



Tokyo Vice: An American Reporter on the Police Beat in Japan

By Jake Adelstein

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A riveting true-life tale of newspaper noir and Japanese organized crime from an American investigative journalist.

Jake Adelstein is the only American journalist ever to have been admitted to the insular Tokyo Metropolitan Police Press Club, where for twelve years he covered the dark side of Japan: extortion, murder, human trafficking, fiscal corruption, and of course, the yakuza. But when his final scoop exposed a scandal that reverberated all the way from the neon soaked streets of Tokyo to the polished Halls of the FBI and resulted in a death threat for him and his family, Adelstein decided to step down. Then, he fought back. In *Tokyo Vice* he delivers an unprecedented look at Japanese culture and searing memoir about his rise from cub reporter to seasoned journalist with a price on his head.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

A Q&A with Jake Adelstein

Question: What drew you to Japan in the first place, and how did you wind up going to university there?



Jake Adelstein: In high school I had many problems with anger and self-control. I had been studying Zen Buddhism and karate, and I thought Japan would be the perfect place to reinvent myself. It could be that my pointy right ear draws me toward neo-Vulcan pursuits--I don't know.

When I got to Japan, I managed to find lodgings in a Soto Zen Buddhist temple where I lived for three years, attending zazen meditation at least once a week. I didn't become enlightened, but I did get a better hold on myself.

Question: How did you become a journalist for the most popular Japanese-language newspaper?

Jake Adelstein: The *Yomiuri Shinbun* runs a standardized test, open to all college students. Many Japanese firms hire young grads this way. My friends thought that the idea of a white guy trying to pass a Japanese journalist's exam was so impossibly quixotic that I wanted to prove them wrong. I spent an entire year eating instant ramen and studying. I managed to find the time to do it by quitting my job as an English teacher and working as a Swedish-massage therapist for three overworked Japanese women two days a week. It turned out to be a slightly sleazy gig, but it paid the bills.

There was a point when I was ready to give up studying and the application process. Then, when I was in Kabukicho on June 22, 1992, I asked a tarot fortune-telling machine for advice on my career path, and it said that with my overpowering morbid curiosity I was destined to become a journalist, a job at which I would flourish, and that fate would be on my side. I took that as a good sign. I still have the printout.

I did well enough on the initial exam to get to the interviews, and managed to stumble my way through that process and get hired. I think I was an experimental case that turned out reasonably well.

Question: How did you succeed in uncovering the underworld in a country that is famously "closed" or restricted to foreigners? Do you think people talked more openly to you because you were American?

Jake Adelstein: I think Japan is actually more open than people give it credit for. However, to get the door open, you really need to become fluent in the spoken and written language. The written language was a nightmare for me.

You're right, though; it was mostly an advantage to be a foreigner--it made me memorable. The *yakuza* are

outsiders in Japanese society, and perhaps being a fellow outsider gave us a weird kind of bond. The cops investigating the *yakuza* also tend to be oddballs. I was mentored into an early understanding and appreciation of the code of both the *yakuza* and the cops. Reciprocity and honor are essential components for both.

I also think the fact that I'm too stupid to be afraid when I should be, and annoyingly persistent as well--these things didn't help me in long-term romance, but they helped me as a crime reporter.

Question: Do you feel that investigative journalism is being threatened or aided by the expansion of the Internet and news blogs, and the closing down of many printed newspapers?

Jake Adelstein: In one sense it is being threatened because investigative journalism is rarely a solo project. It requires huge amounts of resources, capital, and time to really do one story correctly. Legal costs and FOIA documents are expensive things. The bigger the target, the greater the risk and the more money is required. The second-biggest threat to investigative journalism is crooked lawyers and corporate shills who sue as a harassment tactic. In general, it's rather hard and time-consuming to be an army of one. It took me almost three years to break the story about *yakuza* receiving liver transplants at UCLA on my own. The costs in financial terms were immense, and so were the losses along the way. A team of reporters could have done the work much faster, probably.

However, these things said, blogging is also a great source of news that might go unreported, or be overlooked, by the mainstream media. Twitter, too, has had an interesting impact, actually helping a journalist get out of jail in the case of James Karl Buck. We're beginning to see kind of a public option in investigative journalism, too--such as things like ProPublica. They do an awesome job at investigative journalism, partly through donations, and they have a great web site. So the Internet is not all bad for investigative journalism, as long as we proceed with caution and forethought. At the same time, real intelligence-gathering work actually requires you to put down your cell phone and your computer and get off your ass and meet people in the real world. As odious as it may be, we have to sift through garbage, pound the pavement, and visit the scene of the crime. Not all answers can be found in front of a keyboard, or on Google, and the "it's all in the database" mentality is the bane of reporting and often generates shoddy reporting.

The individual journalist can do great investigative work--it's just a lot harder, and usually financially difficult to do unless you're independently wealthy, like Bruce Wayne. Most of us don't have the time or the resources or the luxury of holding down a day job and doing investigative journalism on the side, as a hobby.

Question: What do you hope your American audience can learn from your book?

Jake Adelstein: I think everyone will take away something different from the book. I suppose you can learn a lot about how journalism works in Japan, how the police work, and how the *yakuza* work. I would also hope that people take away from the book an understanding of some of the things I really like about Japan and the Japanese, things like reciprocity, honor, loyalty, and stoic suffering. I think in Japan, I learned how important it is to keep your word, to never forget your debts--and not just the financial ones--and to make repayment in due course. Perhaps that's what honor is all about.

There's a word in Japanese, *hanmen kyoshi*, which means, more or less, "the teacher who teaches by his bad example." At times, I'm an excellent *hanmen kyoshi* in the book.

Everything I've learned that's important to me is in the book somewhere. I hope there's something universal in the contents beyond just making people aware of cultural differences between the United States and Japan, or reiterating the importance and value of investigative journalism. Like a book I would choose to read to my

children, I hope there's some kind of moral to it all. Maybe the real lesson is to be kind and helpful to the people you care about whenever you can, because it's good for them, and good for you, and your time with them may be much shorter than you imagined.

(Photo © Michael Lionstar)

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. A young Japanese-schooled Jewish-American who worked as a journalist at Tokyo newspaper Yomiuri Shinbun during the 1990s, debut author Adelstein began with a routine, but never dull, police beat; before long, he was notorious worldwide for engaging the dirtiest, top-most villains of Japan's organized criminal underworld, the yakuza. A pragmatic but sensitive character, Adelstein's worldview takes quite a beating during his tour of duty; thanks to his immersive reporting, readers suffer with him through the choice between personal safety and a chance to confront the evil inhabiting his city. He learns that "what matters is the purity of the information, not the person providing it," considers personal and societal theories behind Tokyo's illicit and semi-illicit pastimes like "host and hostess clubs," where citizens pay for the illusion of intimacy: "The rates are not unreasonable, but the cost in human terms are incredibly high." Adelstein also examines the investigative reporter's tendency to withdraw into cynicism ("when a reporter starts to cool down, it's very hard... ever to warm up again") but faithfully sidesteps that urge, producing a deeply thought-provoking book: equal parts cultural exposé, true crime, and hard-boiled noir.

Review

"Groundbreaking reporting on the yakuza. . . . Adelstein shares juicy, salty, and occasionally funny anecdotes, but many are frightening. . . . Adelstein doesn't lack for self-confidence . . . but beneath the bravado are a big heart and a relentless drive for justice."--*The Boston Globe*

"Gripping. . . . [Adelstein's] vividly detailed account of investigations into the shadowy side of Japan shows him to be more enterprising, determined and crazy than most. . . . In some of the freshest pages of the book, our unlikely hero tells us about his initiation into the seamy, tough-guy Japan beneath the public courtesies,. . . . Adelstein builds his stories with as much surprise and grit as any Al Pacino or Mark Wahlberg movie, blurring the lines between the cops, the crooks and even the journalists. . . . *Tokyo Vice* is often so snappy and quotable that it sounds as if it were a treatment for a Scorsese movie set in Queens. Yet the facts beneath the noirish lines are assembled with what looks to be ferocious diligence and resourcefulness. For even as he is getting slapped around by thugs and placed under police protection, Adelstein never loses his gift for crisp storytelling and an unexpectedly earnest eagerness to try to rescue the damned."—Pico Iyer, *Time*

"A journalist's memoir unlike any I've ever read."--Dave Davies, *Fresh Air*

"Marvelous. . . . *Tokyo Vice* offers a fascinating glimpse into Japan's end-of-last-century newspaper culture as seen from a gaijin's perspective. It's filled with startling anecdotes and revelations. . . . Adelstein writes of his quest for scoops with sardonic wit, and his snappy style mixes the tropes of detective fiction with the broader perspective of David Simon's books as he makes a careful account of his journalistic wins and losses. . . . The author's gallows humor bleeds into even darker, more serious hues once Adelstein starts covering the Japanese mafia. . . . Astonishingly proves that no matter how weird and perverse Japan may seem in fiction, the real thing never fails to exceed our most violent expectations."—Sarah Weinman, *Confessions of an Idiosyncratic Mind*

"*Tokyo Vice* succeeds on several levels: as gripping journalism, as a ragged crime tale, as culture-shock memoir. Stakes are raised in its third act as the yakuza exercise increasing pressure on Adelstein, but he pursues the story anyway. Obviously, he lived to tell his tale — and thank goodness, because it's a

fascinating one.” —BOOKGASM

“Engrossing. . . fast-paced.”—*The Atlanta-Journal Constitution*

“Exposes Tokyo’s darkest, seamiest, most entertaining corners. . . . [A] gritty, true-to-life account of 12 years on the news beat as a staffer for a Japanese daily — and it is exceptional. Its classic atmospheric rekindle memories of Walter Winchell and Eliot Ness. It’s a tale of adrenalin-depleting 80-hour weeks, full ashtrays, uncooperative sources, green tea, hard liquor, and forays into the commercialized depravity of Shinjuku’s Kabukicho. . . . Definitely raises the bar. . . . A classic piece of 20th century crime reporting.”—*The Japan Times*

"[A] gripping story. . . . Pulls the curtain back on a sordid element of Japanese society that few Westerners ever see. In addition to his clash with [a] yakuza boss, Adelstein details the more notable cases from his 12-year career at the *Yomiuri*, including "The Chichibu Snack-mama Murder Case" and "The Emperor of Loan Sharks." No less fascinating is the view Adelstein provides into Japanese society itself. . . . Adelstein's Tokyo is a veritable Gomorrah where nearly every act of intimacy is legally bought and sold."—*San Francisco Examiner*

"Debut author Adelstein began with a routine, but never dull, police beat; before long, he was notorious worldwide for engaging the dirtiest, top-most villains of Japan's organized criminal underworld, the yakuza. Thanks to [Adelstein's] immersive reporting, readers suffer with him through the choice between personal safety and a chance to confront the evil inhabiting his city. . . . Adelstein also examines the investigative reporter's tendency to withdraw into cynicism ("when a reporter starts to cool down, it's very hard... ever to warm up again") but faithfully sidesteps that urge, producing a deeply thought-provoking book: equal parts cultural exposé, true crime, and hard-boiled noir."—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

"Not just a hard-boiled true-crime thriller, but an engrossing, troubling look at crime and human exploitation in Japan."—*Kirkus*

"Terrific. With gallows humor and a hardboiled voice, Adelstein takes readers on a shadow journey through the Japanese underworld and examines the twisted relationships of journalists, cops, and gangsters. Expertly told and highly entertaining."—George Pelecanos

"Sacred, ferocious and businesslike. This is the Japanese mafia that Adelstein describes like nobody else." —Roberto Saviano, author of *Gomorrah: A Personal Journey into the Violent International Empire of Naples' Organized Crime System*

"A gripping and absorbing read. Very few foreigners ever come close to discovering what's really going on in Japan's closed society. Adelstein chases two major stories that pull him into a vortex of destruction, threatening his friendships, his marriage and even his life. As he battles with profound issues concerning truth and trust, *Tokyo Vice* approaches a heart-pounding denouement. This is a terrifying, deeply moral story which you cannot put down, and Adelstein, if occasionally reckless, is an extremely courageous man."—Misha Glenny, author of *McMafia: A Journey Through the Global Criminal Underworld*

"A tale of a *gaijin* who stumbled onto a story so important and so dangerous that it put his life at risk. A *yakuza* offered him half a million dollars not to tell it. He wrote this book instead." —Peter Hessler, author of *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze*

"In this dark, often humorous journey through the underworld of Tokyo, Jake Adelstein captures exactly

what it means to be a *gaijin* and a reporter. Whether he is hunting for tips in *Kabukicho* or pressing *yakuza* for information, it is an adventure only he could write. For anyone interested in Japan or journalism, this is a must read." —Robert Whiting author of *Tokyo Underworld: The Fast Times and Hard Life of an American Gangster in Japan*

"Anyone interested in tattooed *yakuza*, 'soapland' brothels, and the various other aspects of Japan's lurid underbelly is guaranteed to be electrified by *Tokyo Vice*. Why is a manual on the perfect way to commit suicide a Japanese bestseller? Who goes to sexual harassment clinics? What's it like to spend a night in a male hostess bar? *Tokyo Vice* reveals all this and more. It's a story of lust and profit; a chronicle of fear and determination; most of all, a modern bildungsroman that simultaneously illuminates the soul of its narrator and that of modern Japan through the underside of Tokyo, the world's most fascinating city. I loved this book for many reasons—its humor, its pathos, its insight, its honesty—and maybe most of all, for reminding me of how lucky I am to live here." —Barry Eisler, author of *Fault Line*

"Jake Adelstein's razor straight reporting from the mean streets of Tokyo is a coming of age story that reveals more than it pretends to—because he has the guts to find the truth, and the gall to tell it." —Roland Kelts, author of *Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop Culture Has Invaded the U.S.*

"Vivid, insightful, and totally revealing of the decadent, seedy and sexual parts of Japanese society, *Tokyo Vice* is ripping fun." —Karl Taro Greenfeld, author of *Speed Tribes: Days and Nights with Japan's Next Generation*

"Jake Adelstein writes in the classic hard-boiled Dashiell Hammett manner—complete with stubbed out cigarettes and a shot of whiskey shared with his cop informant—but this is not San Francisco or New York, it's Tokyo, and it's not fiction. Those who live and work in Japan will recognize reality on every page. It's at times a harsh and ugly reality, but depicted humorously with whimsical details of Japan's twilight world that we only dreamt of. A guaranteed page-turner." —Alex Kerr, author of *Dogs and Demons: Tales from the Dark Side of Japan*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Charles Lee:

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