



While I Was Away

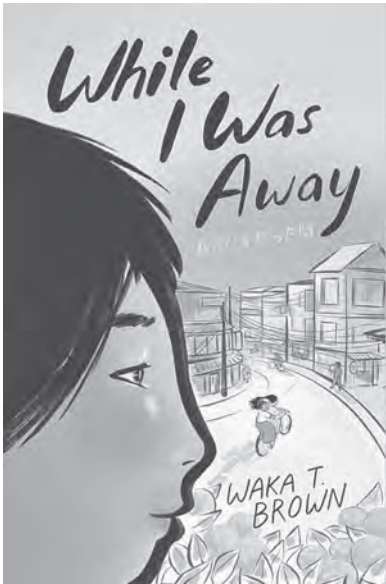
BY WAKA T. BROWN

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2021 FREEMAN BOOK AWARD HONORABLE MENTION
FOR YOUNG ADULT/MIDDLE SCHOOL LITERATURE

Reviewed by Molly DeDona



Waka T. Brown. Photo by Miles W. Brown.

While *I Was Away*'s prose is almost identical to a young adult novel, but is instead a memoir based on the author's own life experience. Waka Brown tells the story of five months in summer 1984 where she lived in Japan, torn from all that is familiar in her rural Kansas home. Waka, whose parents emigrated from Japan to America before she was born, has only visited Japan a handful of times with her family before this fateful trip. The earnestness of Brown's younger voice resonates well throughout the book and is colored by her insight as an adult. Anyone who has resided in Japan for any time period as a nonnative speaker of Japanese could certainly relate to Waka's roller coaster of emotions during this five-month period. Waka makes enormous progress in learning to speak and read the Japanese language. The author perseveres despite negative experiences and leaves Japan with the sense her time was richly spent in school, making new friends, and bonding with family. Moreover, in telling her story, the author integrates explanations of Japanese culture without appearing to be patronizing, which might be an issue in books targeting a younger demographic. For these reasons, her book might be suitable for not only middle school, but also upper elementary, high school, and even adult readers.

The story begins with almost a sitcom-like misunderstanding between mother and daughter. A simple request in Japanese from Waka's mother to fold some laundry, "Waka, *chotto sentaku tatande yo*," ("Waka, fold some laundry.") is the refrain throughout the first chapter. Waka, as a typical sixth-grade student, is reluctant to do a chore that none of her other siblings are expected or asked to do and ignores her mother. This has drastic consequences as her parents, particularly her mother, are extremely concerned that Waka has little to no Japanese-speaking abilities. Hence, despite Waka's vocal protests, they choose to send her to Japan to live with her *Obaasama* (grandmother). Part of Waka's hesitation comes from her family, including her mother, father, aunts, uncles, and cousins, who indicate through their body language and the stories they tell about *Obaasama* their often-tenuous relationships with her. Waka's mother's most generous descriptions of *Obaasama* is "I think Waka is what *Obaasama* would have been like if she hadn't had such a hard life." *Obaasama* lived through a world war, became a widow when her husband died when he was fifty, and then as a single mother raised nine children. In the memoir, Brown is able to bring her adult insight to her experience as a child and weave connections among generations.

Facing life with a purportedly strict grandmother, Waka finds herself counting down the days before leaving for Japan with dread. Perhaps the worst offense to a middle-schooler is not only forced isolation from her friends and family but the fact that Waka must attend school for most of her time in Japan since Japanese students have much shorter summer vacations than their American counterparts. Waka will miss the end of her sixth-grade year, summer vacation, and the beginning of seventh grade in America! Waka, after much bribing from her parents, reluctantly accepts her fate and finds herself flying to Japan alone. Waka brightens slightly when, greeted by her aunts and uncles, she enjoys visiting her cousins, whom she has not seen in several years. Nevertheless, like the case with her parents, tension and awkwardness fill the air when discussing *Obaasama*. Waka is taken to *Obaasama*'s house in Tokyo, a traditional Japanese-style building with spare rooms rented out to local university students. Despite all her previous anxiety, Waka takes it in stride when she learns she'll share a bedroom with *Obaasama* and need to launder her own clothes by hand since the house does not have a washing machine. Various small events put Waka more at ease: the fact *Obaasama* is learning English especially for her via radio lessons, Waka's enjoyment of *ofuro* (Japanese-style bath) at the house, and learning more about *Obaasama*'s life through casual discussions. Waka's worries about her living situation recede, and she focuses on her impending school commitment and making friends.

One of Waka's concerns is keeping up with her friends in America, which she does through airmail letters. Long-distance calls are expensive and inconvenient due to the time difference,

so these mailed communications are the primary way Waka hears from family and friends in America. When corresponding with friends, Waka uses code words and hidden messages. Fortunately, her friends frequently write, and Waka is typically dutiful with responses—but also wants to make new friends in Japan. Her closest friend during her five-month stint in Japan is Reiko, who lives in Obaasama's neighborhood and accompanies Waka on her walk to school every day during her stay.

Reiko later serves as a conduit for Waka to learn how her grandmother is doing after she returns to America, as neither Waka nor Obaasama write letters to each other after Waka departs Japan.

In attempting to make new classroom friends, Waka is disappointed that Reiko will not be in her class, and her hopes fall even further when a friend from her previous visit, Midori, seems unenthused about seeing her again. Yet most of the girls in Waka's class are happy to meet her, and the temporary Kansas transplant is able to communicate with her classmates without too much trouble.

Problems occur, though, because of apparently more rigid classroom friend group divisions in Japan than is the case in Kansas. Waka senses pressure to choose between social groups in her classroom—and struggles to find her balance with these dynamics that leave her uncertain about what group to choose. Moreover, Waka is utterly flabbergasted as to why her classmates indicate disapproval with her being friends with Reiko, for the simple reason that she belongs to another classroom.

Waka realizes she is not happy with the one friend group in Japan asking her to choose their group over her other friends and decides to and defy this expected cultural norm. She hangs out with the friends she wants and enjoys friendships that come naturally.

As is normally the case with anyone thrust into a new environment and culture, Waka does make a few blunders due to her unfamiliarity with the language, but negotiates her Japanese schooling mostly unscathed. She makes amazing progress in her short stay, but she certainly faces challenges along the way. A highlight of Waka's schooling experience is PE class, where she is markedly ahead of classmates of both genders in her athleticism. Despite her great progress, especially in speaking Japanese, Waka is far behind her Japanese peers in reading and writing Japanese due to their longtime education in reading and writing the language.

As would be expected, Waka struggles in other classes, not called upon to read textbook passages out loud in front of the class due to her lack of *kanji* reading abilities. The emotional stress of being a straight A student in America to scoring 2/10 on quizzes in Japan takes a toll on Waka. All the more determined, she studies between classes with her teacher Mr. Adachi, whom

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A graphic for the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) donation campaign. The background features a dark, textured image of a Buddha statue. On the left, there is a globe icon and the text 'Association for Asian Studies'. In the center, a large white circle contains the text 'DONATE TO ASIAN STUDIES' and 'HELP US TEACH THE WORLD ABOUT ASIA ...and claim a tax deduction'. On the right, there is a call to action: 'Visit www.asianstudies.org for more information'. At the bottom right, a black box contains the text 'SUPPORT AAS EDUCATION AND OUTREACH INITIATIVES by donating to the EDUCATION ABOUT ASIA FUND, for direct donations to Education About Asia Teaching Journal'. At the bottom center, a line of text reads 'The AAS is a 501(c)(3) corporation and contributions are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.'

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Waka recognizes is sacrificing his breaks so she might catch up to her peers. Waka, when frustrated with trying to keep up in other classes and intensely homesick, reads novels in English for all her classmates to see—much to their amazement. Despite her accomplishments, Waka is embarrassed to not read at the level of her peers in Japanese and will not walk close to sections in the library that are second- or third-grade level, worried a classmate may spot her looking at some titles and tease her for her inability to read Japanese at a sixth-grade level.

The author's memoir also introduces historical topics with a personal touch. Although Waka knows her grandmother and grandfather lived through a war, Obaasama speaks of the time she lived in Manchuria. Manchuria, now part of current-day China, was a colony of Japan during the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere Era, and teachers who utilize the author's memoir may find the book a good introduction to a history lesson. The Co-Prosperity Sphere refers to the most aggressive era of Japanese imperialism, from about 1931 through the end of World War II in 1945—a topic that many American high school students don't learn. The author acknowledges she learned nothing of Japanese colonization in her American high school. The Japanese government actively recruited resettlement of Japanese citizens to regions that include current-day Korea and China and other parts of East and Southeast Asia. At the end of World War II, many Japanese citizens returned to mainland Japan, as did Obaasama. Waka takes deep enjoyment in her conversations with her grandmother about their family history, but not all their interactions are pleasant. At times, their relationship is tense and awkward. Waka learns that living with Obaasama comes with its challenges. For example, Obaasama locks Waka out of the house when she stays too late at a friend's house. Obaasama yells at Waka when she makes a common mistake to foreigners: taking a couple of steps indoors wearing outdoors shoes. Waka learns that despite Obaasama's somewhat-eccentric behaviors, such as feeding her koi fish rather than engaging in conversation or rubbing vegetable peels on her skin to prevent age spots, she is able to connect with her and discover common similarities, such as a shared love for Twix candy bars. Waka and Obaasama also bond over fashion and, on occasion, sew together. Inspired by a purse her grandmother made herself, Waka sews a purse made of purple fabric, Obaasama's favorite color, that she presents as a gift to her grandmother. Her grandmother is touched moved by this gesture. Despite tension at times, Waka and her grandmother truly create a bond invaluable to them both.

By the end of her stay, Waka feels as if she is less of a burden to her extended family, and even navigates her grandmother around public transportation with ease. She overhears Obaasama talking with her aunt about how Waka is more proficient at using the local train system than she is! Waka is, of course, excited to return home and see her family, and with that come bittersweet goodbyes to her new friends and classmates at school, who leave her a signed card with handwritten messages. Waka finally feels truly accepted by her classmates. She then realizes that perhaps she was the only one who really saw herself as an outsider. When it comes to saying goodbye to family, particularly Obaasama, Waka does as any typical middle-schooler and tries to push down her emotions but breaks down and, as she turns away, begins to cry. Waka returns home to her parents and siblings, and she and her mother are finally able to casually chat in Japanese while doing daily chores, such as the laundry.

I enjoyed reading this memoir, and I anticipate that young adults would too. *While I Was Away*, although geared for younger readers ages eight through twelve, can be enjoyed by individuals of any age, regardless of how familiar they are with Japanese life because Waka Brown is a wonderful and impressive storyteller. Those familiar with her experience will remember their own times in Japan or other cultures when their language skills and cultural knowledge were not that of the permanent citizens or residents. Those readers who are unfamiliar with Japanese life and culture will learn a bit of rich content about life in the archipelago. ♦

MOLLY DEDONA graduated from the University of Michigan with an MA in Japanese Studies in 2020. She studied abroad in Japan in Shiga prefecture and lived in Otsu, Japan with a host family for four months as an undergraduate student. She currently works at the Association for Asian Studies in Ann Arbor, Michigan as the Grant Programs Manager.