

# Culture Notes

## *Indigo Girl*

by Suzanne Kamata

GemmaMedia, 2019

Fiction, set in the U.S. and Japan

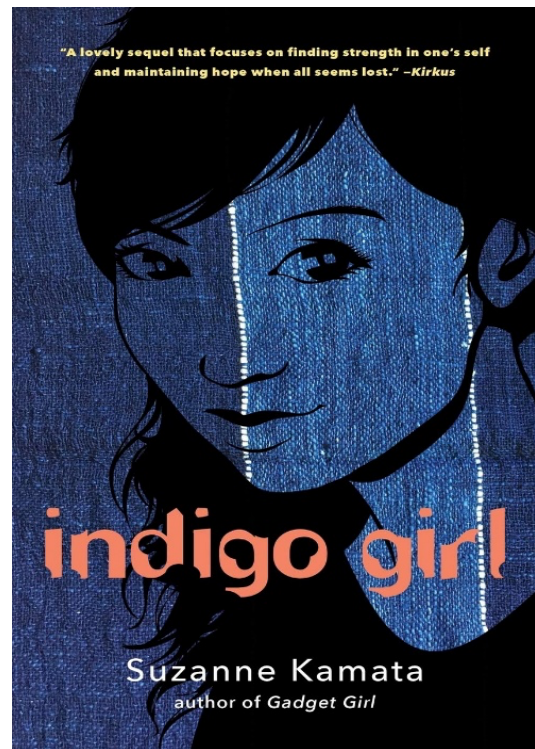
2019 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult / High School Literature

*Indigo Girl* is filled with examples of contemporary life in Japan, many of which are explained below so that students can better understand the social and cultural contexts that are integral to the story.

**Homes in Japan:** Many homes in Japan today are a mix of contemporary and traditional architecture and interior design. When you enter a Japanese house, remove your shoes in the *genkan* (foyer) and then step up to the main floor, where you are given slippers. It is not uncommon to have tatami mat rooms, as in the farmhouse in this story. Slippers are removed before entering a tatami room. In these rooms, you sit on the floor, typically on your knees with your legs crossed under you at the ankles. Boys and men often sit cross-legged. Older Japanese often use small, raised seats to take the pressure off their legs.

**Breakfast:** Aiko is surprised at the type of breakfast she receives at the farmhouse. A typical Japanese breakfast is rice, soup, salad, and perhaps some fish. "Western style" includes fried eggs, ham, salad, and thick slice of white toast. Japanese also will eat leftovers from the night before, such as curry rice, for breakfast. Tea and/or coffee is also served.

**Bathrooms and Toilets:** The toilet and room for bathing are separate in Japan. You always take off your house slippers and put on toilet slippers when entering the room with the toilet. It is not uncommon to locate the washing machine next to the room for bathing. For bathing, you enter a separate room where there is a shower and a bathtub. You must never get into that bathtub without showering first. After scrubbing with soap and rinsing off, you lower yourself into the tub for a nice relaxing soak in very hot water. Several people may use the same bath, so it is important to keep the water clean and hot. (Do not add cold water to the bath!)





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***Butsudan*** (Buddhist altar): Homes often have what the author refers to as a shrine. This is a *butsudan*, a Buddhist altar where prayers and offerings are made for deceased family members. Typically, the *butsudan* will house a statue or painting of the Buddha or a Buddhist deity. Memorial tablets and photos of the deceased are placed upon the altar, and flowers and incense typically placed in front of the photographs. Food and/or tea may also be placed there as an offering. Typically, upon approaching the altar, you light a stick of incense and put it in its holder, strike a small mallet against a bowl-shaped bell, and then offer prayers to the deceased.

**The Great Hanshin Earthquake of 1995:** This national disaster is referred to several times in the book. Also called the Kobe earthquake or the Hanshin-Awaji earthquake, this huge earthquake (7.3 on the Richter scale) occurred at 5:46 a.m. Japan time on January 17, 1995. It struck the Hanshin area of Japan, Japan's second largest urban area, which includes the cities of Osaka and Kobe. The epicenter was located beneath the northern end of Awaji Island. An estimated 6,400 people were killed, 40,000 injured, and over 240,000 homes damaged overall, with the city of Kobe being the hardest hit (4,571 fatalities, over 14,000 injured, over 120,000 damaged structures). Roads and bridges were twisted and broken, and traditional houses with heavy roof tiles became death traps for many families. [source:

<https://www.britannica.com/event/Kobe-earthquake-of-1995>]

**3.11:** This triple disaster is also referred to in the book, and is the reason for why Aiko's new friend, Taiga, and a second character, Kotaro, are both refugees from Tōhoku. At 9:46 p.m. on Friday, March 3, 2011, the Great East Japan Earthquake struck in the Pacific Ocean, east of Sendai in the Tōhoku region of northern Honshu. The rare magnitude 9.0 earthquake lasted three minutes and moved the main island of Honshu a few meters east, with the local coastline subsiding half a meter. It was the most powerful earthquake ever recorded in Japan. The 15-meter tsunami that followed was horrific in its size and speed, overwhelming entire neighborhoods while people attempted to flee. Around 19,500 people were confirmed dead, over a million buildings collapsed or were destroyed. The tsunami caused the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, primarily the partial meltdowns of three of the fuel rods in three of its reactors. The release of radiation that followed resulted in the evacuation of over 100,000 people. [source: <https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/safety-and-security/safety-of-plants/fukushima-daiichi-accident.aspx>]

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**Half-lion half-dog statues:** Aiko passes a local shrine (p. 39). The half-lion half-dog statues are Chinese lion dogs (*komainu*), which often appear as guardian figures at or near the entrance to shrines or temples. The “red gate” is a torii, which is a tall gate under which you pass when you enter the grounds of a shrine. The main building within a Shinto shrine houses the nature spirit of the shrine. The image below is a large torii at the Fushimi Inari Taisha (Shrine) in Kyoto.



Fushimi Inari Taisha, Kyoto (author's photo)

**Arranged marriages:** These are not quite what Americans would think. In modern Japan, a family would approach a matchmaker about finding a potential marriage partner for their son or daughter. The matchmaker would provide some photos and descriptions of various possibilities, and then the son or daughter would decide whether they were interested in meeting one of these people. If the couple hit it off, they would continue to date and might become engaged. In the past, an arranged marriage might have been more the decision of the family heads rather than between the couple (as was the case with the grandmother in the story). In contemporary Japan, couples also meet the same way that they do in the U.S., without using the matchmaker.

**Adoption:** Also mentioned in the book is the adoption of a man into a woman's family. The type of adoption that Americans are familiar with is not the custom in Japan. Rather, when a family does not have a male heir to pass on the family name or take up the family occupation, a young man who marries the eldest daughter of the house will often legally adopt the girl's family name. This type of adoption is centuries old and was used to maintain a male head of a business or household. The practice still occurs today.

**Laundry:** There are both washers and dryers in Japan, but typically only washers are used. Laundry is then hung up to dry indoors or outside in the open air. There are all sorts of poles and other articles used for hanging laundry from balconies or in the garden.



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**Shikoku pilgrimage:** the pilgrimage site mentioned on page 59 is one of 88 Buddhist temples that are part of the Shikoku pilgrimage. Devoted pilgrims usually wear special clothing, but one can also walk part or all of the route without doing so. The full route, if walked in its entirety, can take several months.

**Otani yaki (Otani ware):** Japan has many regional specialties, such as variations in teas, ceramics, cloth, and items made of wood. Otani pottery, mentioned on page 67, is a representative ceramic of Shikoku.

**Treatment of Guests:** Aiko is uncomfortable with the way her family hovers over her and prevents her from going about by herself. But in Japan, hospitality is very important, and that means making sure the guest is not inconvenienced or has to go anywhere alone. To an American, this can seem stifling; to a Japanese, this is just good manners.

**Bowing:** Bowing is a very important sign of respect in Japan. You keep your back straight as you bow, head slightly lowered, and hands either at the side or crossed in front of you. There are even different levels of bowing; a teacher or boss receives a deeper bow than a colleague at work or a casual acquaintance, for example. Quick shallow bows are common when acquaintances meet in the street.

**Japanese Words:** there are too many Japanese words to include in this essay but a few common ones that students enjoy learning include:

*Ohayō gozaimasu* [oHIO\_GO\_ZAI\_MAH\_suh] Good morning (said before 11:00 a.m.)  
*Konnichi wa* [KOH\_KNEE\_CHEE\_wah] Good day (said after 11:00 a.m. and before evening)  
*Gomen nasai* [go\_MEN\_NAH\_sigh\_ee] Excuse me or an apology (this phrase typically of western Japan)

*Arigatoo gozaimasu* [ah\_REE\_GAH\_toe\_go\_ZAI\_MAH\_suh] thank you

*Hai* [HA\_ee; pronounced like the greeting "hi" in English] yes; also used as a response to a teacher asking if you are present

*Tadaima* [tah\_DIE\_EE\_mah] I'm home! I'm back! I've just arrived!

**Author:** Brenda G. Jordan, former University of Pittsburgh NCTA Director  
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