

## ESSAYS

## Literature on Japan for Elementary and Middle School Students

By Kazuko Minamoto and Elaine Vukov

*Many excellent books on Japan have been published during the past decade. In fact, there are so many interesting and useful resources available that teachers or librarians acquiring items for schools with limited budgets might well wonder where to begin. This article offers some guidance for those educators who want to acquire new materials on Japan for elementary and middle school students.*

**B**y profession, elementary and middle school educators are cultural generalists—faced with the daunting task of selecting materials for a multitude of world cultures about which they may have little specialized knowledge. Their charge is to find material of high visual and literary quality that is also historically and culturally accurate, for though there are many good books on the market, there are also others with clichéd, misleading or incorrect information. It is virtually impossible for one person to have the expertise to pass judgment on the flood of materials coming to their attention at book fairs, through catalogues and over the Internet.

What can teachers do to ensure that they are not using outdated or flawed information about Japan? If they are not Japan experts, how can they judge whether a book and its illustrations are realistic or accurate? Here are some practical guidelines for approaching the process of selecting good materials without having a total command of Japan's history and culture.

### Signposts to the Integrity of a Work

Some factors are not directly related to the content of the material but are very helpful as signposts to its quality. These signposts include the backgrounds of both the author and the illustrator; the nature and history of the publishing company or catalogue offering the material for sale; and the publication date and/or copyright notice—all elements already familiar to educators. Now, consider how these signposts can be applied exclusively to the selection of Japanese materials.

Examine all of the biographical information about the author. If the author is not Japanese, does he have long-term experience living in Japan? Has an author written many books about Japan?

Does he have any formal training in Japanese culture or language? Did he spend time studying in Japan as a student or in his professional career?

A Japanese name does not always ensure that the writer knows about Japan. A second- or third-generation Japanese American may be seeing Japan from the same vantage point as other non-Japanese speakers. If the author is a Japanese native, it does not necessarily mean that his story has anything to do with Japan or Japanese culture. If there are terms or phrases in Japanese in a story, is a note or glossary provided?

Review the biographical information for the illustrator as closely as that of the author. The illustrations in children's literature are as important as the story, and they have a tremendous impact on the way students view an unknown country. One of the most common problems is illustrations with exaggerated "Asian-type" facial features that are not Japanese, and may not, in fact, portray the features of any Asian at all. There is often confusion between Chinese and Japanese clothing, hairstyle, architecture, home interiors and other physical features. There may be erroneous visual details or a mixing of historical periods.

Comic-like illustrations are common among some Japanese illustrators who grew up with comic books or *manga* and should not be dismissed as "cartoons." This trend can be regarded as an authentic product of Japanese culture, since *manga* has influenced and shaped the contemporary Japanese art form. Educators must rely on the expertise of the illustrator in these situations.

It is difficult to steer the way through all of the pitfalls of purchasing cultural materials. One thing to be wary of is sets of books offered by publishing companies that purport to cover several Asian cultures but are all written by the same author or a group of children's literature professionals. Such authors may not have any background in Asia at all. These sets can look very attractive on the shelf, but might be assemblages of other outdated materials with little or no first-hand research. In such sets there may be no biographical data on the author—a warning sign in and of itself.

The publishing company and copyright date of the materials also offer an indication of the quality of the work. Is the publisher known for works on Asia and Japan? If the work is listed in an educational clearinghouse, the publishing company or the copyright date may not be noted. In these cases, order the materials only if they are returnable, and examine them carefully after delivery. Some publishers reissue out-of-print materials with a new copyright date.

### Cultural Themes Found in Literature on Japan

The literature of every culture has major themes that are specific to it and set forth its fundamental characteristics. The predominate social and historical themes reflected in literature on Japan written for students include folk tales, stories about life in Japan, poetry, biography, and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Let's examine folk tales as a major literary form familiar to most teachers and children. Japanese folk tales may be a child's introduction to Japanese culture and a key to further explorations into Japanese literature. Folk tales allow students to immerse themselves directly in the world of Japanese legends without viewing Japan as a distant country. Original folk tales, such as "Momotarō" ("The Peach Boy") and "Kaguyahime" ("The Bamboo Princess"), widely known by children in Japan, offer an attractive starting point. These tales can be found in compilations of famous Japanese folk tales and are often beautifully illustrated.

In addition to conventional picture books, there is *kamishibai*, a traditional form of Japanese storytelling that uses large color picture-boards with accompanying narration, available in both Japanese and English. This is a good alternative for telling stories to groups of younger children. The majority of stories used in *kamishibai* are selected from folk tales that have been told and read through many generations in Japan.

Like most folk tales from around the world, Japanese folk tales may be found in more than one version. Depending on where the story has been told and by whom, there will be variations in content. This diversity is a hallmark of the oral transmission of such literature.

Caution should also be taken with "Japanese folk tales" that are "adapted" or new. Adapted folk tales may be older stories specially re-created to appeal to readers outside of Japan. The adaptation may cleanse the tale of cultural references or even change the meaning of the original story. Authentic Japanese folk tales often express particular emotions or moods rather than communicating a moral, a storytelling feature common in the tradition of many European tales. Stories created as new "folk tales" may actually have little Japanese content but are packaged in such a way as to make them appear to be part of a famous folk tale canon. Such stories may be intriguing and entertaining, but they also lose the deeper meaning that is Japanese.

Another well-defined genre in Japanese literature is the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For young readers, the aspects of World War II that have been explored most often by either American or Japanese authors are the internment camps in the U.S. and the atomic bombings. Teachers may wonder why books about such awful events are available for young readers and worry whether the subject is appropriate for their age group. But materials are abundant, and many of them are carefully written and formatted for young readers.

The stories focus on the tragedy of war and the severity of the atomic bombs as seen through the eyes of young narrator-victims. Although these stories rarely address the political and military realities from a historical point of view, they are successful in appealing to children emotionally—indirectly but earnestly calling for peace and denouncing war. The books can be applied in social studies classrooms as a supplement to reinforce awareness and understanding of war. They promote critical thinking of how countries are interrelated, and how the life of an

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Photo:  
A *Kamishibai* man telling stories in postwar Japan.



Illustration:  
At night, the Bamboo Princess would look up at the moon with tears in her eyes. From *The Bamboo Princess*.

The above photo and illustration appeared in the article "Kamishibai, Japanese Storytelling: The Return of An Imaginative Art" by Elaine Vukov in the Spring 1997 (Volume 2, Number 1) *EAA*.

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individual is shaped by historical events. They also enable young readers to see how children on the other side of a conflict view the same events.

### Japan in American History

In addition to considering Japan as a separate and foreign culture, it can also be seen as part of the cultural heritage of the United States. These themes come to mind most readily: Japanese immigrants and their descendants coming to terms with life in the United States; the experience of Japanese Americans in the internment camps during World War II; and the cultural and political relations between the U.S. and Japan over the past 150 years. Educators can use these in *American* history classes. The Japanese immigrant experience could be taught as a part of immigration history. The decision to incarcerate Japanese citizens was a policy carried out by the *United States* government and therefore could fit into a discussion about the U.S. constitution.

Stories that appeal to young readers often deal with Japanese American youngsters born in the U.S. who are searching for identities that are intertwined but radically different from their parents. Readers whose families immigrated to the U.S. can easily relate to the experiences of the Japanese characters. But books about Japanese Americans are not limited to a comparison between the two countries. Another genre that has recently become an important theme in children's literature deals with the internment camps where more than 100,000 Japanese Americans were forced to live during World War II. Stories narrated from the viewpoint of children who were in the camps are readily available and, for the most part, very well written. These can be particularly effective in social studies class after a careful examination of American history.

There are other genres not fully considered here, such as poetry, biography and recently written stories about contemporary life in Japan, to which the same guidelines can be applied. The literature on Japan available for young readers has grown immensely in recent years and promises to continue expanding. With foresight and careful examination, educators can bring the best of this literature to students. ■

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**NOTE:** An annotated bibliography of over sixty works suitable for K-8 is available, free of charge, from: Educational Outreach, Japan Society, 333 East 47th Street, New York, NY 10017. Call: (212) 715-1203, or e-mail your request to [kminamoto@japansociety.org](mailto:kminamoto@japansociety.org).

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

The following is a selected bibliography of recommended materials.



## Folk Tales

Sakade, Florence, ed., *Japanese Children's Favorite Stories*. Illustrated by Yoshisuke Kurosaki. Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Company, Inc., 1953. An old, but still one of the best, collection of the twenty most famous Japanese folk tales, such as *Peach Boy (Momotarō)* and *The Old Man Who Made the Trees Blossom (Hanasaki Ojisan)*. Grades 2–4.

*Urashima Taro*. Adapted by Ichiro Wakabayashi, illustrated by Saburo Nishiyama. New York: Kamishibai For Kids (U.S. distributor). Tokyo:



Dōshinsha (publisher). This *kamishibai* (a set of picture

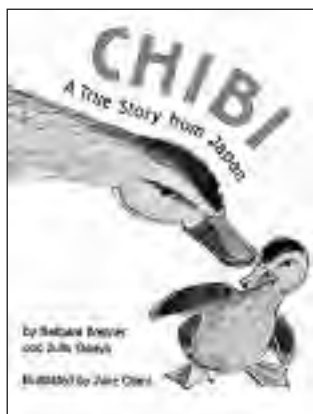
boards) tells the story of Urashima Tarō, a fisherman who is invited to the Dragon King's palace at the bottom of the sea as a reward for saving a tortoise's life. He finally returns home to find that everything in his village has changed. Bewildered, Tarō opens a magic box that a beautiful princess gave to him. Grades 2–4.

## Stories About Life In Japan

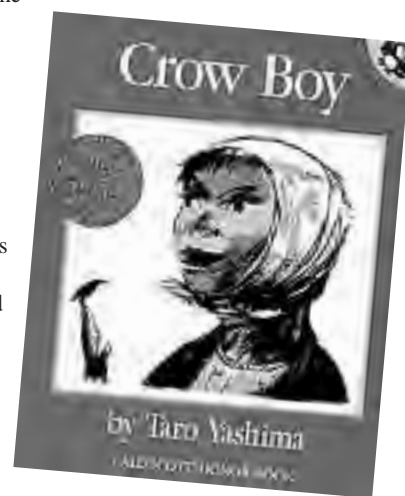
Nomura, Takaaki. *Grandpa's Town*. New York: Kane/Miller Book Publishers, 1991. A young boy, worried that his grandfather may be lonely, accompanies him to the public bath where he finds out that his grandfather has many neighborhood friends. Excellent book to introduce the ideal Japanese community in which all of the neighbors and shopkeepers know each other. Grades K–3.



Brenner, Barbara, and Julia Takaya. *Chibi: A True Story from Japan*. Illustrated by June Otani. New York: Clarion Books, 1996. Based on actual events set in the center of Tōkyō, this story follows a mother duck and her ten baby ducklings as they search for a place to live. Grades K–3.



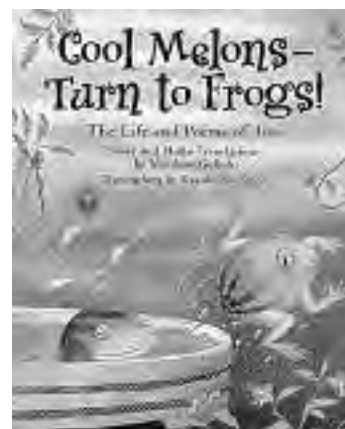
Yashima, Taro. *Crow Boy*. New York: Viking, 1983. A heartwarming story depicts how Chibi, a shy boy, discovers his own talents with the help and understanding of a kind teacher. Grades K–3.



## Poetry

Nishimoto, Keisuke, ed. *Haiku Picturebook for Children*. Illustrated by Kozo Shimizu. Torrance, California: Heian International, Inc., 1998. A collection of haiku written by some of Japan's most famous poets, such as Yosano Buson and Matsuo Bashō. The works are arranged in a seasonal pattern along with their original version in Japanese. Grades 1–4.

Gollub, Matthew. *Cool Melons Turn to Frogs! The Life and Poems of Issa*. Illustrated by Kazuko G. Stone. New York: Lee & Low Books, 1998. A biography and introduction to the haiku of Kobayashi Issa, whose love for nature finds expression in the more than thirty poems included in this book. Grades 1–4.





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### The Atomic Bomb/Hiroshima

Maruki, Toshi. *Hiroshima No Pika*. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books, 1980. A story about a heart-rending experience of a young girl and her family during the Flash (the Pika) that destroyed the city of Hiroshima. The abstract nature of the illustrations maintains the overall mood of the story without being overly harsh. Grades 2–6 with a teacher's discretion.

O'Neal, Michael. *President Truman and the Atomic Bomb: Opposing Viewpoints*. San Diego, California: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 1990. This book examines what led to President Harry Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb on the city of Hiroshima. Each chapter raises questions and issues that lead to further discussions and debate. Grades 6–8.

### Immigration and Life in the United States

Takaki, Ronald. *Democracy and Race: Asian Americans and World War II*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1995. This work examines the experiences of Asian Americans during World War II. Asians of Chinese, Korean, Filipino, and Asian Indian descent who faced discrimination suddenly found themselves valued partners in America's fight against Germany and Japan. For the Japanese Americans, the war brought intensified discrimination, loss of property rights, and internment in concentration camps. Grades 6–8.

Takaki, Ronald. *Issei and Nisei: The Settling of Japanese America*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989. This work focuses on two generations in conflict: the Issei, the first generation Japanese Americans and the Nisei, their American-born children. It examines the initial Japanese immigration to the U.S., and the prejudice they faced. It also addresses land and work issues, the struggle for citizenship, and the search for identity among the Nisei. Grades 6–8.

### Japanese Americans in the Internment Camps During World War II

Mochizuki, Ken. *Baseball Saved Us*. Illustrated by Dom Lee. New York: Lee & Low Books, 1993. A Japanese American boy learns to play baseball when he and his family are forced to live in an internment camp during World War II. Baseball helps the boy to cope with the hardships in the camp as well as the discrimination he faces after the war is over. Grades 2–6.

Uchida, Yoshiko. *The Bracelet*. Illustrated by Joanna Yardely; New York: The Putnam & Grosset Group, 1996.

In the beginning of WWII, a young Japanese American girl, Emi, receives a bracelet from her friend to remember their friendship before Emi and her family are sent to an internment camp, but she lost it at her "new home" and became devastated. Emi soon comes to realize that their friendship is more than a physical reminder. Beautiful illustrations. Grades 2–6.

### The Cultural Relations Between the U.S. and Japan

Say, Allen. *The Bicycle Man*. Oakland, California: A Parnassus Press Book, 1982. The story takes place in a small village in Japan during the post-World War II occupation era. Elementary school children enjoy their sports day festivities and encounter two American soldiers who perform bicycle tricks for them. Grades 1–4.

Say, Allen. *Tea with Milk*. New York: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1999. Masako, a young woman who was born in the U.S., moves to Japan with her native Japanese parents. She soon feels lost and homesick. Struggling between two countries, she finally finds a way to live her own life in a big city, Osaka, where she finds a job and then her future husband. Grades 6–8.

