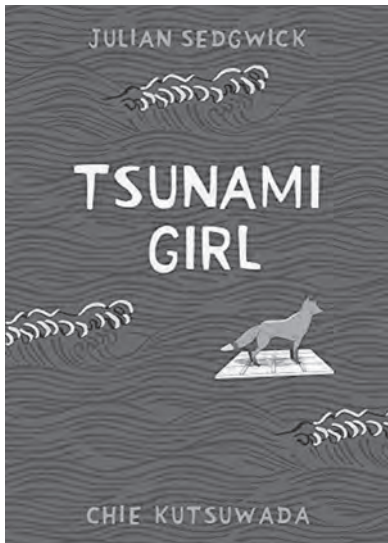


Editor’s Note: This Freeman Award-winning book for young adults/high school literature is also appropriate for honors or gifted middle school students.



Tsunami Girl

BY JULIAN SEDGWICK, ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHIE KUTSUWADA
 DIDCOT, ENGLAND: GUPPY BOOKS, 2021
 100 PAGES, ISBN: 978-1913101466, PAPERBACK



WINNER 2021 FREEMAN BOOK AWARDS YOUNG ADULT/HIGH SCHOOL LITERATURE

Reviewed by Rebecca Byrd

The remarkable novel *Tsunami Girl* is the story of fifteen-year-old Yuki, who lives in the United Kingdom and had just arrived in Japan for a visit with her grandfather in the fictional town of Osoma when the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami struck on March 11, 2011. The narrative is an account of Yuki’s survival and emotional recovery from the trauma of that day. The part-story, part-manga weaves together elements of Japanese folklore, including shape-shifters and ghosts, with the story of Half Wave, a character created in childhood by Yuki. As the novel progresses, the storylines blend together into a tale that combines the stark realities of the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster, with supernatural elements that are both eerie and heartwarming. The overall effect is a novel that is hard to describe and harder to put down.

The novel begins with Yuki sitting in the kitchen with her grandfather Jiro, an award-winning manga artist, as he showed her a box of sketchbooks filled with drawings of Half Wave, the hero she created when she was younger. Jiro tries to convince Yuki that the drawings show her artistic promise, but it becomes clear through their conversation that Yuki is struggling emotionally with issues beyond her art. When Jiro tells Yuki that he spoke with her deceased grandmother about helping Yuki with her problems, Yuki is unable to hide her skepticism—prompting a lecture from Jiro on the importance of imagination and the belief in things unseen. Yuki is still thinking about the sketchbooks when the tremors begin.

In chapters 2–6, the reader learns about the anxiety that plagues Yuki and the journey that leads to her grandfather’s kitchen. During the journey, Yuki spends time in Tokyo with her Aunt Kazuko, who tells her urban ghost stories. On the train, Yuki encounters Taka, a teenage boy who recognizes her as Jiro’s granddaughter from her prior visits. Both Kazuko and Taka will play important roles in part 3 of the novel.

Chapter 7 begins with Yuki realizing that the trembling she feels is an earthquake. She and Jiro take cover in the house until the quake is over and then quickly climb the mountain behind the house in case of a tsunami. They reach higher ground, but Jiro decides he must return to the house,



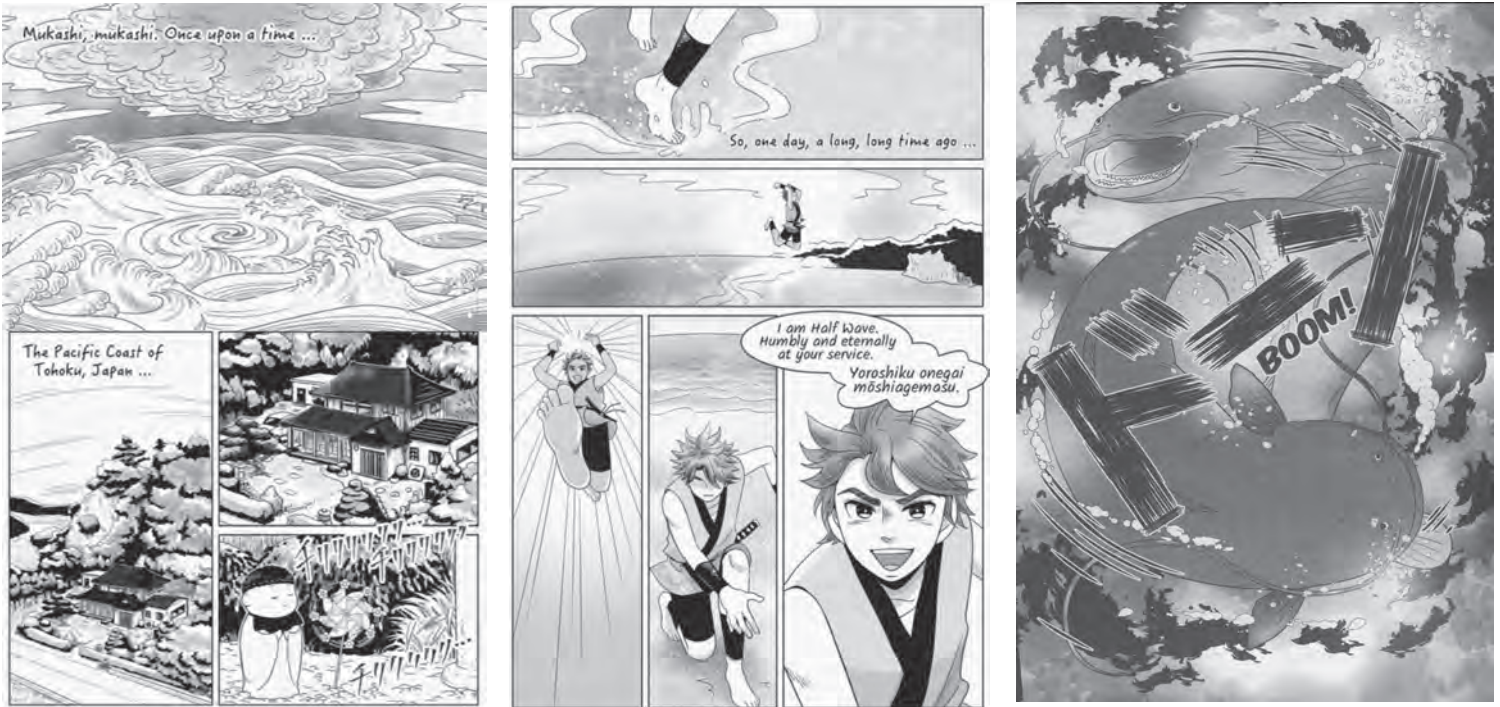
Julian Sedgwick. Source: Author’s website at <https://tinyurl.com/5ekawkkx>.



Manga artist, Chie Kutsuwada. Source: Winsor Newton webpage at <https://tinyurl.com/2p8h46t8>.

The Freeman Book Awards

The National Consortium for Teaching about Asia (NCTA), the Committee on Teaching about Asia (CTA) of the Association for Asian Studies (AAS), and Asia for Educators (AFE) at Columbia University sponsor the annual Freeman Book Awards for new young adult and children’s literature. The awards recognize quality books for children and young adults that contribute meaningfully to an understanding of East and Southeast Asia. Awards are given in two categories: Children’s (picture books for up to grade 5) and Young Adult literature (Middle School and High School (Text) and High School (Graphic) for grades 6-12) on the several countries of East and Southeast Asia. Winners along with honorable mentions and books of note are recognized. The books, published in English, have the culture and people of East or Southeast Asia as the primary focus of the story and contribute meaningfully to understanding of any of the following: China, Japan, Korea, Việt Nam, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Genres available for the award include fiction, folklore, graphic novels, poetry, selected non-fiction (no textbooks). More information about the award including past award-winning books are available at <https://www.nctasia.org/awards/>.



This article contains selected manga from from sections I, II, and III. Others can be found on Julian Sedgwick's website at <https://tinyurl.com/4nj7aj7z>. The illustrations are drawn by Chie Kutsuwada.

though he does not tell Yuki why. Yuki decides to find Jiro, but before she can head down the mountain, she looks out at a stretch of mud and rocks where the Pacific should be and realizes that a tsunami is imminent.

Panicked, Yuki makes her way back toward the house but is swept up in the tsunami. She manages to survive by pulling herself onto a piece of debris with an animal she first thinks is a dog, but then realizes is a fox. Yuki and the fox are first pulled out to sea, but eventually the wave shifts course and Yuki manages to get them both to land. Yuki returns to the house but finds no sign of her grandfather. As a light snow begins to fall, Yuki encounters a neighbor, and together, they make their way toward town to seek help as they begin to realize the terrible scope of the disaster.

Part 2 of the novel begins two months after the earthquake with Yuki back in the United Kingdom trying to deal with the trauma of the tsunami and the fact that Jiro's body has not been found. Yuki begins drawing again as a form of therapy and starts to dream of her grandfather. Yuki attempts to contact Taka without success. Yuki then tries to convince her parents to let her return to Japan, but they feel the ongoing nuclear disaster makes the trip too dangerous. Eventually, they relent and Yuki and her mother travel to Tokyo. In Tokyo, Yuki learns from her aunt that her grandparents' first child was a boy who was stillborn. Her grandfather placed a *kokeshi* doll (a small wooden doll originally from northern Japan) under their home to remember the boy. As a child, Yuki had an imaginary friend that her grandfather believed was the spirit of the boy.

Part 3 begins with Yuki sneaking out of her aunt's apartment in Tokyo and returning to Osoma via train and taxi, where she encounters Taka. He agrees to sneak her into the disaster zone on the first anniversary of the disaster. As they make their way into the radiation danger zone, Taka and Yuki share their tsunami experiences. Taka reveals that when Jiro returned to the house, he called Taka and told him that he had a dream in which Taka drowned. After Jiro's call, Taka went upstairs instead of walking to the port, as he had planned, a change of plans that saved his life. Taka also reveals that like Jiro, his father's body was not recovered after the tsunami. Eventually, Yuki and Taka are able to make peace with the losses they experienced. Yuki returns home, where she channels her energy into creating a comic of Half Wave with Taka's help. The novel ends with Yuki sending the finished comic to Taka with a promise to see him soon.

Throughout Yuki's journey, the reader also follows the journey of Half Wave, who emerges from his sleep deep under the sea to save as many people as he can from the tsunami, including Yuki. The panels show him

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All manga by Chie Kutsuwada.



rescuing the fox and then pulling Yuki from the water to the same piece of debris. Following the tsunami, Half Wave comforts Yuki and the other survivors, and helps stabilize the nuclear plant. When Yuki returns to Japan, Half Wave appears to help her on her journey to her grandfather's house. He helps Jiro's spirit find peace by returning the box of sketchbooks and the kokeshi doll to Yuki. Yuki places the doll in a shrine before leaving the radiation zone, which allows her grandfather's spirit to find peace. When Yuki and Taka emerge from the zone, they find a police car driven by Half Wave that returns them to safety. In the last panel, Half Wave meets his companion, a character that Jiro had talked of creating before the tsunami.

Tsunami Girl, which received the 2021 Freeman Book Award for High School Literature, will be a wonderful addition to any high school (and honors or gifted middle school library). The author, Julian Sedgwick, conducted extensive research and interviewed numerous tsunami survivors to craft a story that is realistic and does not shy away from the trauma of the events. Teen and adult readers will find Yuki's story of survival and recovery to be emotionally compelling. Chie Kutsuwada's illustrations bring Half Wave to life and help blend the factual and supernatural elements of the story together. The glossary that is included at the end of the novel is very helpful for readers unfamiliar with key Japanese vocabulary in the story. While the e-book version of *Tsunami Girl* lists the glossary in the table of contents, the print edition has no table of contents, so readers may not find this useful tool until they have finished the book. American readers may also experience some confusion with the use of British terms such as "lift" and "lorry."

Teachers considering reading *Tsunami Girl* in the classroom would certainly need to identify and preteach the vocabulary included in the glossary, as well as other words unfamiliar to their students. Students may also struggle a bit following the arc of the storyline since the story is not always told in strict chronological order. Explicit discussion of the story arc and chronology while reading should help students avoid confusion. Another helpful tip for teachers is to have students review the manga from the beginning when they finish each section of the novel. The early images contain a number of details whose importance does not become clear until later in the prose storyline. Reviewing the images creates an excellent opportunity to discuss foreshadowing.

Before reading the novel in class, teachers should be aware that the novel hints at a romantic relationship between Taka and Yuki, and mentions Taka kissing a previous girlfriend. There are also a few instances where mild profanity is used. Finally, teachers considering this book should be aware that students who have experienced a natural disaster or the loss of a beloved family member may have a strong emotional reaction to the novel. Teachers might consider consulting with their school's guidance counselors before introducing the novel in class so that they are prepared to support students' academic and emotional journeys with Yuki and Half Wave. Overall, *Tsunami Girl* is a well-researched, emotional, and imaginative novel that will resonate with high school students and adults. ♦

Chie Kutsuwada's illustrations bring Half Wave to life and help to blend the factual and supernatural elements of the story together.

REBECCA BYRD is currently a World History Teacher at Sevier County High School in Tennessee. She spent twenty-four years teaching world history and American history in middle school. Rebecca received her bachelor's degree in history as well as a master's degree and an education specialist degree from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Rebecca has been an alumna of NCTA since 2007 and has participated in a variety of NCTA programs, including a study tour of China in 2010.