dealing with interest in books other than those in English. Students, faculty, travelers, native speakers, international business workers, all have an interest in non-English material. The broader world has comparable needs. In store and online we can work to meet these needs while expanding our knowledge of the global book business.

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