

Curriculum Connections

The Minamata Story: An EcoTragedy

By Sean Michael Wilson
Stone Bridge Press, 2021

Illustrated by Akiko Shimojima
Non-Fiction, Set in Japan

2021 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School Literature

The world needs young people to keep pushing for positive change.

~ *The Minamata Story* (pg. 86)

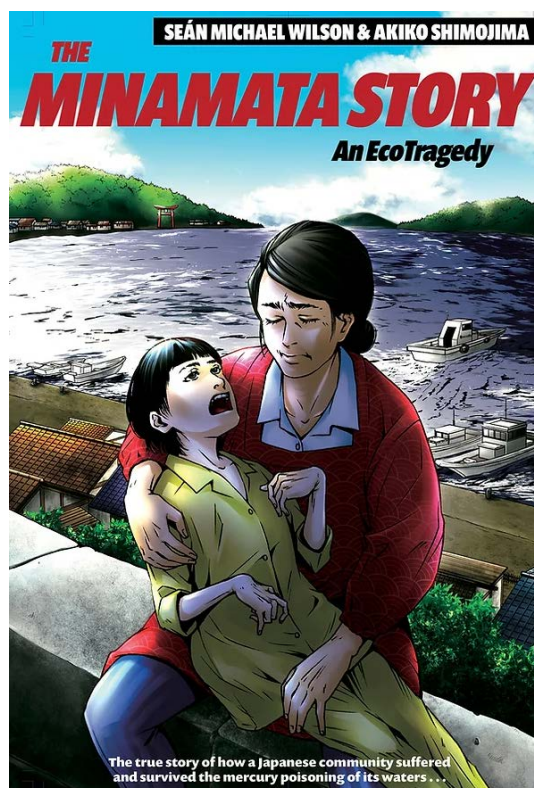
Appropriate for Grades: 6–12

Best for Grades: 6–8

Introduction to the Book

The Minamata Story: An EcoTragedy is an informational text told in the form of a graphic novel with a combination of real and fictional characters. Although a few references require some background knowledge, the format is highly accessible to teen readers. Moreover, since the graphic novel is so short, the time commitment for reading the text is minimal.

The Minamata (pronounced: me-NAH-MA-tah) *Story* offers a plethora of meaningful topics of inquiry. As such, it can readily guide entire unit curriculums or adapt to existing unit curriculums, especially units in visual arts, humanities, and sciences (chemical, biological, and environmental).



Best Matched Curricular Units

- Empathy and activism for the marginalized (Humanities)
- Human impacts on environment and ecology (Science)
- Neural diseases (Science)
- Illustration of facial expression (Visual Arts)

Essential Questions

- How are ecologies and communities intertwined?
- What role should the government play in public health?
- How can citizens best affect policy change?



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Key Vocabulary

1. Archipelago
2. Methylmercury
3. Plankton
4. Bioaccumulation
5. Sludge
6. Neural

Essential Background Information

- A. Geography of Japan in relation to bodies of water:
"No one lives further than seventy miles from the coast, so Japanese are oriented to the sea, even though their land is mountainous. Nearly all the people live on several flat coastal plains where it has been possible to farm." ([SPICE](#))
- B. Seafood diet in Japan, especially coastal towns:
"Japan is a maritime nation surrounded by the ocean...The Oyashio and Kuroshio currents carry small fish close to the coastal areas, and they attract packs of larger fish in pursuit, so there is an abundance of fishing grounds along the coasts." ([All About Japan](#))
- C. Japanese discrimination against those afflicted by illness (atomic bomb survivors, lepers) in the past:
"*Hibakusha* [atomic bomb survivors] also faced social stigma. Because no one really understood how radiation worked, many feared it and anyone it affected. As a result, *hibakusha* were deemed social pariahs in Japanese society."
([Outrider](#))

"Japan believed it had to get rid of its impure elements, which included victims of leprosy." ([CIOMAL](#))

(*Hibakusha* is pronounced: he-BAH-KU-shah)



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Several cross-curricular activities are included below, followed by suggested discussion and writing prompts. Page numbers from the book refer to the inspiration for each activity.

Suggested Activities

Front Cover Examination. Before reading the book, look at the cover. Ask students to identify objects or places they recognize in the cover art (mountains, boats, etc.). Have students raise questions in response to the cover art (for example, Why does the woman look sad? Is she the child's mom? What's that red thing near the mountain?). Using the images and words on the cover, invite students to make predictions for the story.

Teacher Note: The back cover reveals the entire story, so this activity would best be done by projecting the front cover on a screen before handing out books to the students.

Geography (pg. 2). In small groups or as a class, decode the meaning of the maps. Once students understand the maps, use [Google Earth](https://www.google.com/earth/) to search for the locations. Explore Chisso's geographic landmarks—mountains, water, buildings, etc.

Make a Mascot (pg. 10). We are introduced to the city mascot Kumamon. Japan famously has many mascots, especially for sports teams and cities. Search online for additional Japanese city mascots and share some favorites. Discuss common traits found among the different mascots. Using these common traits, invite students to imagine mascots for their hometowns.

Upcycle Project (pg. 30). In small groups, identify something at school that is commonly thrown away but could be reused. Come up with a way to reuse the objects, and then gather materials to develop a proof of concept.

Negative Chain Reactions. Throughout the book, the author presents negative chain reactions resulting from mercury poisoning: children with neural diseases get bullied into suffering mental difficulties (**pg. 43**); losses in the cat population lead to rat infestations and then food contamination (**pg. 60**); and as families lose their



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livelihoods, riots ensue (**pg. 81**). Have students think about (or research) another environmental problem and illustrate a three-part negative chain reaction stemming from that issue.

Mercury Research (end of book). Mercury continues to impact human food consumption today, even in the United States. Research the various sources of mercury in the American diet today.

Other Chemical Research (end of book). Provide students with a list of common sources of harmful chemicals found in many home environments. The list might include spray paint, weed killer, pesticides, vaping products, makeup, and plastics. From the list, choose a chemical source and research the harmful chemicals it contains. Consider the chemical effects as well as populations already affected.

Suggested Discussion and Writing Prompts

Prediction (pg. 8). Why is the cat behaving so strangely?

Compare and Contrast (pgs. 4–5, 16). Discuss the purposes of the images, which illustrate mercury's path into the human body. How are the illustrations similar? How do they differ? Is one more effective than the other? If so, why?

Fear Builds Tension (pg. 21). Why would the fishermen and fish retailers fight with each other? Does it make sense?

Bullying (pg. 38). Why do people bully those who are different? Who can help?

Fish Debate (pg. 51). Debate which is more dangerous: the dead fish or the living fish in Minamata water?

Protests (pg. 101). Explore recent examples of environmental protests happening in countries other than Japan or the United States. How have some protests been more effective than others? What protest do you think is the most important to support at this time?



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