

**Scholastic Press, 2018**

**2018 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult / Middle School Literature**

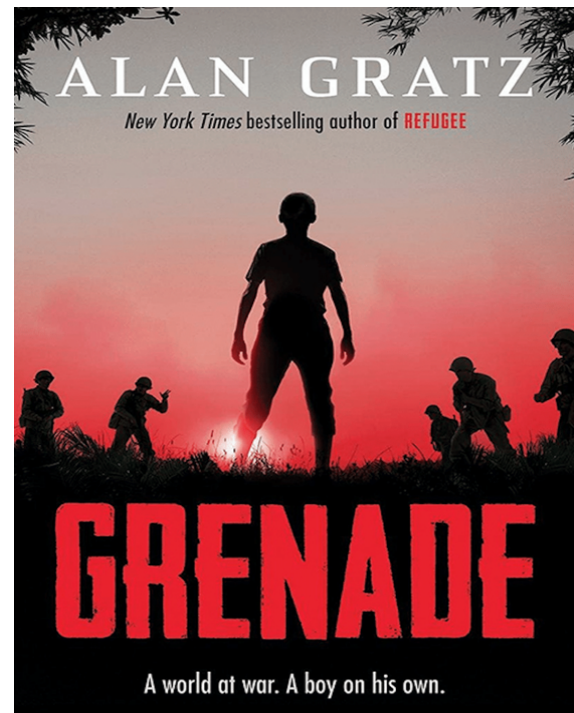
# Culture Notes

## *Grenade*

**by Alan Gratz**

**Fiction, set in Japan**

Alan Gratz's *Grenade* is a novel about an Okinawan boy named Hideki who encounters an American G.I. named Ray during the Battle of Okinawa, a decisive battle between the Imperial Japanese Army and the Allied Forces led by the United States. The battle started on April 1, 1945, and lasted a grueling 83 days. At the conclusion on June 23, the Allied Forces (consisting mostly of American Marines) gained complete control of the main island, enabling them to stage the next planned phase of the war—that is, attacking mainland Japan. But on August 15, after the dropping of the atomic bombs on August 6 (Hiroshima) and August 9 (Nagasaki), Japan surrendered to the Allied Forces, ending the war in the Pacific.



Okinawa continued to play a role in the geopolitics of the region after the war. The United States occupied Okinawa and built many military facilities there and throughout mainland Japan. Some of these bases played an important role in supporting American military operations during the Korean War (1950–1953). A security treaty between the U.S. and Japan was signed in 1951 that allowed American bases to be established in Japan. A few years later, this was replaced by a more comprehensive military pact between the countries (United States–Japan Security Treaty, known as Anpo, signed in 1960). There were massive public demonstrations in Japan against this treaty in 1959–1960 and again in 1970. During the Vietnam War, Okinawan bases were used to support and supply the American troops deployed there.

President Nixon ceded control of the islands to the Japanese in 1972, returning Okinawa to Japan with its full prefecture status, but large U.S. military bases remain. About 54,000 American servicemen are posted in Japan today, and as many as 30,000 of them are in Okinawa, representing the largest concentration of American troops anywhere in the world.



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The presence of American bases in Okinawa has caused a great deal of tension between the U.S. and Okinawan governments, stemming from residents' complaints about noise, land use, and crime, not to mention general concerns around hosting American troops. The Japanese government will not abrogate the treaty for security reasons, but promises were made to work harder with the U.S. to manage these issues.

Historically, Okinawa was the center of the Ryūkyū Kingdom, which had its own distinct culture and language. The kingdom was colonized by the Japanese in 1609, when the Satsuma domain in southern Kyushu invaded the kingdom, dethroning King Shōnei. In 1879, Okinawa was officially incorporated as a prefecture into the nation of Japan.

### **The setting of the story**

During the last phase of World War II, Okinawans were forced to defend Japan, even though they had been treated as second-class citizens under Japanese rule. At the end of the war, Okinawa was placed under American military rule, and in May 1972, it was returned to Japan. As a result of this 400-year history of foreign occupation, many Okinawans still feel a great deal of resentment toward both the Japanese and the Americans.

Draft-age Okinawan males, as citizens of Japan, were required to join the military during World War II. Toward the end of the war, Japan did not have enough soldiers, and so high school, college, and university students were mobilized (*gakuto dooin*) to help with the war effort. Many were sent to work in factories. Female secondary school students were assigned to non-combatant roles like nursing, and male students took on paramilitary activities. In Okinawa, about 1,500 male and 500 female students were mobilized. Hideki and Kimiko in *Grenade* are two high school students who were enrolled in the student mobilization troops.

In *Grenade*, civilians are described as throwing themselves off a cliff instead of being captured alive by the American troops. This kind of suicide was not reported at the Battle of Okinawa, though it likely happened. In the year prior, Okinawan soldiers and civilians did choose to jump off cliffs to their deaths in the Saipan Islands (Banzai Cliff) and at Suicide Cliff rather than fall into enemy hands. The exaggerated description



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in this story may have value as a novelistic device, but it will perpetuate the stereotype that Japanese people simply did what they were told during the war.

The young Hideki is portrayed sympathetically. He has not experienced a lot in life, much less on the battlefield in which he was unwillingly inserted. Hideki is contrasted to Japanese soldiers from the mainland, who are represented as unfeeling, interested only in following orders. They do not exhibit human decency, and don't hesitate to take the lives of other Japanese. In contrast to this portrayal, American Marines, especially one of the main characters, Ray, are benevolent, compassionate, and morally righteous. Ray is an innocent young adult from a farming family in Iowa, who, like Hideki, doesn't know much about war, much less what it is like to participate in one.

There is a three-way tension among the American military, the Japanese Imperial Army soldiers, and Okinawan civilians caught between them. Because this is a work of fiction, a teacher should not judge *Grenade* for its historical accuracy. Nevertheless, it is important to note the rather one-dimensional characterization of the Japanese Imperial Army as savages and the American troops as bringers of peace and mortality.

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