



# Manga Miracle:

## Learning from the Light

Keiko Tobe, author of *With The Light – Raising an Autistic Child* discusses inspiration, hope and ambition with Lesley Smith



**W**ith the Light is not your run of the mill manga. It's not in the manga section for one, and is nearly triple the size and width of familiar offerings from VIZ Media, TOKYOPOP and Tanoshimi. *With the Light* is aimed firmly at adults and tells a moving tale of a Japanese family whose son, Hikaru Azuma, is autistic.

Told from the perspective of his mother Sachiko, *Hikari to Tomoni – Jiheishouji Wo Kakaete* is grounded in fact and follows Hikaru's struggle against adversity and ignorance. It is this factual basis that has made the series such a success, both in Japan, where it won the 2004 Japan Media Arts Excellence Prize, and here in the UK. Featuring delicate, hand-drawn artwork and a moving storyline, it not only entertains but also enlightens readers about a disability which remains mysterious and incurable.

Manga-ka Keiko Tobe explains that her inspiration for the series came while working on the yearbook committee at her five year old son's school, where she found herself meeting an autistic boy called R-kun. "When the children were about to graduate from day care, I sent out a questionnaire with the question: 'What do you want to be when you grow up?'. When I got the questionnaire back, R-kun was the only one who didn't answer that question and I regretted asking.

"On the day of graduation, all of the kids were supposed to answer what they wanted to be when they grow up so I was curious what R-kun was going to do. When he went up, his mother answered for him: 'When I grow up, I want to be a cheerful working adult'. It was such a good goal! I asked R-kun's mother if I could use her line in my manga. Then she asked me to please draw manga about autism because it is misunderstood in society. I didn't know anything about autism at the time, and this is how I started to study it from the beginning."

Tobe-san continues, "I am not a specialist, so I never thought I was drawing the manga to teach but I do hope that I can incorporate what I learn from research into the manga. Autism is different for each and every person, so it doesn't mean that what worked well for Hikaru-kun will work for other children. But using the information from the autistic child and from my manga might help one way or the other, and if that happens, I'd be happy."

Tobe-san always wanted to be a manga-ka, with her first story *Sanbiki no Obake (The Three Ghosts)* written whilst still in primary school and this ambition remained a consistent theme running through her life until she debuted in 1986:

"I went to college to become a teacher but I met a friend who also drew manga, and got into it again. We even published manga on our own during college. When I graduated, married, and moved to Tokyo, I worked as an assistant to a manga artist for about a year and a half. Then I was able to debut as a manga artist through Akita Shoten."

The series, originally published in Akita Shoten's *For Mrs. Magazine*, has been collected in 13 volumes so far (which are being doubled up for the English language release). The series also inspired a live action television series produced by NTV in 2004 and Tobe-san continues to draw Hikaru's story.

"Hikaru-kun says that he will become a 'cheerful, working adult' so I want to continue until I draw that scene. I don't know what volume that will be, but I don't think it'd be that far ahead. I am currently drawing him in 8th grade [13-14 years old], and in Japan, volume 13 will be released in April. I have many stories inside my head, and I want to draw them soon but I'm only working on *With the Light* so I'm giving one manga 100%."

Volumes one and two of *With The Light* are out now, and volume three (containing Japanese volumes five and six) will be published by Yen Press in September.



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