



Culture Notes

When the Sakura Bloom

by Narisa Togo

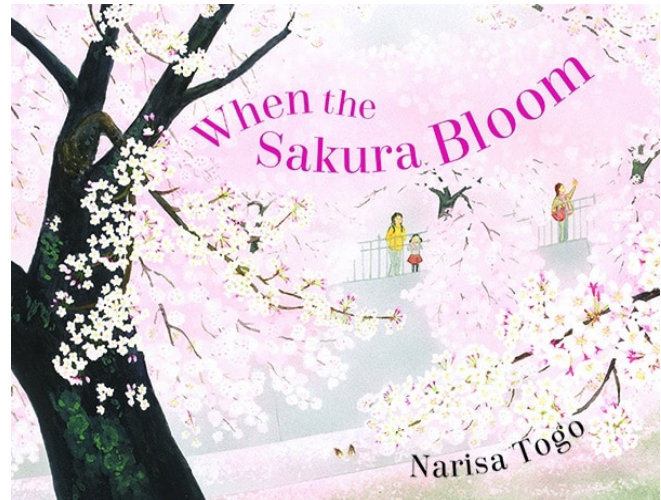
Berbay Publishing, 2022

Fiction, set in Japan

2022 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Children's Literature

1) Connection to Nature in Japanese Culture

When the Sakura Bloom revolves around the annual blooming of the Sakura (cherry) trees and the social events associated with them—reflecting the deep connection Japanese culture has with the natural world. Japanese society in the twenty-first century is highly urbanized, yet agrarian cycles and Shinto celebrations continue to figure prominently in daily life. Even in Tokyo, Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples can be found in parks and wooded areas. This predilection for sacred spaces to be set apart in natural environments is also incorporated into festivals and holidays.



2) Shinto Festivals & Celebrations in Japanese Culture

Shinto (“the way of the gods”) is the indigenous belief system. It is usually described in academic terms as an animistic tradition; this refers to the Shinto belief that every aspect of the natural world has an animating spirit, or *kami* (pronounced: KAH-me). These *kami* are believed to pervade the natural world, with certain natural features that have a striking presence—whether it is an ancient tree or an imposing mountain peak—being set aside for worship in a distinct way. *Kami* can even be historical personages who are associated with certain miracles or acts attributed to them by people who think they have intervened after their death. The role of *kami* is often limited to the physical spaces where they reside and are worshipped, through festivals and other celebrations.

Festivals (*matsuri*) and other traditional celebrations are an essential part of Japanese culture. During festivals, many local people join in, participating in parades that incorporate the deities of the Shinto shrine or Buddhist temple. Portable shrines (*mikoshi*) are often carried in these parades. Street stalls are set up in the



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neighborhoods around local shrines. Some festivals are seasonal celebrations, as described in *When the Sakura Bloom*. Sakura and Hanami ("flower viewing") festivals are an entrenched part of Japanese culture, closely identified with the height of spring, in tandem with other festivals and celebrations connected to the pre-modern agrarian calendar of Japan.

3) Terms Mentioned in the Book

- a. **Sakura** – Japan's iconic cherry trees known for their soft pink-and-white blossoms. Sakura trees are one of the many national symbols of Japan, with the brevity of their blossoming period being associated with impermanence, friendship, and the beauty of spring. Sakura blossoms last for as little as five days, and Japanese news outlets follow the Sakura season—from bud to full flower—throughout Japan.
- b. **Takoyaki** – A street food found at many Japanese festivals and celebrations. Best described as ball-shaped dumplings with a crispy exterior and a gooey interior, they are filled with minced octopus (*tako*), tempura scraps, pickled ginger, and green onion. Usually topped with bonito flakes, mayonnaise, and dried seaweed, takoyaki serves as a culinary mainstay of festival culture across the country.



Sakura in bloom in Shinjuku Gyoen National Garden (Wikimedia Commons)

4) Inferences within the Text

- a. While the location is not stated, the first city that elementary students may have heard of is Tokyo. Tokyo is a megalopolis on the East Coast of Japan, formerly known as Edo. It became the capital of Japan during the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1867). In the subsequent centuries, the Tokyo-Yokohama urban area has become one of



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the largest in the world, with an estimated population of 37–41 million people in 2025. In this highly urbanized and densely populated environment, Tokyo parks and other natural features are highly prized. For cherry blossom viewing in Tokyo, the most famous destinations are Ueno Park and Shinjuku Gyoen, along with some riverside spots like the Meguro River near Nakameguro. Referring to Tokyo will help provide elementary students with an anchored place where they can explore more of the features of the text in projects and assignments.

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