

Graphic Novels about Japanese Imperialism in East Asia

Shigeru Mizuki's Showa (vols. 1–4) and Keum Suk Gendry-Kim's Grass

By Peter Braden



Shigeru Mizuki (1922–2015).
Source: *Brunch* website at <https://tinyurl.com/fj4nd67e>.

Shigeru Mizuki's sweeping manga history and personal memoir of the reign of the Shōwa Emperor (1926–1989) could be a valuable addition to high school and college classroom discussions of Japanese imperialism before and during the Pacific War, and of the country's turbulent postwar economic and cultural transformation. The graphic novel format offers readability and impressively vivid illustrations. Additionally, the author's inside perspective on the events of this tumultuous period provides students with a stimulating and challenging way to discover or revisit familiar aspects of this history, such as the Pearl Harbor attack and the postwar occupation of Japan. In this way, the series could help students understand the significance of imperialism and militarism in a non-Western context. Finally, because the author himself is the protagonist of this series, students can reflect on issues common to all historical writing, such as selective emphasis or neglect of significant incidents, the possibilities and limits of histories that focus on a particular individual, and the tension between official narratives and personal experience.

Originally published in 1988–1989, each volume of approximately 500 pages includes a glossary and brief preface. Using these books in conjunction with more conventional textbooks, academic articles, and translated primary sources could invite fruitful comparisons across the genres. Because many students are exposed to history through popular, non-scholarly representations such as the musical *Hamilton*, it is worthwhile to consider the possibilities and limits of conveying and learning history through artistic representations. How does the graphic novel differ from a textbook account of the same period? What documentary or oral evidence is the graphic novel based on? How do we evaluate the way it tells its story? What responsibility do the author and illustrator have to their source materials, and to the people and events they depict?

The artistry of the illustrations in *Showa* and the immediacy of the author's account could inspire readers to learn more about the Second World War. Recent findings suggest that many young people cannot name the major belligerents of the defining conflict of the twentieth century. These books could help students, who may be deterred by the challenge of digesting detailed textual analyses of the war, to become curious about the war and the societies that fought it. While the war caused the author substantial hardship, the tone of the books is not accusatory toward the Western allies. Rather, Shigeru Mizuki reserves his harshest criticism for the militarized imperial system that sent him and millions of other young men into combat for dubious strategic purposes, causing suffering both in Japan and abroad.

Instructors will likely find Volumes 1 and 4 most useful, due to their integration of Mizuki's personal observations of these time periods and the larger sweep of Japanese and global history. In Volumes 2 and 3, the focus is more squarely on Mizuki's experiences of combat in the Pacific War. His portrayal of small-unit group dynamics, the misery of malaria, and the bloodiness of industrial warfare are vivid and incisive. Still, these books are more appropriate for courses on the construction of memory and the literature of battle, than for general courses in modern Japanese history.



Showa: A History of Japan

Vol. 1: 1926–1939

ALL VOLUMES:

BY SHIGERU MIZUKI

TRANSLATED BY ZACK DAVISSON

PUBLISHER: MONTREAL, QUEBEC,
CANADA: DRAWN & QUARTERLY

VOLUME 1:

2013, 560 PAGES, ISBN: 978-
1770461352, PAPERBACK

Volume 1 (1926–1939) follows the young Mizuki through childhood adventures against the backdrop of the global Great Depression. His schoolyard pranks and commentaries on contemporary popular culture help to draw in readers, allowing students to see prewar Japan through the eyes of a relatable and funny budding artist. Interwoven with this light-hearted material is the Japanese empire's gradual annexation of China and Southeast Asia. By combining slices of ordinary life with this over-arching narrative of grand politics, the book shows how the political and economic conditions in Japan made imperialism attractive to senior leaders, and how ordinary citizens experienced Japan's overseas expansion. For example, Mizuki's father, a struggling businessman, sets off for the Indonesian island of Java to launch an insurance franchise (145–160). While gently ridiculing his father's endless get-rich-quick schemes, Mizuki subtly shows how some citizens experienced their empire's overseas aggression as an opportunity to reinvent themselves and seek their fortunes. The author also deftly portrays the harsh discipline and social conditioning that aimed to mold them into powerful warriors for the Emperor (125–132). As an adult, Mizuki unequivocally denounces



Excerpts from *Showa: A History of Japan*, Vol. 2: 1939–1944.

the war, and the ideology of militarism that launched it. Yet by depicting his father's endeavors, alongside the Japanese people's enthusiastic response to wartime propaganda, Mizuki adds nuance to discussions of war and imperialism. The series shows that participants in traumatic events often experience, understand, and remember such phenomena differently than future observers.



Showa: A History of Japan Vol. 2: 1939–1944

2014, 536 PAGES,
ISBN: 978-1770461512, PAPERBACK

Volume 2 (1939–1944) follows the progress of the Pacific War, focusing on Pearl Harbor, the island hopping campaign, and Japanese expansion in southeast Asia. As Mizuki was called into military service

during this period, there is less attention on the politics and culture of the Japanese home islands. The book's treatment of orders of battle, military rank, and the strategic aims of the Japanese military during this period are likely too specialized for a typical high school or undergraduate classroom. The depiction of soldiers' lives as a combination of boredom and terror, and the outsized significance of favorite foods such as canned pineapple, add an intimate and likely unfamiliar dimension to students' understanding of the experience of war. Some of the most valuable sections portray the stifling political atmosphere and economic austerity of the Japanese home islands at war (381–385). These scenes could be useful in discussing the tension between civil liberties and wartime mobilization. They could also be particularly resonant for students whose family members experienced the

hardships of censorship and rationing during the war. This book devotes only a few pages to the military brothels and “comfort women” whom the Japanese authorities pressed into sexual slavery for the soldiers (495–496). On its own, this would be inadequate treatment of a fraught and agonizing aspect of wartime history. Yet the author's meager coverage of the comfort women can still be a valuable learning opportunity for students, as it involves recurring issues in popular history and artistic representation. Classes may wish to discuss the lingering taboo around the comfort women among Japanese readers who were the original audience for this book, as well as the limits of history as related by a single male protagonist. Instructors may wish to supplement this volume with Keum Suk Gendry-Kim's outstanding graphic novel, *Grass* (see sidebar).

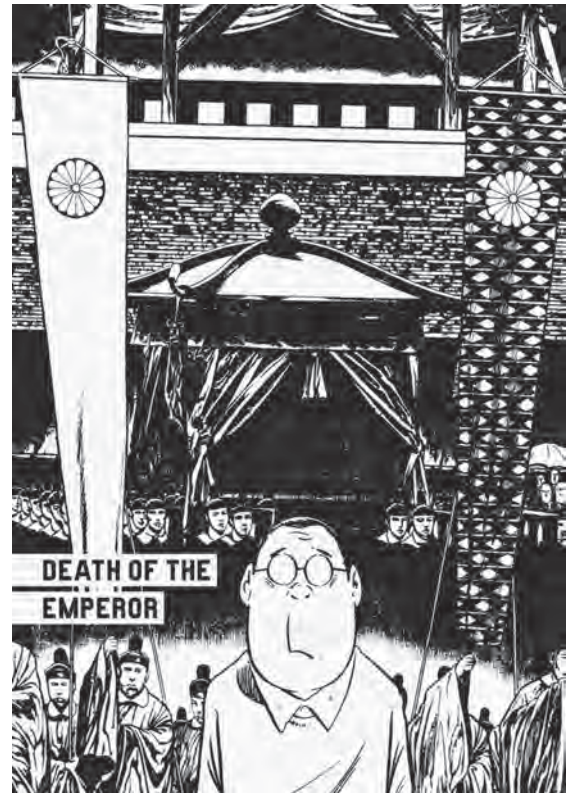


Showa: A History of Japan Vol. 3: 1944–1953

2014, 536 PAGES,
ISBN: 978-1770461628, PAPERBACK

Volume 3 (1944–1953) covers Mizuki's warm interactions with Papua New Guinean islanders, who save his life and nurse him to health. He then returns to a defeated Japan, where his family's struggles make clear the connections between devastation on the battlefield and on the home front. Some of the events in this volume overlap with another Mizuki graphic novel, *Onward Towards Our Noble Deaths*, which deals with the military high command's willingness to sacrifice foot soldiers in the name of the Emperor. The author launches his career as a manga artist amidst the scarcity and social turmoil of the American occupation. Mizuki briefly covers the origins of the Cold War, although his focus is mostly on his career

the war, and the ideology of militarism that launched it. Yet by depicting his father's endeavors, alongside the Japanese people's enthusiastic response to wartime propaganda, Mizuki adds nuance to discussions of war and imperialism. The series shows that participants in traumatic events often experience, understand, and remember such phenomena differently than future observers.



Excerpts from *Showa: A History of Japan*, Vol. 2: 1939–1944.

struggles and the ways in which American influence shaped the economy, politics, and popular culture of postwar Japan. Of particular note is the coverage of the new postwar constitution and social reforms (381–392). Mizuki’s perspective on life in an occupied country could be a valuable counterpart to accounts of postwar Japan narrated by the victors.



Showa: A History of Japan Vol. 4: 1953–1989

2015, 552 PAGES,
ISBN: 978-1770462014, PAPERBACK

Volume 4 (1953–1989) brings the narrative from the Korean War to the death of Emperor Hirohito. At a brisk pace, Mizuki portrays the impacts of industrial modernity, from the availability of household

appliances to problems of pollution, including smog and Minamata disease. The Tokyo Olympics and student unrest of the 1960s illustrate the tensions of rejoining the international community during the anxious Cold War era. On his long-delayed return to Papua New Guinea, Mizuki reckons with wartime trauma during a visit to a former battleground, before reconnecting with the locals who saved and befriended him. Several brief and eccentric vignettes about Mizuki’s romantic life add little to the overall narrative. The volume ends with his critique of consumerism and his warning to “never forget what happens when the military rules a country.”

How Do Graphic Novel Authors Portray Distinctions Among the Characters in Their Texts?

Showa is an excellent case study for examining how authors can shape their readers’ perceptions by exaggerating or emphasizing aspects of characters’ dress, speech, physical appearance, and behavior. Students might compare the appearance and facial structure of Japanese civilians to the islanders of Papua New Guinea who save Shigeru Mizuki’s life in Volume 2. The author is clearly sympathetic to the islanders, whom he visits in Volume 4, many years after the war. American readers may, however, find them stereotypical or outlandish in appearance. Rather than unquestioningly accepting Mizuki’s portrayal, or rejecting the books as racist, this artistic choice could be a starting point for a discussion of the implicit attitudes that inform all creative works. This could also prompt consideration of how different audiences receive works of art and literature; the books were originally produced for Japanese readers, whose perspectives on race and ethnicity often differ from Americans.

Next, educators could discuss *the perspective of the graphic novels*. Do they employ an omniscient third person narrator? Do they focus on the experiences of a particular person or group of people? Whose stories are emphasized, and whose stories are omitted? How does the author organize the narrative: chronologically? With flashbacks? How does the treatment of time affect our understanding and response? In Volume 1, for instance, the war crime now called the Rape or Massacre of Nanking receives only a few (albeit ghastly) pages, and the biological warfare program at Unit 731 goes unremarked. Sensational crimes and popular fads of the prewar period occupy more space than some of the most horrific violence of the twentieth century. Students can benefit from asking why Mizuki made this choice, and how it affects his narrative. Is the author trying to cover up a national shame? Does the author’s focus on his personal experiences and recollections strip context from major events of history? Does it illustrate how individuals in a society make sense of their own lives amidst turbulence and strife?

These books could help students to develop a more skeptical and critical understanding of visual media and storytelling.

Thirdly, educators might guide students in asking how the author uses images, color, fonts, and dialogue to advance their narrative? How are the pages laid out? Does the style of illustration change? How does this contribute to the reader's experience and understanding? Are any scenes particularly vivid or memorable? For instance, Mizuki uses a great deal of onomatopoeia to emphasize characters' actions and reactions. Do students find this engaging, distracting, or irrelevant? The author also blends cartoonish illustrations with highly detailed reproductions of well-known historical photos, such as the assassination of the socialist leader Inejirō Asanuma (vol. 4, 106). Neither photos nor manga illustrations are straightforward, uncontroversial depictions of the world as it is. By comparing Mizuki's versions with the original photos, students could gain insights on how storytellers (and photographers) use context and selective emphasis to advance their arguments. These books could thus help students to develop a more skeptical and critical understanding of visual media and storytelling. In short, graphic novels make the author's aesthetic and narrative choices more visible than do purely textual sources.

Finally, it could be helpful to have the students free-write about their experience with the graphic novel at several times during the semester. Immediately after reading the book, students might write one or two paragraphs in class explaining their understanding. The instructor could

repeat this exercise several weeks later, and again at the end of the term. This writing and subsequent in-class discussion would help the students to review and refresh their understanding of the material. It would also provide a documentary record of how students respond to and retain this unusual kind of reading. Perhaps they would have detailed recollections of the characters and situations in the text. Do they connect the reading to other discussions or readings from the course? Alternatively, they may have only vague memories, unconnected to larger course themes. Whatever the outcome, this exercise would help teachers to evaluate the materials themselves, and their methods of guiding students through the reading process.

Showa is not an ordinary comic book, and it is also not a textbook. The great merit and weakness of the series is its deeply subjective, individual portrayal of decades worth of major and minor events from the perspective of a lowly infantryman-turned-renowned artist. Conventional textbooks can appear as immutable orthodoxy, stifling alternative interpretations and smothering students' curiosity. In graphic novels like *Showa*, the author's textual and visual choices are evident, not obscured behind a façade of timeless objectivity. With bold imagery, sharp prose, and jokey asides, the books encourage readers to engage, to disagree, to doubt, and to think. ♦

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Grass

BY KEUM SUK GENDRY-KIM

TRANSLATED BY JANET HONG

MONTREAL, QUEBEC, CANADA:
DRAWN & QUARTERLY, 2019

480 PAGES, ISBN: 978-1770463622,
PAPERBACK

This graphic novel relates the life story of Granny Lee Ok-sun, an elderly Korean woman who was forced into sexual servitude as a “com-

fort woman” by the imperial Japanese Army during the Pacific War [1931–1945]. The author based this work on extensive oral interviews and interactions with Granny Lee. She uses stark and beautiful black and white images to convey key moments in Granny's life, in the context of Korea's exploitative and violent colonization during the early twentieth century. The grim and frank portrayal of sexual violence may be distressing for some students. This powerful book captures the terrifying and agonizing experiences of one young woman among many, whose exploitation was suppressed for decades in official accounts of the war in Japan and Korea.

As with *Showa*, instructors might encourage students to note the artist's creation of a graphic vernacular. How are men and women portrayed? How does the author's use of shadow and blank space contribute to readers' understanding of the story? How well does the euphemistic term “comfort women” capture the nature of Granny's experience?

Students might compare the possibilities and limits of oral history, based on recorded testimony, and conventional histories based on textual evidence from newspapers, diaries, archives, and other written sources. Teachers might also wish to use this book in conjunction with Shigeru Mizuki's *Showa* Volume 2. Comparing the books' depictions of comfort women could inspire fruitful if difficult conversations about the conversion of personal experience into public memory. Mizuki's book first appeared in the late 1980s, when Japanese and Korean taboos against discussion of the comfort women were even more powerful than today. By the publication of Gendry-Kim's book in the last decade, interest and attention in the comfort women was waning even in South Korea as the last of the survivors were passing away. Students can engage with fundamental aspects of the craft of history by contrasting these authors' approach to the comfort women.

Who, if anyone, owns another person's stories? What can we learn from people who have undergone painful injustices? And are remembering and forgetting both forms of violence? ♦

—Peter Braden



Keum Suk Gendry-Kim. Source: Screen capture from an interview by the Literature Translation Institute of Korea on their YouTube channel at <https://tinyurl.com/w8xx8np7>.