



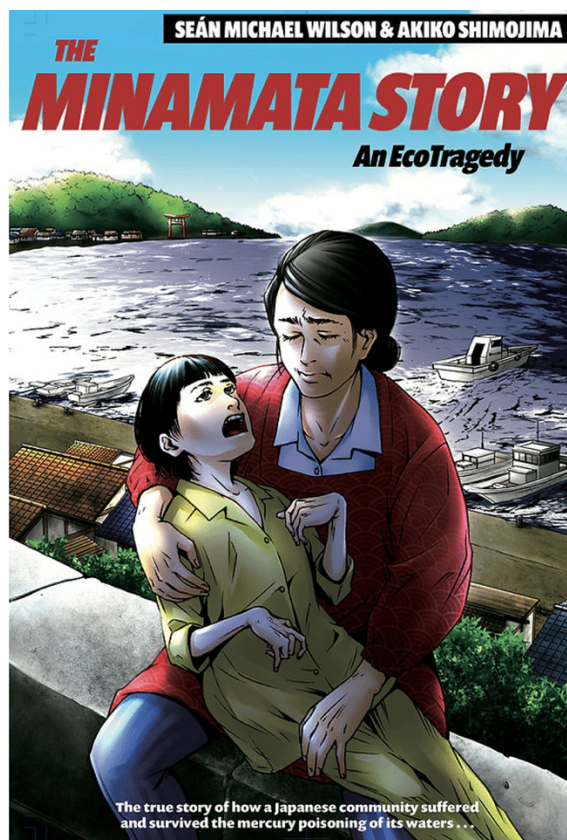
Culture Notes

Minamata Story: ***An EcoTragedy*** by Seán Michael Wilson Forward by Brian Small Nonfiction, set in Japan 2021 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School Literature

Illustrated by Akiko Shimojima
Stone Bridge Press, 2021

The manga format is often used in Japan to bring serious adult subjects forward, enabling the young and old to become more informed on sensitive social issues. For example, *Hadashi no gen* (Barefoot Gen), *Kaze tachinu* (The Wind Rises), and *Sōin gyokusai-se yo* (Onward toward Our Noble Deaths) all deal with World War II.

The Minamata Story was written to raise awareness of the environmental catastrophe of mercury poisoning in Japan and to promote environmental activism. The main character is a Japanese college student whose father is British. The events are portrayed from a Western perspective, a critical look at how the incidents were handled by the Japanese. The photographer on which the cover is based is W. Eugene Smith, a well-known American photographer. The graphic art is by the Japanese manga artist Akiko Shimojima.



Minamata Disease

The book begins with a brief history of Minamata (pronounced: ME-na-ma-ta) disease and the turning points in determining the cause, demonstrations, and discrimination against the sufferers of this strange disease. This is followed by a description of monetary compensation to the victims. The story is told from the perspective of a college student and his grandmother, who has clear memories of living in the Minamata area when the disease caused so much suffering. At the end of the story, they renew their commitment to environmental activism.

Beginning in the 1920s, the chemical corporation Chisso released discharge water containing mercury in the coastal city of Minamata, on the southern island of Kyushu.



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Chisso acknowledged that the mercury pollution was causing damage to the fishing industry in the area, which led to monetary compensation agreements in 1923 and 1936 with the local fishermen's union. The agreements did not stop the practice, however, and throughout the following decades, the pollutant continued to flow into the bay. In the mid-1950s, a sudden outbreak of mercury poisoning occurred in this area. A local university research team determined that the cause of the strange disease was acute mercury poisoning. The government agency that regulated the industry eventually agreed to the findings and held Chisso accountable for polluting the bay.

The researchers discovered that the disease was caused by the ingestion of methylmercury, a powerful neurotoxin, by consuming fish and other seafood that had accumulated a large amount of methylmercury. The symptoms were first noted in small animals like cats and crows that were found dead or behaving strangely. Symptoms in people included numbness, lack of coordination, difficulty seeing, swallowing, and hearing. Convulsions, coma, and even death followed these symptoms. Congenital cases were also reported. Chisso denied any responsibility but agreed to compensate the victims without admitting any wrongdoing. Impatient with the inaction of Chisso and the regulating government agencies, people took to the streets to demonstrate.

In the following legal fights between the victims and Chisso, the company's responsibility was officially acknowledged, and the company as well as the prefectural government compensated Minamata victims. By May 2023, more than ¥417,300 million (US\$2.8 billion in 2024) was paid to more than 2,284 certified victims and for the cleanup and other projects related to the damage. Additional lawsuits are pending; these litigations continue today.

Minamata disease is one of the four major diseases caused by environmental catastrophes in Japan. The other three are *itai-itai* (pronounced: E-tie E-tie) disease, a painful condition caused by cadmium poisoning in Toyama prefecture (1930s to 1965); mercury poisoning in Niigata prefecture in the 1970s, which occurred in similar circumstances to Minamata disease; and the outbreak of asthma and other respiratory problems in the 1960s, caused by air pollution in Yokkaichi City, Mie prefecture.



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Public sentiments about social and political issues are not often expressed in the form of demonstrations in Japan. Large-scale political activism took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s when radicalized students fought to reshape university governance, fight against the ratification of the U.S.–Japan Security Treaty and demonstrate against the Vietnam War. In more recent years, demonstration-worthy events that catch people’s attention have rarely occurred. People have protested against the presence of American military bases and the servicemen’s behavior outside of the bases, a sore point for many Japanese since the end of World War II. The 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami brought the issue of nuclear power safety to the fore and attracted a high number of demonstrators in 2012.

According to one survey, most Japanese do not believe that public demonstrations can change society and that it is a waste of time to be involved in political activity. They are generally not interested in becoming politically active. An example of this attitude may be seen in their attitude to nature. Despite the general perception that the Japanese love nature (and they do), they do not take an active role in protecting nature. Their apathy toward politics is symbolized by the low voter turnout in national elections, where less than 56% voted for the lower house in 2021 and only 52% for the upper house in 2022.

Although we are always cautioned against judging a book by its cover, the striking pieta—a reference to the Virgin Mary holding the dead body of Jesus Christ in her lap—conveys the emotional impact of this environmental tragedy. This is underscored by the foreword by Brian Small, who regards this book as a call for action. The cover illustration could be based on W. Eugene Smith’s iconic *Tomoko and Mother in the Bath* (available copyright free found at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tomoko_and_Mother_in_the_Bath) or another work by Smith on the Magnum Photos website: <https://www.magnumphotos.com/arts-culture/society-arts-culture/w-eugene-smith-minamata-warning-to-the-world/>.

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