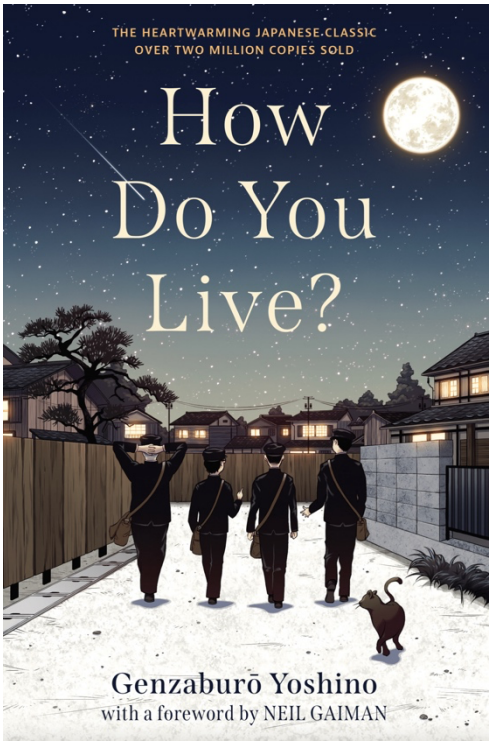
Culture Notes
How Do You Live?
by Genzaburō Yoshino
Translated by Bruno Navasky

Algonquin Yong Readers, 2021 **Fiction, set in Japan**

2021 Of Note, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/Middle School Literature



How Do You Live? is an English translation of a book long regarded as a classic in Japan, a book that Hayao Miyazaki called his favorite childhood book. The following are some cultural notes to give students a better understanding of the story.

1) Humanist Philosophy

Published in 1937, the novel is structured around interactions between the characters, conversations, and an exchange of letters that grapple with philosophical problems (either stated outright or through the parables that form the crux of most chapters). These philosophical problems usually question the nature of class, hierarchy, meaning, and motivation. All of these are hallmarks of humanist philosophy, which was introduced to Japan from Western Europe during the Meiji era (1868–1912). Humanism is a set of philosophical ideas that place importance on the values at the core of the human condition. The author of *How Do You Live?* communicates a positive message about human nature, the universality of the human condition, and the need to respect all forms of life.

2) Prewar Japan (Meiji, Taisho, and Showa eras)

The author wanted to include elements of humanist philosophy in his book to counteract the growth of nationalism, militarism, and imperialism in Japan in the 1930s.

Beginning in 1853–1954, when Commodore Matthew Perry of the U.S. Navy opened Japan's ports to international trade, the nation began to compete militarily with Western powers. During the three eras that followed—the Meiji era (1868–1912), the Taisho era (1912–1926), and the Showa era (1926–1989)—Japan adopted some elements of Western culture, political ideas, and new technologies. At the same time, Japan's imperial and military ambitions mirrored those of the European nations' powers and the United States.

Just as these nation-states used industry and armies to colonize land across the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia, Japan sought to exert its influence and presence in China and Korea. To this end, Japan colonized Korea (1910–1945) and invaded Manchuria, which it fought for in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905. During this period, Japan advanced rapidly in science and technology as well as military might, embracing new technologies such as the steam locomotive, gas lighting, photography, and more. At the same time, ultranationalism was growing in some circles. During this same period, Western European nations experienced the growth of both democratic representation and fascism. During the 1930s, Japanese officials embraced a militaristic government and imperial ambitions, eventually aligning with the Axis Powers, and specifically the Nazi Regime of Adolf Hitler. While Japan's imperial ambitions eventually led to their defeat in the Pacific Theater of World War II, certain aspects of prewar culture still live on in Japan among some segments of the population, such as prejudice against people of Korean descent and views of superiority regarding Japan's "unique" cultural sensibilities.

3) Modernization and Industrialization in Japan during the Meiji Restoration (1898)

Many of the concepts that inspire conversations in *How Do You Live?* are not drawn from Japanese culture or philosophy. In fact, American readers could be forgiven if they miss the fact that the novel takes place in Japan at all. The focus on Western philosophical ideas and historical figures reflects the social and political shifts that occurred with the Meiji Restoration, which ended the Tokugawa shogunate and restored power to the emperor. Japan sought to rapidly modernize the military and the economy so that the country could compete with imperial powers such as England and the U.S. Japanese leaders were determined not to become a vassal state of a more powerful country or be mired in poverty. These Westernizing efforts were vast and comprehensive, creating in the span of several years new systems that drew heavily from the West but emphasized Japanese values.

4) Tofu and Class in Japan

Tofu was once mainly eaten by Buddhist monastics and commoners in Japan but is now used in many popular dishes. In 1930s Tokyo, the manufacturing and consumption of

tofu was primarily associated with the "lower class." In Chapter 4: A Friend in Need, one of Copper's friends is mocked for smelling like tofu (pp. 34–37), only for Copper to learn that his friend works in his family's tofu shop to help support his relatives. Yoshino uses this story as a gateway to understanding class stratification in Japan.

5) Geta

Geta are a type of traditional Japanese footwear. The wooden "teeth," known as *ha*, elevate the foot and support the base of the sandal. Geta were initially developed for use in snowy or swampy areas. They are still worn at summer festivals with cotton kimono (*yukata*). Sumo wrestlers, geisha, and other traditional entertainers wear geta. In recent years, geta have become a fashion statement, paired with everything from jeans to designer outfits.


Pair of geta, Wikimedia Commons

6) Napoleon

Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821) was a military genius during the French Revolution who rose from relative obscurity to Emperor of France (1804–1814). Napoleon conquered most of continental Europe during his reign; he was a great tactician who quashed rebellions in every corner of Europe. The Japanese fascination with Napoleon began with reports from Dutch traders at Deshima (also known as Dejima) during the nineteenth century. An artificial island built in Nagasaki harbor, for 200 years Deshima served as Japan's sole conduit for Western trade and cultural exchange under the shogunate's isolationist policy (*sakoku*). In the Meiji era (1868–1912), Japan modernized, rapidly absorbing knowledge from the West, but it was also a period of increased military and imperial ambitions. The Japanese preoccupation with Napoleonic motifs can be seen in the uniforms and military academies developed in Japan during this period.

7) Japanese School Culture and Hierarchy (*Senpai-Kohai* system)

In *How Do You Live?* Yoshino highlights both the positives and negatives of Japanese school culture in terms of both friendship and bullying. In highlighting these seminal experiences of being a Japanese high school student, Yoshino introduces the reader to the subtle dynamics of school culture in Japan. Better known as the *senpai-kohai system,* this school culture is an integral part of how Japanese institutions operate. In this system, younger individuals are expected to show respect and deference to older individuals who are their seniors. Based in Confucian values, the *senpai-kohai system* was dominant by the 1930s in Japanese schools. It was meant to foster a mentor-mentee relationship where skills and knowledge are transferred from knowledgeable individuals to the less-worldly younger generation. As Yoshino shows though—especially in Chapter 2: A Brave Friend—the *senpai-kohai system* can be abused, creating situations where bullying can occur. Yoshino highlights the abuses of this system in a school setting while also highlighting how the *senpai-kohai* system can work well, as exemplified in the Napoleon conversation the main character Copper has with the older sister of his wealthiest friend.

Author: Matthew Kizior, M.Ed., Central Catholic High School, Pittsburgh, PA
2026

To learn more about the Freeman Book Awards, please visit:
www.nctasia.org/freeman-book-awards/