



# Culture Notes

## *Temple Alley Summer*

by Sachiko Kashiwaba

Illustrated by Miho Satake (Yonder)  
Restless Books, 2021

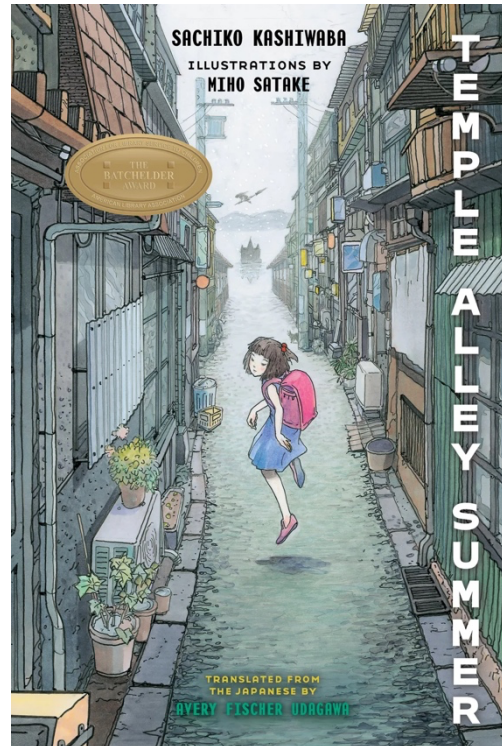
Translated by Avery Fischer Udagawa  
Fiction, set in Japan

2021 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/Middle School Literature

These Culture Notes provide information on key terms from *Temple Alley Summer*:

### Yōkai

A broad term for mysterious phenomena in Japan, *yōkai* refers to a variety of spirits, entities, and even deities or demons that defy or typical natural phenomena and common perceptions of right and wrong. *Yōkai* are represented by many different types of beings; for example, *yōkai* can be fox spirits known as *kitsune* or turtle-like creatures known as *kappa*. Some *yōkai* take on even more unconventional forms, like the *kasa-obake*, which is often pictured as an umbrella with one eye and one leg. *Yōkai* can be tricksters or protectors. The term is also used to refer to deities and demons that are not associated with a specific Buddhist temple or Shinto shrine. *Yōkai* are prevalent in Japanese monster and ghost stories, including anime (*Spirited Away*, *Pom Poko*, *Yokai Watch*, etc.)



### Yūrei

Human ghosts, *yūrei* can take different forms depending on how they died or what brought them back to haunt the world of the living. Typical features associated with *yūrei* are a white kimono, long black hair, and powers associated either with a particular curse or the place or person they are haunting. Most closely analogous to the Western concept of ghosts, *yūrei* usually haunt a person or place out of revenge, manipulating the area around them to drive their victim insane or to right the wrongs they experienced while they were alive.



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### **Black Cat (*Maneki Neko, Kuro Neko, Bakeneko, etc.*)**

The black cat in *Temple Alley Summer* is reminiscent of the distinct ways in which cats take on supernatural significance within Japanese folklore. Cats can take on many good and bad spiritual forms, just like foxes (*kitsune*) and raccoon dogs (*tanuki*). As *maneki neko* or *kuro neko*, they are seen as a sign of good luck or a messenger from the spirit world. While the former are usually portrayed as white and the latter as black—the Japanese word *kuro* means black—they are generally seen as cat spirits that protect against evil. Cat spirits can be quite powerful, with one type known as the *bakeneko* able to create zombies, speak, and shape-shift. These are only a few of the many ways that cats take on power and symbolism as *yōkai* throughout Japanese cultural history.

### **Jizō Statues**

The bodhisattva Jizō is revered in Japan as a compassionate being who delayed his own enlightenment to help save other beings from suffering and ensure they do not end up in hell after they died. This has led Jizō to take on a different type of significance in Japanese spirituality, where he is seen primarily as a protector of the souls of children who died, including those who died during pregnancy or childbirth (the latter being known as “water children,” or *mizuko*). To this end, Jizō statues can be seen holding small pinwheels or wearing red bibs, hats and small coats that grieving parents dress them in for protection. This is seen as a way for the Jizō statues to guide the souls safely to the afterlife and protect them from any *yōkai* or *yūrei* who may mean harm along the way. Stone statues of Jizō can be found throughout Japan, often at roadsides.

### **Home Altar (*Butsudan/Kamidana*)**

Most traditional Japanese households have both Buddhist and Shinto home altars. The Buddhist altar (*butsudan*) is focused on reverence for the family’s ancestors. The Shinto shrine (*kamidana*) is usually located in the kitchen and is believed to bring good luck to the household. The frequency of offerings on these home altars may depend on the religiosity of the household.



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### ***Sandō***

Alleys or roads approaching a Buddhist temple or Shinto shrine (*sandō*) are considered liminal spaces. Acting both as a commercial hub for economic activity near temples and shrines and as a passageway for pilgrims and visitors to switch their mindsets from the secular to the sacred as they approach the temple or shrine, *sandō* are an integral part of temple and shrine culture in Japan. The setting in the book, *Kimyo Temple Alley*, corresponds to temple alleys across Japan that have historically served as locations for street stalls that cater to pilgrims. One of the best-known temple alleys in Japan today is Nishi Sandō near Asakusa Temple in Tokyo. Not only does this area offer items such as incense and prayer beads associated with the Buddhist faith and practice, but also small bakeries that offer traditional Japanese treats like *dango mochi* on a skewer and even modern amenities like McDonalds.

### **Buddhist Temple Cemeteries**

Buddhism is closely associated with funerary rites in Japan. Graveyards are always attached to Buddhist temple complexes. These cemeteries function as sacred spaces where families pay their respects during major holidays or festivals such as Obon in August. Cemeteries in Japan are not only viewed as places of spiritual contemplation, but areas where spirits may persist to dwell after death.

### **Summer Ghost Stories**

In an inversion of Western beliefs surrounding the supernatural, in Japan and other East Asian societies, the time for ghost stories and otherworldly visitations is during the summer months. In Buddhist traditions that spread throughout Japan over the course of several centuries, people would gather in halls to share ghost stories, blowing out lamps one by one until the growing darkness summoned the spirits they were swapping stories about. Sharing ghost stories during the sweltering heat of summer is believed to give people the “chills” to cool them down. This tradition of summer ghost stories has had a deep effect on Japanese culture and media, influencing poetry, manga, anime, and live-action film (such as *Ring*).



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### Summer Vacation for Students

The story of *Temple Valley Summer* corresponds with the time in Japanese school life when students are on summer vacation. The Japanese school year follows a trimester model, with one of the times students are off being between the end of July and the end of August. This summer vacation corresponds nicely with the celebration of Obon, a Buddhist festival honoring the dead throughout the country. In the context of this story, the elements that come together to comprise the crux of the plot—the temple alley, the ghost story, an old temple with the power to bring the dead back to life—would be seen as potent storytelling material naturally associated with the summertime.

### Obon (Festival honoring ancestral spirits)

In mid-August, Japanese families travel to their hometowns to celebrate the spirits of their ancestors, making offerings at their graves and participating in festival events. These customs and rites have become codified into the celebration of the three-day festival known as Obon or Bon. Buddhist views on the relationship between the land of the living and the land of the dead mark Obon as a time when spirits come back to pay a visit to the land of the living. At Buddhist temples, it is also seen as a time to quell the spirits of hungry ghosts—restless spirits that can never find satisfaction or peace. Beyond the specific religious aspects of Obon, the festival is seen as a time for families to gather at the end of summer and decompress before the school year starts up again after the summer break.

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