



Curriculum Connections

Onibi:

Diary of a Yokai Ghost Hunter

by Atelier Sentō (Cécile Brun and Oliver Pichard)

translated by Marie Velde

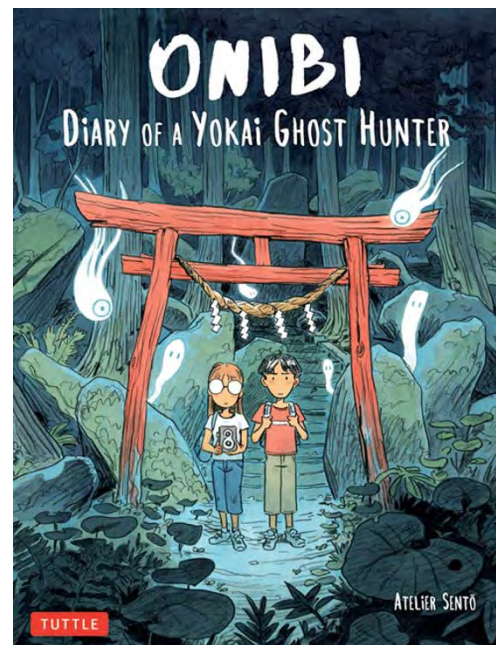
Tuttle Publishing, 2018

Fiction, set in Japan

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

Summary

The graphic novel *Onibi: Diary of a Yokai Ghost Hunter* tells the tale of two friends (stand-ins for authors Cécile Brun and Olivier Pichard) during a trip to Niigata (pronounced: knee-EE-GAH-tah) prefecture in Japan. Their trip takes an odd turn right away, when one of the characters purchases a “Yokai camera” (pronounced: YOO-kah-ee) from an odd store. From there, the protagonists travel to different locations in search of the spiritual and supernatural, hoping to locate and document a side of Japan rarely seen by tourists. Traveling to Shinto shrines, natural landscapes, and landmarks, and finally ending up in front of a statue on the island of Jizō (pronounced: jee-ZOH), they discover aspects of Japanese mythology and begin to view the Land of the Rising Sun in a very different light.



Analysis

Onibi (pronounced: oh-KNEE-bee) does not provide the reader with any easy answers, leaving the supernatural shrouded in mystery at the end of each chapter. The graphic novel provides a multilayered reading, using text and dialogue to explain aspects of Niigata prefecture and Sado Island (pronounced: SAH-dough), panel art to communicate the natural beauty and supernatural eeriness of each setting, and the sections before each new chapter to connect the tales and imagination of the story with the real world. The approach used to express the intention and themes of the book—folklore, cultural communication and diffusion—not only gives the reader a sense that they are learning about things that are altogether unfamiliar to Western rationalism, but also that these things should be appreciated for their distinct “Japanese-ness.”



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The Spiritual and the Supernatural

In Japan, some people believe in the existence of spirits known as *yōkai* (spirits/monsters) and *yūrei* (ghosts; pronounced: YOU-ray). According to Shinto, the indigenous belief system of Japan, nature spirits known as *kami* (pronounced: KAH-me) have their own individual personalities, and they may be attached to objects or specific aspects of the natural landscape. This belief in multiple deities or spirits pervades Japanese Buddhist cosmology as well, which has drawn on Shinto *kami* while introducing divine figures from Indian and Chinese Buddhism, known as bodhisattvas. Given all these instances of spirits in Japanese belief systems, the supernatural has become embedded in the Japanese culture. When the protagonists of *Onibi* explore particular sights and aspects of the area they are staying, they do not experience anything out of the ordinary in comparison with what they might encounter in other parts of Japan. Within the story, the protagonists even refer to specific kinds of spirits, or representations of spirits. The first are the *kitsune* (pronounced: key-TSU-neh), trickster spirits in the guise of foxes that are usually associated with the harvest deity Inari (pronounced: ee-NAH-ri). The second are the statues representing Jizō Bosatsu (pronounced: jee-ZOH BOH-sah-tsu), a Buddhist bodhisattva who ensures that the souls of the recently deceased, especially young children, gain safe passage to the spirit world. The inclusion of these and other kinds of local spirits of Niigata prefecture create a portrait of a country with a deep history and appreciation for the role of the supernatural in daily life.

Appropriate Grade Levels

Depending on the grade level, the book can be used on all three levels: elementary, middle, and high school.

- Elementary: 4th grade
- Middle school: 7th/8th grade
- High school: 9th/10th grade (possibly 11th grade, depending on the depth of analysis the teacher would like to pursue)



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Activities

- **Reading and Discussion:** Engage in a simple reading and discussion lesson with students. The text itself is not very long or difficult, especially for middle school students. The teacher can take the direct approach and read portions of the text to the students while calling on students to volunteer to read other sections; this should take only one to two classes to accomplish. Alternatively, for a constructivist approach, students could be split into groups and take turns reading the text and engaging with it as much as possible within the group. Regardless of the method, students can write down observations and questions while going through the reading; you might start a discussion before the next reading to talk about these. If they are reading in groups, students can take turns talking about what they noticed and answering questions from other students.
Applicable to all aforementioned grade levels.
- **Photography/Imagination Project:** Like the protagonists of *Onibi*, students can go out with a camera and take photos of natural landscapes or particular monuments they come across in their own neighborhoods. They could then print photos that catch their attention and develop stories about the supernatural creatures they believe could be lurking in that area. They could also associate a place in their photos with a well-known supernatural creature, or they can make up their own. Either way, the student should draw a picture of the creature they were imagining along with a description of its characteristics on a separate sheet of paper. The teacher could hang these in the classroom and have the students take notes about the supernatural creatures that could live in the places within the photos. *Applicable to all aforementioned grade levels.*
- **Yōkai Poster Project:** A poster project is another straightforward idea to build upon the ideas, concepts, and folklore learned through *Onibi*. The teacher can decide whether the students work in groups or individually. If



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in groups, it may be best to focus only on *yōkai* featured in *Onibi*. If the students work individually, it may be preferable to use *Yokai Attack!* and *Yurei Attack!*, both written by Hiroko Yoda and Matt Alt, as supplementary materials so each student can choose a unique spirit or monster (these texts are explained below). Once students have added text and images to their posters, presentations can be done by each group or individual student.

Common Core Standards

CCSS. ELA-LITERACY.RL.2.1. Ask and answer such questions as *who, what, where, when, why, and how* to demonstrate understanding of key details in a text.

CCSS. ELA-LITERACY.RL.2.2. Recount stories, including fables and folktales from diverse cultures, and determine their central message, lesson, or moral.

CCSS. ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.1. Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.

Literature and Media Connections

The supplementary texts that can be employed to help enrich the new ideas and concepts being learned through *Onibi* vary by grade level. Teachers may wish to do some preparatory reading ahead of teaching this book, using some of the recommended texts below.

Elementary Texts: *NonNonBa* by Shigeru Mizuki (translated by Jocelyne Allen, Drawn and Quarterly, 2012); *Gegege no Kitaro* by Shigeru Mizuki (various collected editions).

Onibi provides a basic introduction to concepts of the supernatural as they appear in Japanese folklore and mythology. Texts such as the manga written and illustrated by Shigeru Mizuki can be used to reinforce what students learn from *Onibi*. Mizuki was a manga artist throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and his work is still featured in the media today. His most popular serialized work, *Gegege no Kitaro*, follows the exploits of the friendly *yōkai* Kitaro as he does his best to help the human and spirit worlds find



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balance. Many of Kitaro's friends are themselves *yōkai* and *yūrei*, but while many of his friends find it fun to scare humans, Kitaro himself is not in the business of frightening or harming humans. Rather, he teaches both sides how to better themselves.

Fascinated by the supernatural and worldwide mythology, Mizuki went on to write a more serious retelling of his childhood from the perspective of interacting with the spirit world in myriad ways. The resulting manga book, *NonNonBa*, is a tale of his relationship with an elderly woman in his village, who introduces him to all the monsters and myths of the local area. These tales eventually take Mizuki's younger self on a journey during which he learns about his relationship to the wider world and how to appreciate the bonds and friendships he makes as he grows older.

Both books are appropriate for younger readers and will increase their cultural knowledge about Japan. The stories are told in an easily accessible format that builds on what was introduced through *Onibi*.

Middle School Texts: *Yokai Attack!: The Japanese Monster Survival Guide* by Hiroko Yoda and Matt Alt, illustrated by Tatsuya Morino (Tuttle Publishing, 2012). *Yurei Attack!: The Japanese Ghost Survival Guide* by Hiroko Yoda and Matt Alt, illustrated by Shinkichi (Tuttle Publishing, 2012).

Both *Yokai Attack!* and *Yurei Attack!* are straightforward and vibrant in ways that will hold middle school students' attention as they read the brief descriptions and examples of each *yōkai* and *yūrei*. Presented in the form of field guides, with color illustrations for each monster, these books by Yoda and Alt are a great way for students with higher reading abilities and a penchant for longer descriptions and definitions to learn more about the supernatural and mythological figures that appear only briefly in *Onibi*. These texts are also solid to use along with project ideas for students, for example, when assigning research on a particular *yōkai* or *yūrei* that could then be shared with fellow students through an interactive and engaging poster project.

Elementary and Middle School Media: *Spirited Away* (2001) directed by Hayao Miyazaki, and *Pom Poko* (1994) directed by Isao Takahata.



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Another avenue for increasing student engagement and understanding of these ideas is the use of film. Anime is a visual medium used for a lot of movies and television shows in Japan, especially those aimed at children and teenagers. Of the anime studios in Japan, Studio Ghibli is usually considered among the most masterful at using the medium to tell profound stories. *Spirited Away* and *Pom Poko* focus heavily on the supernatural. The former is the tale of a girl lost in the spirit world who befriends all sorts of unique characters on her journey to return to the human world. The latter depicts how particular shape-shifting nature spirits—the raccoon dogs known as *tanuki*—respond to the encroachment of urbanization on their natural habitat in the real world. Both are engrossing stories with varied characters and messages about a person's relationship with the world around them, seen and unseen, and both are great ways to show, rather than tell, students more about the ideas and concepts introduced in *Onibi*. Great resources to approach different cultural values and stories, these films can be used to bookend a unit on Japan concerning myths and folklore and to transition into other aspects, like life in modern Japan or Japanese cities. No matter how the teacher uses these films, they are both highly regarded, ideal for quickly teaching cultural lessons that students may not otherwise fully understand.

High School Text: *A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine* by John K. Nelson (University of Washington Press, 1996).

A scholarly text, this book is written at a level most older high school students will understand and provides a thorough anthropological picture of the interplay between Japanese society and spirituality that students might not otherwise have the opportunity to learn about. During his time teaching in Japan, Nelson visited the Suwa Shrine in Nagasaki, befriending the head priest and learning the intricacies of the temple's day-to-day operations and how the rituals and worship related to the larger community it served. Nelson is thorough in his analysis and explanations, covering history, concepts, mythology, first-hand observations, community life, and personal stories that are all important in weaving a complete picture of not only Suwa Shrine but also the vital indigenous spiritual history of Japan. Nelson's text is indispensable for any



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educator looking to expand their knowledge on the topic of Japanese spirituality and religion, and it serves as a decent introduction to an aspect of Japanese culture that is not often discussed. *A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine* could be split up to provide case studies of certain aspects of Japanese spirituality and folklore that are only hinted at in *Onibi*, or it could help guide the pattern of a particular lesson and the information the teacher wishes to impart. No matter how the text is used in the classroom—either as supplementary material, to fill in informational blanks, or for reading and discussion material—*A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine* will enrich the student’s understanding of Japanese spirituality as a lived experience.

Common Core Standards

CCSS. ELA-LITERACY.W.2.2. Write informative/explanatory texts in which they introduce a topic, use facts and definitions to develop points, and provide a concluding statement or section.

CCSS. ELA-LITERACY.W.2.7. Participate in shared research and writing projects (for example, read a number of books on a single topic to produce a report; record science observations).

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