



Curriculum Connections

Temple Alley Summer

by Sachiko Kashiwaba

Illustrated by Miho Satake (Yonder)
Restless Books, 2021

Translated by Avery Fischer Udagawa
Fiction, set in Japan

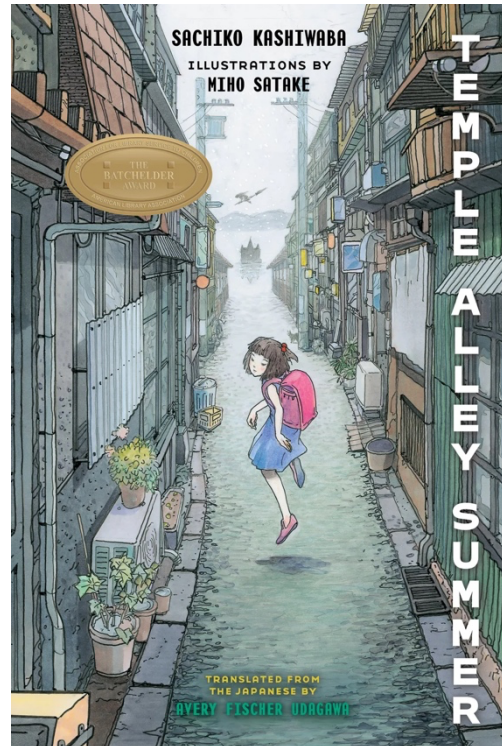
2021 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/Middle School Literature

Summary

Temple Alley Summer is a book about friendship, second chances, and the supernatural. We start off being introduced to our main character and narrator, Kazu. Kazu sees the ghost of a girl near his house, which upends his understanding of what's real and possible in his life. As he investigates, he notices that the same girl—Akari—attends his school. Everyone can see her, but they don't know her as the ghost that Kazu saw one night. They think that Akari has been their friend and classmate for years. As Kazu and Akari investigate how she has managed to return to the land of the living, he discovers that where he lives used to be known as *Kimyo Temple Alley*—a place fabled for having a temple that could bring the dead back to life. As they uncover the secrets of the temple and Akari's past, they gain the help of Kazu's odd neighbor, Ms. Minakami, in unraveling the reasons why any of this happened in the first place. While Kazu wants to help Akari to fully live her new life, others want the power of the temple to stay a guarded secret. As the two work together to solve the mystery, their friendship deepens.

Analysis

Temple Alley Summer is an engaging book for middle school students, especially those in 7th and 8th grade. Despite the supernatural elements, the book focuses on themes that are relevant to many young teenagers, such as friendship, home, and feeling lost and disoriented when people suddenly enter or leave our lives. In addition, cultural and supernatural elements may pique their attention or remind them of manga or anime they enjoyed in the past.





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Cultural and Historical Themes

When it comes to cultural and historical themes, *Temple Alley Summer* presents a wealth of material and possibilities for elaboration in a text geared towards middle-school readers. The story touches on Japanese ghost stories and a general fascination with the supernatural, including references to Buddhist cosmology. In Japan, the barrier between the world of the living and that of the dead is believed to be thin, something that persists time and again in stories about ghosts and apparitions (*yūrei*), and the power that certain mysterious phenomena and manifestations (*yōkai*) have such as foxes (*kitsune*) and raccoon dogs (*tanuki*). While Japanese folklore is relatively easy to introduce to students, Buddhist cosmology is much more complicated. However, emphasis on Buddhism's influence on Japanese life can still be elaborated upon in direct ways to allow students to understand the rich spiritual heritage of certain Japanese practices and beliefs. The story-within-the-story, *The Moon Is on the Left*, introduces the reader to aspects of melancholic storytelling that focus on the mixed-bag nature of life that is endemic to Japanese forms of literature (*mono no aware*). All of these elements taken together—and filtered through the main theme of friendship that characterizes the relationship between the characters Kazu and Akari—give an instructor ample opportunity to take these new and fascinating elements their students may be encountering for the first time and help them better grasp what makes other cultures unique and fascinating. Here are some of these cultural and historical elements explained in a bit more detail:

- A) **Yōkai** 妖怪 (pronounced: YOO-kah-ee): *Yōkai* refers to the entire supernatural realm of ghosts and demons. Within this larger category are all sorts of manifestations and phenomena, from human ghosts to inanimate objects that come alive.

- B) **Yūrei** 幽霊 (pronounced: YOU-ray): A *yūrei* is a human ghost, often female. If a person dies violently or dies while experiencing emotional angst, their spirit is trapped between this world and the next. The *yūrei* might be the crying ghost of a young woman who had been abused by her master, for example. More typically, a *yūrei* is an angry spirit, bent on revenge for wrongs that have not been righted. She is usually depicted in Japanese art



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with long hair, a white robe, and no feet. She floats in the air or her face might appear in a paper lantern, for example.

- C) ***Mono no Aware*** 物の哀れ (literally “the pathos of things”): A bittersweet appreciation for the fact that nothing lasts forever, *mono no aware* within Japanese literature and folktales highlights the inescapable realities of life. Whether through metaphor, figurative language, or concrete plot developments, Japanese literature is suffused with the basic truth that life contains pain as well as joy. In the context of this story, the character of Akari experiences the most acute forms of *mono no aware*. Kazu feels a sense of bittersweetness over how things develop near the conclusion of the novel.
- D) **Japanese Buddhism:** Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the mid-sixth century through Korea. It introduced new teachings, deities, and cosmologies to the Japanese sensibility. Mahayana Buddhism offered a particularly rich tapestry of beliefs. Japanese Buddhism expanded various traditions and strains of thought, especially during the Kamakura period (1192–1333) and afterwards. As Mahayana Buddhism developed in Japan, focus was put on celestial beings, life after death in the Pure Land, and the potency of sacred scriptures and prayers. In short, Japanese Buddhism had particular views that contribute to the specific ways in which Kashiwaba refers to the supernatural in *Temple Alley Summer*.

Relevance and Reflection: Friendships and the Built Environment

Temple Alley Summer will resonate with middle-school readers regarding the challenges and discoveries they are starting to make as they become more aware of their personal lives and the world around them. On the one hand, the relationship between the two main characters Kazu and Akari highlights how friendships and relationships can start to deepen and develop as students grow older. Even if friendships are relatively new, they can still contain an inner life of hard-earned victories and unexpected endings. In



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In addition to the friendship, Kimyo Temple Alley itself—the built environment—represents both the past and reflects how the alley is used in the present. The past and present of Kimyo Temple Alley contributes to the start and development of Kuzo and Akari’s friendship and gives it what could be called an animating purpose. Students can explore how their own friendships are influenced by their cities, neighborhoods, and the way people interact in and among them in meaningful ways.

Appropriate Grade Levels

Temple Alley Summer is best used with middle-school students in 7th and 8th grade. The book is accessible and uses easy-to-understand vocabulary while challenging the reader to understand core concepts and ideas from a different cultural perspective within the context of an engaging mystery. This text provides an introduction to higher level reading concepts (character POV, the reliability of narration, and more) to better prepare students for the transition to 9th grade, where they will be asked to read denser and more complicated material.

Activities

- a. **Reading Activity Setting Map** – Use a map alongside the reading of the text. Students could be asked to create the map as they read the text together or as a form of review. This exercise helps students to expand their imagination by visualizing scenes from the novel. Students could use the map activity to draw out Kimyo Temple Alley, label important locations within the temple alley and around it and give students a chance to draw out old temple locations. In this way, the novel starts to become a much more real and lived-in place for the student as they continue to read the plot and learn more about where particular scenes take place.
- b. **Friendship Analysis** – A T-chart handout could be used to compare Kazu and Akari at the beginning and end of the story. How do the characters change throughout the course of the story, and how does the relationship between Kazu and Akari evolve? Special emphasis should be



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placed on students developing comprehension questions and writing down key details and moments from the story that relate to friendship.

- c. **Visual Arts Project** – This is a creative arts project that students can do either individually or in groups of two, ideally in an art class. Students could select a theme or symbol from the novel—the temple, the alleyway, ghosts, friendship, light, summer, etc.—and explore it visually. Students might also choose to illustrate a key moment from the story, which could give them a deeper understanding of what it means to be a friend in trying times.

- d. **Cultural Comparison of Beliefs About the Supernatural** – Encourage students to explore the differences between how we in the West view supernatural phenomena versus how Japanese do. By looking at how the characters in *Temple Alley Summer* remember the dead and communicate with the supernatural, and then comparing it to how we think about these things, students will see the stark differences between the two traditions. This cultural comparison can then be shared through oral presentations and possibly even through accompanying material, like a short essay, worksheet, poster, trifold, or other format.

Common Core Standards

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.K.1

With prompting and support, ask and answer questions about key details in a text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.K.2

With prompting and support, retell familiar stories, including key details.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.K.3

With prompting and support, identify characters, settings, and major events in a story.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.K.4

Ask and answer questions about unknown words in a text.

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CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.K.5

Recognize common types of texts (including storybooks, poems, and more).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.K.6

With prompting and support, name the author and illustrator of a story and define the role of each in telling the story.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.K.7

With prompting and support, describe the relationship between illustrations and the story in which they appear (e.g., what moment in a story an illustration depicts).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.K.9

With prompting and support, compare and contrast the adventures and experiences of characters in familiar stories.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.K.10

Actively engage in group reading activities with purpose and understanding.

Literature and Media Connections

To highlight the differences between ghost stories in Japan and the West, the literature and media connections for *Temple Alley Summer* could include a compare-and-contrast assignment with a *Goosebumps* book. Students could also be introduced to manga (Japanese comic books) or anime (Japanese animation) that highlight ghosts and monsters in ways that would help students better understand how these types of characters are regarded in a different cultural context. A great and easy-to-access manga text for the middle school reading level would be Shigeru Mizuki's *GeGeGe no Kitaro*. This book features the main character Kitaro with a rotating cast of Japanese ghosts and monsters. Akari in *Temple Alley Summer* is a spirit with feelings and motivations that make her seem just as human as everyone else around her. Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* could be shown to the class, given how both stories portray girls with connections to the spirit world. Also, Sachiko Kashiwaba's other book—*The Village Beyond the Mist*—is cited as an important influence on *Spirited Away*.

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