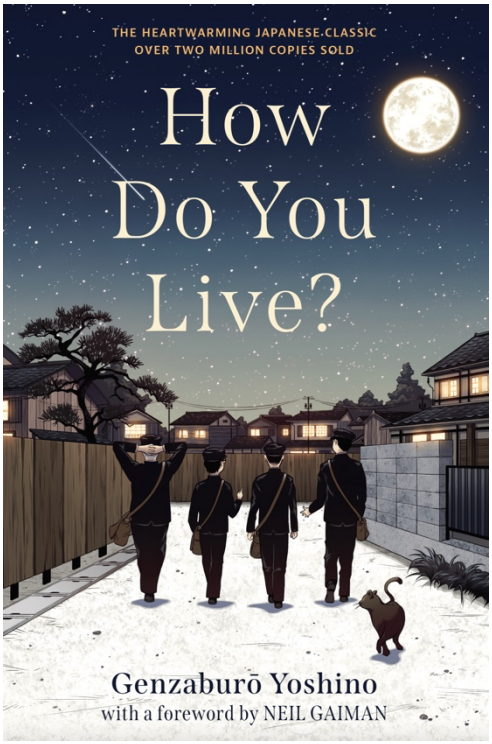
Curriculum Connections
How Do You Live?
by Genzaburō Yoshino
Translated by Bruno Navasky

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

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



Summary

How Do You Live? is a beloved classic in Japan, first published in 1937. It tells the story of a young man growing up in Tokyo before World War II. The protagonist, Jun'ichi Honda, is nicknamed Copper after Nicolaus Copernicus. We witness Copper navigating the social dynamics of his high school, discussing interesting topics with his friends, and growing in wisdom. Copper faces many challenges and learns profound lessons as he goes through life. He comes to understand what he truly values as he slowly but surely becomes more confident in being his own person.

1) Analysis

Using a dialectical model that draws on Western philosophy, science, and history, the novel explores what it was like to be a young man growing up in 1930s Japan. The appearance of Western historical figures in the book—Napoleon Bonaparte, Nicolaus Copernicus, Blaise Pascal, and more—reflects how, since the opening of Japan to the West at the beginning of the Meiji period (1868–1912), Japan had been absorbing Western knowledge. By the early twentieth century, especially after Japan defeated Russia in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), Japan saw itself as equal to Western nations in terms of technological advancements and military might.

Yoshino integrates Japanese and Western philosophical ideas in his exploration of the human condition. Some of the themes highlighted in the book are worth noting and discussing in the classroom:

- **Moral Growth and Personal Responsibility:** Copper corresponds with his uncle regarding ethical issues raised by various events. We are shown how Copper internalizes the lessons of his life experiences and integrates them with the philosophy and ethics he learns from his uncle.

- **Friendship and Loyalty:** The book explores the nature of the human condition and connects it to the personal relationships Copper has with his friends Uragawa, Mizutani, and Kitami. Through conversations, situations, and even fights with other students, the boys start to understand what it means to stick together as friends and the importance of the bonds that bind people together, whether it is simply as friends or more deeply—as chosen family.

- **Independent Thinking:** Copper's uncle provides elucidating thoughts and reflections through his letters to his nephew. He seeks to ground Copper's experiences and trials through the universal lens of human nature. Through this writing device, Yoshino is urging the reader as much as he is urging Copper to be a critical thinker, someone who reflects on their actions and does not take their circumstances for granted.

- **Empathy and Human Connection:** Copper's friendships and his uncle's exhortations provide a glimpse into a reflective worldview that asks people to learn from their mistakes and to believe in the best of human nature. While we are all fallible, we can learn from our mistakes. We can seek to understand each other, and to work together toward a better world, no matter who we are. Closer to the end of the novel, Copper experiences a crisis of conscience following a fight at school where he does not support his friends in the way he should have, or they expected. This is highlighted specifically in the chapter entitled "On Human Troubles, Mistakes, and Greatness," where Copper's uncle tells us it is important to learn from both our successes and our hardships. Embracing empathy and connection with others helps us to learn truths about ourselves and the world that we would otherwise neglect to face head-on. This is a timeless message for all young men and women.

2) Cultural and Historical Themes

Conceived as a guide to modern thought and ethics for a Japanese society that was already involved in the geopolitical machinations that led to World War II, Yoshino's novel promotes critical analysis and deep empathy, an approach that would not have been endorsed by the militaristic government in power at the time. In this regard, the novel is an embodiment of the cultural theme of deep thinking and reflection that—

while filtered mainly through the topics of Western philosophy and history—have deep roots in the core Confucian and Buddhist values of Japan.
In How Do You Live? self-reflection and critical inquiry are not pursued through specifically Japanese concepts, but instead—possibly to highlight more universal values—through scientific and historical concepts. Yoshino devotes whole chapters to having characters discuss historical figures such as Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821) in what can be easily interpreted as an effort to place Japan within the broader context of human history. By focusing on historical figures, Yoshino is attempting to shape young Japanese men to be critical thinkers who do not pander to government ideologies like *kokkashugi* (state nationalism), which was increasingly dominant in the 1930s when the book was written.

To understand the book's subject matter and broader themes, students will need some knowledge of prewar Japan, including Taisho democracy (1905–1932), the rise of ultranationalism and State Shinto, Japanese colonialism, and more. The type of humanism Yoshino is promoting through his book stands in stark contrast to what his target audience may have been hearing and seeing in the form of government propaganda at the time of its publication.

3) Relevance and Reflection: Politics and Humanity

Yoshino first published *How Do You Live?* in 1937, during a period when Japan was an imperial power that controlled Taiwan (1895–1945), Korea (1910–1945), and Manchuria (1932–1945). Japan sought to establish itself as an Asian power that could stand toe-to-toe with the Western powers. Between the May 15 Incident of 1932, a failed coup d'état that saw the assassination of the Japanese Prime Minister, and the February 26 Incident of 1936, another failed coup, the rule of law and the growth of democracy was slowly giving way to a more militaristic nation. In September 1940 Japan signed the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy and entered World War II. Drawing attention to this history helps readers to understand the climate in which this novel was first published.

Taken outside of the historical and sociopolitical context of its era, *How Do You Live?* appears to be simply a philosophical guide to steer young people in the correct direction. In the midst of the political upheaval in 1930s Japan, though, Yoshino's work proposes that we must be in touch with our shared humanity and our common

universal values, whether that is in the context of four young men learning what it means to be friends in Japanese society or having larger discussions about what it means to confront the fragility of our own human nature in order to be better people in general.

Reflecting on the historical context of the novel helps us to be better positioned to use it in a contemporary classroom. The violent upheavals in the international world order that we are currently living through share some similarities with the first several decades of the twentieth century. Land wars in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, the rise of autocratic leaders embracing reactionary politics, polarized political environments that have led to violence, and worse. In the context of the current political climate and the changes students are witnessing today, it is important for teachers to use this text in a way that emphasizes the universal experience of humanity during times of uncertainty and upheaval. *How Do You Live?* can encourage critical thinking and self-reflection today in the same way it was designed to do in the time it was written.

4) Appropriate Grade Levels

How Do You Live? is appropriate for students in grades 8–10. The philosophical, scientific, and historical content of the book presents a unique challenge to a teacher who may want to use the book in their English or History class. The novel sets young readers up for understanding the world around them, and because of this central conceit, could be used with older and more higher-level readers to facilitate critical thinking and Socratic discussions.

5) Activities

Given the hefty nature of the book (288 pages) and the intensity of the historical time period it is responding to writ large, the type of activities that would best supplement this book within the high school classroom are the following:

- **Research Paper/Project:** Students who are reading the novel would greatly benefit from being more aware of the historical and political events that occurred before, during, and after the publication of *How Do You Live?* Whether this activity is done as an individual research paper or a group research project is up to the discretion of the teacher. Subjects can be general (Taisho democracy, ultranationalism, colonialism, etc.) or more specific (focusing on a political leader

of historical incident, for example). No matter how the teacher assigns this subject matter, the emphasis should be placed upon students furthering their general understanding of the circumstances the book is responding to in the context of its own time.

- **Socratic Discussion:** Another option the teacher can use as a type of assessment throughout the reading of the novel is having students engage in Socratic discussions of the topics raised by the novel. These discussions could also be conducted after the whole class has finished the novel. The students should prepare questions that they can pose to each other. These questions and/or answers can focus on the specific events of the book itself, or the larger thematic and philosophical elements that comprise the core of the book's message.

6) 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.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.K.5
Recognize common types of texts (for example, storybooks, poems).

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 (for example, 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.

1) Literature and Media Connections

Hayao Miyazaki's *The Boy and the Heron*: Entitled *How Do You Live?* in Japan, Miyazaki's film is an ode to Yoshino's novel, given that it was one of his favorite books as he was growing up. While the subject matter and plot of the novel and the film do not contain any of the same characters or setting, the question at the heart of both remains the same: How does a person live in this world amid conflict and grief? By focusing on this central question, Miyazaki intentionally puts himself in a dialogue with Yoshino, answering in the way he knows best, through the tools, medium, and creativity he is used to expressing through his films. By viewing Miyazaki's more fantastical take on topics like those found in Yoshino's novel, students would expand their understanding. Using the film in the classroom would also help students understand that the concept of "text" applies to films as well as books.

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