

Culture Notes

Onibi:

Diary of a Yokai Ghost Hunter by Atelier Sentō (Cécile Brun and Oliver Pichard)

translated by Marie Velde

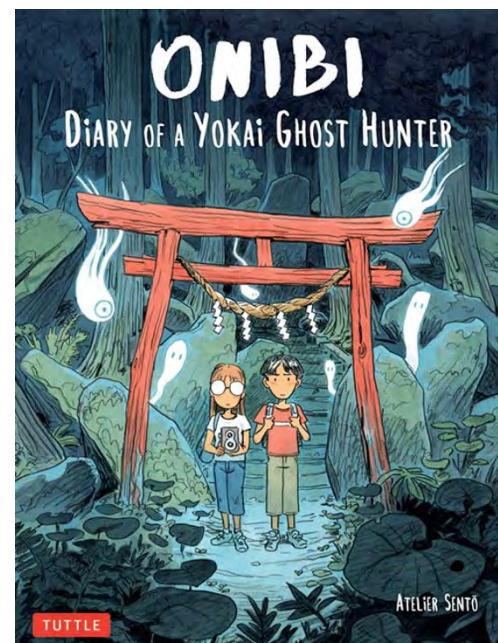
Tuttle Publishing, 2018

Fiction, set in Japan

2018 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/Middle School Literature

The Supernatural in Japan

Japanese culture, folklore, and belief systems have more manifestations of the supernatural than perhaps any other culture. This is partially due to the Shinto concept that all things are to some degree alive. But Buddhism and stories imported from abroad have added to this rich cultural heritage. Even today, the supernatural is hugely popular with the Japanese public, and is featured in books, scholarship, manga, movies, anime, video games, and more. Many of the characters and situations that students experience in video games have their roots in the Japanese supernatural.



Places Mentioned in the Book

Niigata prefecture 新潟県 (pronounced: knee-EE-GAH-tah)

Japan is divided into prefectures, which are similar to American states. Niigata prefecture is located on the Sea of Japan, on the main island of Honshu (pronounced: HONE-shoe). The city of Niigata is the third largest on the Sea of Japan side. The major industry is agriculture, particularly rice.

Sado Island 佐渡島 (pronounced: SAH-dough)

Sado Island is located off the coast of Niigata and is the largest island in the Sea of Japan. It was once a place of exile for Japanese political figures who had fallen out of favor. Prominent exiles include Emperor Juntoku, the Buddhist monk Nichiren, and Zeami Motokiyo, the founder of Noh theater. Today, one of Sado Island's most popular attractions is the Earth Celebration, a festival hosted by the taiko group Kodo, who are world renowned.



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Onsen 温泉 (pronounced: OWN-sehn)

The islands of Japan are dotted with hot springs. Bathhouses have been built over and around these hot springs, attracting tourists and locals alike. These are called *onsen* and are often featured on Japanese television travel shows, as many boast mineral waters and other special features. A typical *onsen* might include a variety of amenities, including a gift shop, cafeteria, dining halls, and massage service. Bathing rooms are usually divided into separate sections for men and women. Each section has a dressing room with lockers and areas to bathe (complete with shampoo and soap) before going into the baths. Once a person is clean, they may enter the rooms with the hot baths and choose from a variety of hot temperatures. Bathing areas might be indoors or outdoors (often fenced off for privacy), and they are large and meant to be communal. Soaking in *onsen* is considered to be both therapeutic and relaxing.

Religion in the Supernatural

Temples vs. Shrines

The two major belief systems in Japan are Buddhism and Shinto. Buddhism came to Japan from India via China and Korea, and Shinto is the indigenous faith, a form of nature worship based on the feeling that all things are animate and sentient. Buddhism and Shinto were intertwined for centuries until the late 1800s, which they were forcibly separated by the government. Buddhism has temples, and Shinto has shrines.

Torii 鳥居 (pronounced: toe-REE)

This term literally means "bird perch." A *torii* is a Shinto ceremonial gateway usually constructed of wood. The design is simple, with two vertical cylindrical posts surmounted by two horizontal posts. The upper horizontal post is rectangular but beveled on the upper surface to shed rain. The lower one is simply rectangular. Anytime you see a *torii*, it denotes sacred space. *Torii* often appear at Buddhist temples as well, as the Shinto and Buddhist systems were intertwined for centuries, and not clearly set apart until the late nineteenth century.



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Jizō 地藏 (pronounced: jee-ZOH)

Jizō is a Buddhist deity, a bodhisattva (Japanese: *bosatsu*) or enlightened being who forgoes nirvana in order to bring Buddhist salvation to others. Jizō is the protector of children and pregnant women in particular. In Japan, Jizō is often depicted in the garb of a monk, with a shaved head. These figures are often seen with bibs, as worshippers donate bibs to the Jizō statues, along with children's toys and clothes, given with prayers that deceased children will travel safely with Jizō into the afterlife. Jizō statues may appear in groups at Buddhist temples or in small structures along roads, or alone along mountain trails.

Supernatural Terms Used in the Book

***Yōkai* 妖怪** (pronounced: YOO-kah-ee)

Yōkai refers to the entire realm of ghosts and demons. Within this larger category are all sorts of manifestations, from animals such as foxes (see below) to human ghosts, to inanimate objects that come alive.

***Yūrei* 幽霊** (pronounced: YOU-ray)

The *yūrei* is a human ghost, often but not exclusively female. It was thought long ago that if a person died violently, had been cruelly abused, or died while experiencing emotional angst, then their spirit would be trapped between this world and the next. The *yūrei* might be the crying ghost of a young woman who had been abused by her master, for example. More typically, the *yūrei* tends to be an angry spirit, bent on revenge for wrongs that have not been righted. She is usually depicted in Japanese art with long hair, a white robe, and no feet. She floats in the air or can appear in a paper lantern or other places.

Foxes (*kitsune*) 狐 (pronounced: key-TSUH-neh)

Japanese foxes have long been considered one of the two tricksters in Japanese lore, along with *tanuki* (raccoon dogs; pronounced: TAH-new-key). Both animals are native



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to Japan and were thought to be shape-shifters. Foxes were believed capable of appearing as Buddhist nuns or monks, or as beautiful women, with the object of tricking humans or luring men to their death. Unlike the archetype trickster that often alternates between good and bad deeds—the North American coyote trickster being a prime example—the Japanese trickster is more often harmful than good. However, there is a story of a fox who was rescued by a man from hunters, and then appeared to him transformed into a beautiful woman. She married the man who had saved her, gave birth to a child, and then eventually shape-shifted back into her fox form, leaving him with the gift of the child.

Foxes are also connected to the Shinto deity Inari, the deity of agriculture, particularly the cultivation of rice. Thus, fox statues will be found alone or in groups at Inari shrines, or sometimes by themselves along a forest road or village street. In this context, the fox is considered a benevolent messenger of Inari.

Onibi 鬼火 (pronounced: oh-KNEE-bee)

Onibi is a will-o'-the-wisp; the Japanese characters literally mean “demon fire.” It is a type of ghostly light. One type of *onibi* is the *kitsunebi*, which is the fox fire of Japanese lore. The fox fire is a hypnotic lure that leads travelers astray from the road on which they are traveling. Foxes are thought to appear as balls of light or fire, particularly at night in graveyards.

Food

Onigiri お握り (pronounced: oh-KNEE-gih-ree)

Balls of Japanese sticky rice have been a staple of travelers since the Edo period in Japan (1615–1868). *Onigiri* traveled well, as they could be wrapped in seaweed and eaten on the road. They often contain vegetables, seaweed, meat, fish, or pickles in the center, making for a light meal. Today you can buy *onigiri* everywhere in Japan, from convenience stores to large supermarkets. It is a popular snack food, and children in



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particular are fond of *onigiri*. It is also said to be the preferred food of foxes in Japanese lore.

Tempura udon 天ぷらうどん (pronounced: ten-PUH-RAH U-dohn) (U is pronounced like the ou in you)

Tempura is a popular dish that could include vegetables, meat, and seafood coated in a very light batter and deep-fried. This dish originally came from Portugal but was refined over the centuries to have a particularly Japanese flavor and appearance. *Udon* are thick, chewy Japanese noodles made from wheat, and they can be flat or rounded. The two together are called *tempura udon*, which is udon served in a bowl with broth, and *tempura* on top.

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