

PAGE-TURNER

THE ORIGIN STORY OF MARIE KONDO'S DECLUTTERING EMPIRE

By Barry Yourgrau

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Marie Kondo, still only thirty years old, is the author of a best-seller on tidying up, but her KonMari method has its detractors as well. **Diarmuid Greene / Web Summit / SPORTSFILE via Corbis**

he Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up,” Marie Kondo’s mega-selling how-to of minimalism—a “Tidily blend of confessional autobiography, life philosophy, decluttering strategies, and clothes-folding tips—arrived in America in late 2014. Since then, it has inspired a will to discard, it seems, in a million and a half (and counting) American book-purchasers with too much stuff. More than four million (and counting) copies of the book have sold worldwide. The second Marie Kondo volume to be translated here, “Spark Joy: An Illustrated Master Class on the Art of Organizing and Tidying Up,” will come out in January. This one has pictures, and is a bit riper with particulars—there are six (short) pages about underwear, three for stuffed toys, and so on—but essentially restates the principles of the world-conquering book that preceded it.

As a recovering clutterbug myself—though not a minimalist and not a fan generally of the how-to genre’s Manichean, one-size-fits-all prescriptions—I admit I find aspects of the so-called KonMari Method (a contraction of Kondo Mariko, her name in the Japanese style) compelling, if not altogether original. The method’s anchoring principle, that we hang onto only what “sparks joy,” deftly reconfigures the notion of tidying and decluttering as mere throwing away: transformative existential keeping seems to be Kondo’s lesson. There are echoes, too, of Joseph Campbell’s dictum “Follow your bliss.” Kondo’s other main strategy finesses the pangs of letting go by calling for a considered, thankful hail and farewell—a ceremony, not a ham-fisted trash-bagging. Clutter, the English psychoanalyst and design teacher Jane Graves wrote, in “The Secret Life of Objects,” is always about memory, and so emotion and sentiment. Tidying, then, is intimate work, and therefore sensitive to conceptualizing and to the subtleties of slogans. A veteran New York design journalist told me that her daughter was a KonMari convert because she felt not reproach but rather an embracing, cheery respect. This conspicuous respect extends to the clutterer, the cluttered premises, and the clutter objects themselves. It brings a light animism to even your old socks.

Kudos, then, to Kondo. Even if her attitude, for instance, toward keeping books—that still-unread means never will be read, and that, once read, books shouldn’t be retained for rereading—strikes me as almost barbaric. And even if, in the year since her own book became a phenomenon in this country, there has been something slightly strange in the tone of public reaction—as though the “magic” of the book’s title were a literal quality, and not a bit of clever publishing hyperbole. This extends to the depiction of Kondo herself. A [profile in *New York* magazine](#) began this way: “As a physical presence, Marie Kondo has more in common with a snowflake than with the flesh-and-

blood humans around her.” It’s true that Kondo, just thirty years old, is a petite prodigy of tidying, possessed of a winsomely deferential and yet authoritative air. She famously started her vocation as a kid. “I have spent more than half my life thinking about tidying,” she writes in “Life-Changing Magic.” For a time, too, she was an assistant at a Shinto shrine, with its many ceremonials of respect, a common enough practice for Japanese teens. Perhaps the more suitable fanciful image is not a snowflake but a determined young heroine from a Miyazaki film, setting out daily to magically clean up the world. By her mid-twenties, Kondo’s thriving organizing consultancy in Tokyo had so many waiting-list clients that, at their request, she wrote what became “The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up”—in three months, according to the *New York* profile. Which conjures up a neatly fairy-tale-like birth for Kondo’s monster best-seller.

But there’s a more down-to-earth version of the story to be found in the Japanese publishing journal *Shin-bunka*. In 2010, Kondo’s book proposal won first prize in a publishing training course called “How to write bestsellers that will be loved for ten years.” One of the judges was Tomohiro Takahashi, an editor at Sunmark, which is a Tokyo self-help and business publisher remarkable for its best-sellers and its hands-on editorial approach. Takahashi made the winning bid for Kondo’s book-to-be, of which she had not yet written a jot. She was a writing novice, but Takahashi told himself, “She’s going to be on TV and become famous.” (“I felt a mysterious energy around her that I had never experienced around other people,” he told *Shin-bunka*.) Immediately they began working together, hand in glove, for eight intensive months. Takahashi’s hunch turned out to be correct. His neophyte author was a TV hit, initially tidying the residence of a well-known comedian. Aided by a savvy Internet campaign, the book sold well, and then, in the wake of the trauma of the tsunami in March, 2011—which threw what’s valuable in life into sharp relief, Takahashi has declared—the book sold phenomenally. After all, as Sunmark notes on its Web site with a touch of cultural pride, living spaces in Japan are tight, so they tend to be tidy and orderly. “In Japan more than anywhere else, tidiness is less a virtue than a philosophy of living,” that *New York* profile informs us.

But not everyone agrees with this account of Japanese culture, or with these theories about the popularity of Kondo’s work. “She is a successor of the long tradition of ‘art of discarding’ starting around the 1990s,” the author and photographer Kyoichi Tsuzuki wrote to me over e-mail. “It looks to me that mood arose after the Japanese bubble economy’s crash. Until then, we were educated to buy more and more.” Tsuzuki’s book “Tokyo: A Certain Style” presents a rather different take on

apartments in his and Kondo's home city. Published in Japan in 1997 and in the U.S. in 1999, his book is a glossy little glut of photos and texts that zestfully celebrates a hundred or so tiny Tokyo residences, most of them crammed to their varying slovenly gills with clothes, books, audiotapes, CDs, art works, posters, and pop knickknacks. All very untidy. "I wanted to show you the real Tokyo style," Tsuzuki writes. "Call it pathetically overcrowded, call it hopelessly chaotic . . . hey, that's the reality." A reality, he proclaimed, of people choosing to be "surrounded by their favorite things." Joy-sparking possessions, if you will—but in disorderly abundance.

Tsuzuki, a husky fifty-nine-year-old with a hiply close-cropped pate, went on to produce more cultural-anthropological celebrations of Japanese low style, in books and projects about kitschy roadside attractions, vanishing sex museums, and young fashion devotees proudly swamped by their collections of wearables. (My e-mail caught him about to leave for Paris to show his "small collection of Japanese freak-show banners" at an art exhibition.) I asked if he agreed that the March, 2011, tsunami inspired people to winnow their possessions to the essential, and that Kondo's book stepped in as the perfect guide. He was skeptical. "It looks to me," he wrote, "that we are entering a cheap, functional, no-character goods decade in Japan. Uniqlo, Muji, and all those corporations became really huge, and our daily life is filled with their merchandise. They are fine, but you really don't need to love them. You don't want to keep your Uniqlo T-shirt even after it has a hole or you become fatter and cannot wear it anymore. You wear them for a season, then throw them away. I think this trend helped [Marie Kondo's] success much more than 3.11."

For the last four years, Tsuzuki has been putting out a weekly cultural e-mail magazine called *Roadsiders' Weekly*; recently, he started a series of articles on the theme of "T-shirts you cannot throw away." His friends and readers are encouraged to show him their "most favorite" T-shirt, one they can't discard, even if they no longer wear it. "Some people keep a rugged T shirt for 20, 30 years," he informed me. This, he said, represented a "totally opposite tendency from Uniqlo and Muji's no-character, functional design philosophy." I advised him that Marie Kondo herself confessed, with embarrassment, to hanging on to (and still wearing, in privacy at home) an old but joy-sparking T-shirt, which bore the image of a green "roly-poly" cartoon mascot named Kiccoro ("Forest Child"). "Kiccoro is one of the pair of characters for 2005 Aichi Expo," which was devoted to environmentalism, Tsuzuki explained. "Extremely ugly."

Nina Saeki offered a gentler, more philosophical assessment of Kondo's way. Saeki, a former architect in her late forties, based in Osaka, is vice-president of JALO, the Japan Association of Life Organizers. We met in September at a conference in Cleveland for an international association called the Institute for Challenging Disorganization. I.C.D. and JALO members work with hoarders as well as people with simpler clutter and organizing issues. I e-mailed her some questions about the effectiveness of Kondo's approach. Saeki told me, through her translator Junko Bradley, that the KonMari method was effective for certain of her clients, but not for the heavier-duty cases—the sufferers from “chronic” (deep-seated and profound) disorganization, and the inhabitants of *gomi-yashiki* (trash houses), as hoarder dwellings are termed in Japan. (Saeki herself was helping an infamous hoarder in Nagoya, whose stuff had glaciated out onto the street.) “Chronically disorganized people are attracted to everything,” she explained. Their joy gets sparked, in other words, by all they possess—the whole hodgepodge load of it.

Saeki's sense of the tsunami's effect was very different from the one propagated by editor Takahashi. “I heard from organizers who lived in the affected area,” Saeki said, “that some of their clients were afraid to let things go—letting go would be difficult. A lot of people started accumulating extra stuff while in temporary housing, in case it might be needed. They were just afraid.” (It is common for people to hang on to things in the wake of trauma—it's a response that has been noted for some time. And hoarders report a much higher incidence of trauma in their lives generally than non-hoarders.)

Overall, Saeki believes that decluttering and tidying must be individually tailored, that no single approach fits everyone. She paraphrased Nietzsche in “Thus Spake Zarathustra”: “This is my way. What is your way? THE way does not exist.”

She also noted that she herself had considered taking the publishing training course, “How to write bestsellers that will be loved for ten years.” She has ambitions to write, too. But ultimately she decided the course wasn't right for her.

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More: Hoarders

