

Culture Notes

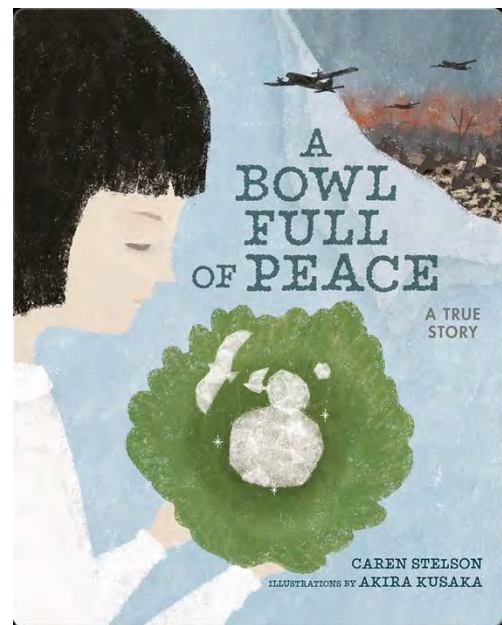
A Bowl Full of Peace: ***A True Story*** by Caren Stelson Illustrated by Akira Kusaka

Carolrhoda Books, 2020

Non-fiction, set in Japan

2020 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Children’s Literature

There are many powerful symbols of the atomic bombing of Japan—for example, the mushroom cloud, long strands of origami cranes, and the Hiroshima Peace Memorial (also known as the Atomic Bomb Dome). In this text, Caren Stelson introduces a new symbol to this pantheon: a green porcelain serving bowl. The story centers on young Sachiko (pronounced: SAH-chee-koh), her family, and her grandmother’s porcelain bowl. As a child, Sachiko gathers with her family for dinner, the bowl in the middle of the table filled with delicious foods such as squid, eel, octopus, and udon noodles. Before each meal, everyone bows their head and says *itadakimasu* (pronounced: ee-TAH-DAH-KEY-mah-sue), as people in the West might say grace or *bon appétit*.



A Bowl Full of Peace follows Sachiko’s family over roughly fifty years, from approximately 1943 to 1995. In the early pages of the book, Sachiko’s family faces increasing difficulties as U.S. military forces converge upon the Japanese empire and their hometown of Nagasaki. The bowl remains a fixture on the dining table, but its contents grow increasingly sparse. Toward the end of the war, the bowl contains only wheat balls in a thin broth. Nevertheless, they start each meal by bowing their heads and saying *itadakimasu*.

On the morning of August 9, 1945, Sachiko and her siblings are playing outside when the atomic bomb explodes. Her little brother Toshi is immediately killed in the blast. The rest of the family hurries home to discover that their house has been destroyed. Over the next days, months, and years, Sachiko’s family members suffer from radiation poisoning. Ice chips are one of the rare treats used to soothe their burning throats.



Culture Notes

A Bowl Full of Peace: A True Story by Caren Stelson Illustrated by Akira Kusaka

Carolrhoda Books, 2020

Non-fiction, set in Japan

2020 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Children's Literature

After two years, the family excavates what remains of their home only to discover grandmother's green porcelain bowl buried under the rubble, but undamaged.

For the rest of their lives, Sachiko's family members gather every year on August 9 to eat ice chips out of grandma's bowl in remembrance of their suffering and loss. As the years pass, most of Sachiko's family members die of radiation sickness, and the annual ice bowl tradition becomes increasingly significant. Each time they gather to eat the ice, they bow their heads and say *itadakimasu*.

Written for elementary school students, *A Bowl Full of Peace* contains many powerful themes. Each can serve as a potential lesson topic for a history class, literature class, or even art class. The most obvious theme involves the Japanese word *itadakimasu*. Said at the start of a meal, it can be translated literally as "we humbly receive this food." And yet as Sachiko's story progresses, the phrase becomes much more significant. It conveys gratitude but also acceptance of their fate. Many elementary students will pick up on these nuances throughout the story and be able to identify similar rituals in their own lives that take on added significance in certain situations (such as holiday dinners, graduation ceremonies, and funerals).

Another theme revolves around childhood innocence and victimization. While Sachiko increasingly hears the "clanging of hammers building torpedoes" throughout the early 1940s, for the most part she and her family are depicted as bearing no responsibility for the war. Instead, they are innocent victims. While it might be more challenging to help elementary students make judgments regarding the individual's responsibility during wartime, they do have a developing sense of fairness and justice. The story doesn't necessarily provoke such questions, but a skilled teacher can help students start to reflect, unpack, and analyze these ideas. If we are ever to achieve the sort of peace that this book promotes, we must move past a fixation on victimization and be willing to ask tough questions about responsibility and aggression. Certainly all participants in World War II engaged in questionable actions and bear responsibility for the tragic events.



Culture Notes

A Bowl Full of Peace: A True Story by Caren Stelson Illustrated by Akira Kusaka

Carolrhoda Books, 2020

Non-fiction, set in Japan

2020 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Children's Literature

Still another theme touches on relics and mementos. The green porcelain bowl represents different things at different times, but it remains a powerful symbol throughout. Upon discovering the bowl in the rubble of their former home, Sachiko points out that “everyone has eaten from it,” even those family members who have already died. “The bowl had the fingerprints of all the members of her family on it,” the text reminds us. It might be useful to ask students to identify relics and mementos in their own families and ask what makes them so meaningful. For the most part, we associate relics with religious or spiritual significance. Is it possible for mundane personal objects such as a bowl to acquire religious or spiritual significance?

Finally, the story introduces the theme of long-term suffering and trauma associated with war. Only one of Sachiko’s family members dies immediately as a result of the bomb, yet the family suffers physical and psychological effects for over fifty years, passing that trauma down to later generations. (Teachers can decide if the Disney movie *Encanto* might be an interesting comparison for their students to understand intergenerational post-traumatic stress.) It would be helpful for students to understand that the survivors of the atomic bombs—known in Japanese as *hibakusha* (pronounced: he-BAH-KU-shah)—were shunned in Japan for decades after the war. They were seen as polluted and potentially dangerous. Japanese employers and politicians routinely discriminated against the *hibakusha*, and many remained single for the rest of their lives as no one wanted to marry them.

The author of the text, Caren Stelson, does an admirable job of sharing Sachiko Yasui’s powerful story. Similarly, illustrator Akira Kusaka provides moving and emotional images. Stelson has written two books about Sachiko; the other, titled *Sachiko: A Nagasaki Bomb Survivor’s Story*, is geared toward middle and high school students. Elementary schoolteachers might direct more advanced students to this companion volume. Regardless of the approach used in the classroom, Sachiko’s story is powerful and needs to be shared.



Culture Notes
A Bowl Full of Peace:
A True Story
by Caren Stelson
Illustrated by Akira Kusaka

Carolrhoda Books, 2020

Non-fiction, set in Japan

2020 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Children's Literature

Author: David Kenley, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Dakota State University
2023