

The Essentials: *Barefoot Gen* By Duane Johansen

Barefoot Gen

Directed by Mori Masaki

Madhouse, Gen Production, 1983 (English dub: Streamline Pictures, 1995)

DVD, 82 minutes, color

Based upon the manga by Keiji Nakazawa

When it comes to teaching the “big events” in history, it’s easy to do the numbers: these are the dates of when it happened, this is how many people it affected, this is how much money it cost, etc. It’s much harder to take those broad events and narrow their focus to the individual people involved, to tell (or just listen to) their stories. It takes the most moving literature, the most evocative artwork, or the most compelling film to make the monumental become personal.

There are two such works that have done this for me and that have profoundly affected how I view—and, hence, how I teach—the horrors of World War II. One is Art Spiegelman’s exceptional graphic novel series *Maus*, about his parents’ experiences in the Auschwitz concentration camp. The other is the anime movie *Barefoot Gen* (1983) from director Mori Masaki and manga artist Keiji Nakazawa about the bombing of Hiroshima in 1945. It is based on Nakazawa’s semiautobiographical manga series of the same name, which eventually reached ten volumes. Reading and watching *Maus* and *Gen* forced me to interact with the war in a visceral and emotionally vulnerable level that just understanding the numbers couldn’t. Spiegelman himself was also deeply affected by Nakazawa’s story, saying in his introduction to the latest American editions of the manga series that “Gen burned its way into my heated brain with the intensity of a fever dream.”

Both *Maus* and *Gen* offer unflinching accounts of the parts of war that are not often depicted in history books. They show the pain of war as it’s felt by those in the midst of it and the day-to-day challenges faced by those who have survived. They also show the before and after of their respective calamitous events, so we can understand who the people are and what it takes for them to survive and to keep going. In *Gen*, even before the bomb drops, we are shown the struggles of the Japanese to find food in war-torn Japan, where ration stamps are a prized commodity and a carp is considered a special blessing. We also feel the fear of the residents of Hiroshima as they watch the skies, waiting for it to be their turn to be targeted by the American’s conventional bombs, which had fallen on most other major Japanese cities.

Gen follows the life of Gen Nakoaka and his family immediately prior to and after the bombing of Hiroshima. Gen is just six years old when “Little Boy” is dropped on the city. Gen is on his way to school on that fateful morning. He bends down to pick up a stone that he has been playing with as the blast hits, so his crouched body is shielded by the playground wall. After witnessing the horrific deaths of his classmates and others, he rushes home to find his father, brother, and sister trapped in their burning house. He and his mother valiantly try to save them, but they are forced to flee the flames, leaving young Gen to look after his mother and his sister, Tomoko, who is born the day after the bombing. Later, they “adopt” a young boy, Ryuta Kondo, who has been orphaned by the blast and who, because of his similar physical features and mannerisms, serves as a proxy for Gen’s deceased brother, Shinji. After the bombing, Gen and Ryuta strive to find food to keep their mother healthy enough to nurse Tomoko.

In one of the most moving parts of the film, Gen and Ryuta are hired by a wealthy businessman to take care of his artist brother, who has been injured by the blast. The artist has been shunned by his family, who are worried that they are going to be sickened by exposure to him. This was a common prejudice that victims of the bomb faced as the country tried to understand the aftereffects of this new type of bomb. Survivors were often turned away while seeking sanctuary in neighboring towns because of fears of spreading the “bomb disease.”



(Top) Gen bends down to pick up a stone he drops as the atomic bomb is dropped on Hiroshima (bottom). He is protected from the blast by a playground wall in front of him. Source: All screen captures in this article are from *Barefoot Gen*.

Nakazawa's own father was a vocal opponent of the war and was imprisoned for criticizing the government. Likewise, Gen's dad speaks out against the Japanese war effort, causing him to be branded a coward and a traitor. At one point, he tells Gen that "this war can't be right, but it's only the cowards like me who dare to say it." I have seldom seen this type of resistance depicted in other tellings of the Pacific War—in any sort of media. Prior to *Gen*, I had



Gen brings a soldier exhibiting symptoms of radiation sickness to a makeshift hospital with other victims of the bombing. The soldier later dies and the doctor is unable to understand why, so fear spreads in nearby towns of the "bomb disease."

always believed that the Japanese people, with their kamikaze fighters and their military drills in schools, were all united in their support of the emperor during the war. Because of their critical stance, the *Gen* books and movies have always been somewhat controversial in Japan, with one complainant in 2013 saying that the books were "ultra-leftist manga that perpetuated lies and instilled defeatist ideology in the minds of young Japanese." Nakazawa himself was reluctant to tell his story. It wasn't until his mother's death in 1966 that he felt compelled to speak out, saying, "Once her body was cremated, my heart became filled with fury. There were no bones among the ashes. All I could find were tiny bits of bone, and I wasn't able to tell whether they came from her head or her feet. I was outraged. The atomic bomb had taken my mother's bones away. I decided I would definitely do something about it."

Nakazawa (and Masaki) doesn't sanitize the horrors of the blast and its aftermath, showing us all the gruesome and vivid details. As the sticker on my VHS copy of the film proclaims, this movie is "not for kids!" When the blast initially hits, we see flesh being blown off of bones and eyeballs popping out of sockets. There are depictions of skin falling off of bodies and of corpses being

loaded on a truck before being taken to be burned. In addition to these disturbing images, there are also brief shots of naked female breasts exposed while nursing and other fast flashes of nudity. This is not to say that the film is all terrible images, though. There's some lightheartedness and humor as well, including a fart joke or two. (The protagonist is a six-year-old boy, after all.) Teachers may need to use selective editing or show only certain excerpts from the movie. However, at a brief eighty-two minutes, it is relatively easy to fit the entire film into a class schedule.

For those who are used to the lush animation of Studio Ghibli films and other more recent anime, the drawing style may come across to some as somewhat crude, but Masaki's pacing and storytelling should be enough to keep the interest of students, and it's easy to break the movie up into manageable chunks. I would often have students read a portion of the manga and then watch the corresponding part of the movie, occasionally using Nakazawa's own words to frame the selection. If possible, teachers may also want to show other anime films that deal with the same topic. Ghibli's own *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988) is another semiautobiographical account of the war, this time dealing with the effects of the conventional bombing of Kobe, Japan. There's also the more recent *In This Corner of the World* (2016), a fictionalized account that is likewise set in Hiroshima.

Although *Gen* stays pretty close to Nakazawa's real life, there are several options for a firsthand account from the artist himself. Nakazawa's autobiographical account of the bombing, called *I Saw It*, was published in 1972 in the popular manga magazine *Monthly Shonen Jump* and was a precursor to *Gen*, which was also serialized in the magazine. Additionally, Nakazawa's own story is featured in several documentary films, including *Pictures from a Hiroshima Schoolyard*, *Barefoot Gen's Hiroshima*, and *Comics Go to War*. Finally, Nakazawa was a vocal advocate for nuclear disarmament until his death in 2012, and there are several interviews with the author that are available online.

Barefoot Gen is not an easy film to watch. Students will be disgusted and angered by the film. But that's the point. Seeing the horrors of this world-changing event through the eyes of a six-year-old forces the viewer to respond to it in a way that just understanding the numbers can't. Masaki gives us time to get invested in Gen's life and in the struggles of his family prior to the dropping of the bomb, so the challenges they face in the aftermath become that much more powerful. I know that my students have been as affected by the movie as I was because some of them who have gone on to become teachers who use it in their classes as well. As a teacher, I can think of no higher validation.

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