



Culture Notes

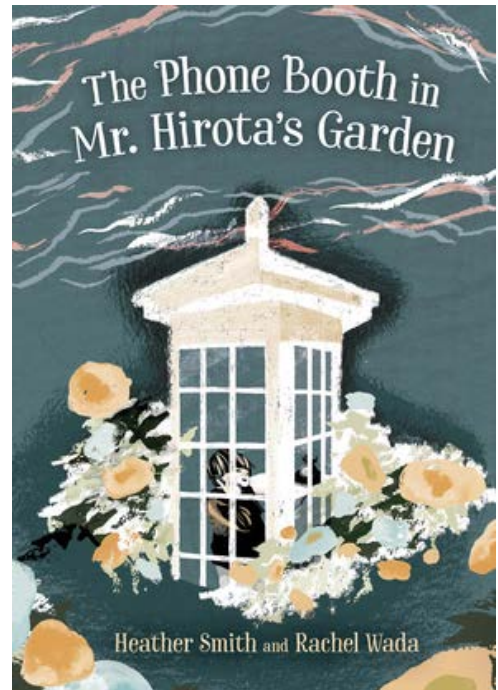
The Phone Booth in Mr. Hirota's Garden

By Heather Smith

Illustrated by Rachel Wada

Orca Book Publishers: Illustrated Edition, 2019 Fiction, Set in Japan
2019 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Children's Literature

Story Background: The story presented by Heather Smith in *The Phone Booth in Mr. Hirota's Garden* is based on the true story of a phone booth installed by Itaru Sasaki (pronounced: ee-TA-rue | sa-SA-key). Mr. Sasaki placed the phone booth in the garden of his home in Ōtsuchi 大槌町 (pronounced: OH-sue-chi), Iwate Prefecture 岩手県 (pronounced: e-WAH-tay), located in the northeastern Tohoku 東北地方 (pronounced: TOE-HO-koo) region of Japan a year preceding the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011. The phone booth, known colloquially as "The Phone of the Wind" or "Wind Telephone" (風の電話 or *Kaze no Denwa*), drew many individuals looking to contact their lost loved ones taken so suddenly from them in the huge tsunami that followed the earthquake. The phone booth's notoriety grew after Mr. Sasaki was interviewed by Japanese broadcaster NHK for a 2016 documentary. After that, a public radio producer from the program, *This American Life*, brought the story to an English-speaking audience later that same year in the episode "One Last Thing Before I Go."



Authorship, Accuracy, and Authenticity: Heather Smith was inspired by "the sense of hope and resilience" found in the public radio story and embarked on fictionalizing it for a young audience. Smith, however, has altered the timing of particular events for the fictionalized narrative. Perhaps most notably is the motivation for creating the "Wind Phone." Unlike Smith's fictional character, Mr. Hirota (pronounced: he-ROW-ta), the reasoning behind the phone was not related to the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011. Rather, it was from the grief over the death of Mr. Sasaki's cousin in a motorcycle

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accident about a year before the disasters. Although the author is taking creative liberties with the phone's origin, she does accurately capture the rest of the story of the "Wind Phone," even though she is filtering her narrative through the *This American Life* and NHK stories that relayed the tale to a wider audience.



The Wind Telephone in Ōtsuchi, Japan. Image by Matthew Komatsu
(<https://longreads.com/2019/03/11/after-the-tsunami/>)

Cultural Understanding: According to Mr. Sasaki, the impetus for placing the phone booth was born out of his need to have a space for expressing the loss of his cousin as well as creating a meaningful link to him. In an interview with NHK, Mr. Sasaki suggests that "because my thoughts could not be conveyed over the regular phonenumber, I wanted them to be carried on the wind." The physical location of the "Wind Telephone" may account for its name as it sits on a particularly windy hillside overlooking Ōtsuchi and the sea. The phone booth itself is a wooden structure, painted white with glass panels, harkening back to an older style of public telephones seen in rural communities. While it can be problematic to generalize, Japanese people do not usually display strong



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emotions publicly. These emotions are often displayed only in private or with close relations. Thus, the relative privacy of a phone booth could offer a space to express one's emotions. Lastly, remembrance and communication with departed family members long have held a place in Japanese culture. Particularly during the late summer Obon festival お盆 (pronounced: oh-BON), Japanese people return to their hometowns to reunite with family, both living and deceased. This includes visiting ancestral shrines or gravesites, welcoming the ancestors back to the home and then, after a period of time, escorting them back to the cemeteries. In the past, this veneration and remembrance was thought to pacify and assist the spirits of the dead in releasing their suffering. Thus, the continued recognition of and communication with the deceased still plays a role in Japanese life.

Historical Background: To better understand the book, it's necessary to know the magnitude of the disaster that serves as the backdrop for the story. In Japan, the event is known as the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011 and is often abbreviated 3.11 in the Japanese media. Outside of Japan this event is often referred to as Japan's Triple Disaster. This name is in reference to three related events that occurred on March 11, 2011, including the initial earthquake, the tsunami and then the eventual nuclear meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station. These events struck the eastern region of Japan known as the Tohoku region. The 9.0 megathrust earthquake was the fourth most powerful ever recorded and is responsible for shifting the entire Earth's axis by several centimeters. While powerful, the earthquake was responsible for only moderate damage as nearly all buildings in Japan are required to meet strict building codes to prevent complete failure. However, the tsunami that followed, generated by the massive, sudden movement of the Earth's crust, created a wall of water reaching many tens of meters into the air. In a matter of moments, the tsunami wave swept away everything in its path. Not long after, total power failures caused by flooding at the coastal Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station brought about a meltdown of the nuclear fuel rods at its Number 1, 2, and 3 reactors. The meltdown of

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the nuclear fuel caused an explosion of steam, which released radioactive particles into the air. These particles carried by the wind contaminated many surrounding communities and were even detected in Tokyo, Japan's capital. As of 2021, the aftermath and cleanup from these three disasters is still ongoing. Many of the coastal communities are still in the process of rebuilding communities washed away by the waves and cleanup from the nuclear contamination continues.

The scale of damage inflicted by the disasters is estimated to be one of the costliest in history by the World Bank. The disasters were responsible for 19,729 people killed, 6,233 injured and 2,559 still missing. In the immediate aftermath, 470,000 people were evacuated from their homes into temporary housing; nearly ten years later some residents are still displaced. In the years since the initial disasters, the town of Ōtsuchi, location of the physical phone booth, still has 425 missing and unaccounted for residents, one of the highest numbers in the affected area.

Illustrations and Art: The illustrator of the book, Rachel Wada, described her art as utilizing, "traditional Japanese art forms and techniques such as sumi-e and calligraphy," when creating the images seen in the book. *Sumi-e* 墨絵 (pronounced: sue-ME-eh) is the Japanese word for a form of ink painting that dates back centuries in East Asia. The painter uses black ink, like the kind used in calligraphy, in differing concentrations



Splashed-ink Landscape (破墨山水 *Haboku-sansui*, 1495) by Sesshū Tōyō. Tokyo National Museum.

(https://emuseum.nich.go.jp/detail?langId=en&webView=&content_base_id=101224&content_part_id=0&content_pict_id=0)



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across paper or silk. This style of painting is heavily associated with Zen Buddhism as its simplicity, directness, and movement within the paintings work to inform what D.T. Suzuki characterized as “gives a form to what has no form.” Zen and *sumi-e* painting were linked in Japan from the very outset as many early *sumi* painters were Zen monks, not professional artists, utilizing painting and calligraphy as a teaching tool to often illiterate students. *Sumi-e* is also linked to calligraphy as it shares the same type of ink and brushstrokes. Often, *sumi-e* paintings skillfully combine sections of calligraphy with playful artistic works that would inform or describe the text.

Author: Stephen Wludarski, Program Assistant for the NCTA and Japan Studies Program at the University of Pittsburgh. He is also former JET teacher in Kobe, Japan.

2021

Suggested Readings and Resources

Glass, Ira, Jonathan Goldstein and Miki Meek. “597: One Last Thing Before I Go.” Produced by WBEZ. *This American Life*. September 23, 2016. Podcast.
<https://www.thisamericanlife.org/597/one-last-thing-before-i-go-2016>

“Japan Disaster Digital Archive.” Edwin O. Reischauer Institute of Japanese Studies at Harvard University. <https://jdarchive.org/en>

“Landscapes of Autumn and Winter by Sesshū Tōyō” Tokyo National Museum.
https://www.tnm.jp/modules/r_collection/index.php?controller=dtl&colid=A1398

“The Phone of the Wind: Whispers to Lost Families” Produced by NHK. *NHK Specials*. Season 1, Episode 3. March 11, 2017. <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6uepb9>