



Culture Notes

Pearl: A Graphic Novel

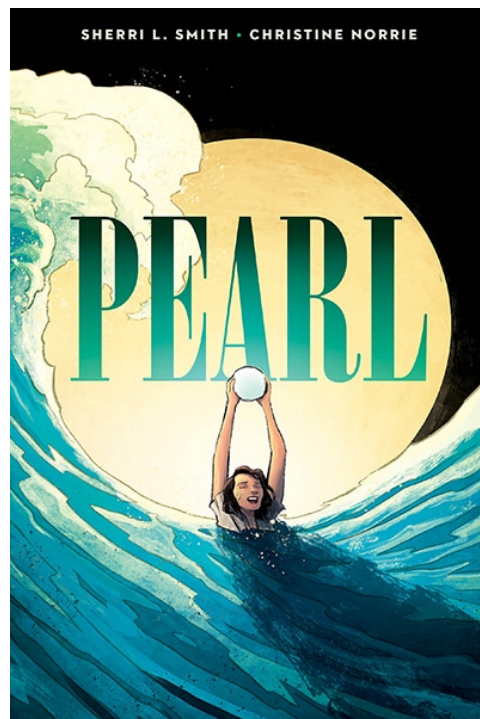
by Sherri L. Smith
Illustrated by Christine Norrie

Graphix, 2024

Fiction, set in Japan

2024 Of Note, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/Middle and High School Graphic Novels

This graphic novel tells the story of Amy, a Japanese American girl who travels from her home in Hawai'i to Japan to visit her ailing great-grandmother on the eve of the Pacific War (1941–1945). She is subsequently “stranded” in Japan when the war breaks out, unable to return to Hawai'i. The book captures and explores an experience that is receiving more attention in recent years through memoirs and historical research: the experiences of both American-born and Japanese-born civilians caught in the enemy nation when the U.S. declared war following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. These stories (both factual and fictional) offer a rich resource for classroom exploration of important topics of national and global history, WWII history, citizenship, and national and cultural identity.



This short graphic novel introduces many significant topics quickly, largely through images, with minimal written explanation or context. These topics include wartime and postwar conscripted service, Japanese American incarceration, Okinawa/Ryūkyū history, Japanese immigration to Hawai'i, Occupation policies, the atomic bombings and their aftermath, and traditional pearl divers.

As fiction, the story takes creative license, particularly in the convergence of so many events in the life of one individual. While this gives teachers the opportunity to explore many topics with students, it also raises a significant discussion topic of fictional plot devices vs. historical authenticity. This issue does not discredit the story but does warrant additional background and the dedication of some classroom time to considering questions of accuracy.

Providing background for all the issues introduced would mean spending a significant amount of time on this book. As Josh Foster writes in his insightful Curriculum Connections for *Pearl* (<https://www.nctasia.org/award/pearl-a-graphic-novel/>):



Culture Notes

Pearl: A Graphic Novel

by Sherri L. Smith
Illustrated by Christine Norrie

Graphix, 2024

Fiction, set in Japan

2024 Of Note, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/Middle and High School Graphic Novels

This book truly does require the teacher to have some interest in the cultural and historical context of the Pacific War. Although it can be read in under 45 minutes, the book should be explored over a much longer period of time.

Teachers with limited knowledge of the U.S. and Japan at war and Japanese American history should consult textbooks or short historical works to cover the history that is beyond the scope of NCTA Culture Notes. Here, we will focus on five topics essential to placing this novel in historical and cultural context. These topics were selected as likely to raise questions among students and possibly lead to misunderstandings without some additional background:

- The experiences of “strandees” in both Japan and the U.S. when war broke out
- *Yūrei*, ghosts in Japanese culture and folklore
- Transnational families and the role of filial piety in Japanese culture
- Conscripted workers in wartime Japan, 1941–1945 and “monitor girls”
- Coerced Americans and repatriation in Occupied Japan, 1945–1952

“Strandees”

In the context of *Pearl*, strandees is a term used to describe people who found themselves away from their country of citizenship and unable to return home at the outbreak of U.S.–Japan hostilities in late 1941. This was a reality on both sides of the Pacific. On U.S. soil, strandees were most commonly Japanese nationals in the United States on business or on family visits. In Japan, strandees may have been Japanese Americans (American citizens) visiting family, going to school, or doing business. And some were Americans of other ethnic backgrounds stranded while visiting or doing business. One source has documented that there were approximately 10,000 Nisei stranded in Japan when war began.

Amy is a Nisei (second-generation) Japanese American visiting her great-grandmother in Japan at the outbreak of war. Japanese American families in the U.S. often traveled back and forth, and it was not unusual for children to be sent to Japan over the summer to visit relatives or to spend time in Japanese schools. See Additional Resources for nonfiction accounts. ^[1]



Culture Notes

Pearl: A Graphic Novel

by Sherri L. Smith
Illustrated by Christine Norrie

Graphix, 2024

Fiction, set in Japan

2024 Of Note, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/Middle and High School Graphic Novels

Yūrei 幽霊 (Pronounced: YOU-ray)

Amy's great-grandmother is always depicted alongside a frightening, long-haired woman grabbing at her. This figure is a **yūrei**, analogous to the Western concept of a ghost. In Japanese folklore, when people die with strong, unresolved emotions, their spirits cannot move into the afterlife and find peace. They are trapped in the physical world as a **yūrei**, where they haunt particular people or places, trying to come to terms with the emotions and circumstances of their deaths. ^[ii] Many circumstances can lead to this suspended state, such as violent death, deep grief, failure to receive appropriate funerary rites, or intense emotional bonds that persist beyond death.

As Leo Baruda notes, "Yurei represent a more personal and tragic element of the supernatural. Their stories are usually deeply human, rooted in betrayal, loss, or injustice. They're not always evil, but they are nearly always suffering." ^[iii]

In *Pearl*, the **yūrei** gives the reader a chance to explore multiple themes, including family and cultural ties, memory, survival, and more.

Transnational families and the role of filial piety in Japanese culture

The premise that a young Japanese American would have been sent from the United States as a family representative to visit extended family in Japan is fundamental to the *Pearl* story. One question that readers might reasonably ask is whether a family would have sent a young teenage girl like Amy alone in the summer of 1941, when there was concern about hostilities between the two countries.

In contextualizing this plot line, it is useful to consider the transnational character of many Issei (first-generation immigrants) and Nisei families in the United States at that time, and to further consider the importance placed on filial piety.

In the early twentieth century, Japanese who immigrated to the United States often maintained strong family ties with parents, siblings, and extended families still in Japan. These families were transnational, identifying with both Japan and the United States.



Culture Notes

Pearl: A Graphic Novel

by Sherri L. Smith
Illustrated by Christine Norrie

Graphix, 2024

Fiction, set in Japan

2024 Of Note, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/Middle and High School Graphic Novels

Additionally, filial obligation and respect for elders were (and are) fundamental values in Japanese culture. Filial piety, stemming from Confucian philosophy, connotes the respect, obedience, and sense of duty children are expected to demonstrate towards their parents and ancestors. Filial values would have been particularly strong motivators for Amy's Issei parents. Their sense of duty and obligation, as well as strong emotional bonds to a grandparent, would have dictated that they should visit their dying relative. These cultural values would typically have been passed on to their children, even as they were growing up as American citizens.

Before December 1941, although diplomatic tensions were intensifying, civilian travel between the United States and Japan was routine. People traveled for business but also for family reasons, as noted above. A useful source for cases of transnational family travel between the United States and Japan during this period is the [Densho Digital Repositories](#) collection of personal histories.

While it may have been rare for someone as young as Amy to travel alone to Japan, it is not implausible. In Amy's family's case, visiting elderly or dying relatives would be considered an important family obligation. Ocean liners transported unaccompanied minors, with stewards or designated adults supervising them.

"Monitor Girls"

While the term "monitor girls" is used to describe a real situation depicted in *Pearl*, my research did not identify a Japanese term for this concept or verification of this term being applied to a category of foreigners working as intelligence gatherers as Amy was in this story.

That said, the "monitor girls" depicted in *Pearl* are most likely based on the stories of bilingual women used by the Japanese government to monitor English-language radio broadcasts from the United States and Britain. They would transcribe and translate news reports, summarize military and political information, and help evaluate Allied propaganda. While *Pearl* accurately depicts Amy as having little choice in wartime Japan, the level of coercion for this work fell along a continuum from pressured acceptance to involuntary compulsory service. The situation changed over time during the war, as well as by location and circumstance.



Culture Notes

Pearl: A Graphic Novel

by Sherri L. Smith
Illustrated by Christine Norrie

Graphix, 2024

Fiction, set in Japan

2024 Of Note, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/Middle and High School Graphic Novels

One historical example of a Nisei serving as a translator is Iva Toguri D'Aquino, the most famous of several women who took on the radio persona of "Tokyo Rose." Toguri D'Aquino, a U.S. citizen stranded in Japan when war broke out, was coerced to work for the Japanese war effort. Her role expanded from translating intelligence to disseminating propaganda to English-speaking audiences through Japanese radio broadcasts. ^[iv]

Another example is Murial Chiyo Tanaka Onishi. A Nisei living in Japan when war with the United States began, Onishi was conscripted into the Japanese military to translate U.S. radio transmissions. She returned to Hawai'i in 1947, two years into the Occupation. ^[v]

Occupation: Coerced workers and failure to repatriate an American citizen

The final sections of *Pearl* unfold in postwar Japan during the U.S. Occupation (1945–1952). The American Occupation authorities identify Amy as a survivor of the bombing of Hiroshima, and force her to gather data on Hiroshima survivors. The Occupation forces did not allow her to return to the U.S. until the Occupation ends. From page 114 on, the implication is that Amy was forced to stay and work for the Occupation because her citizenship was unclear.

"The Americans came for me. Once again I was taken to Hiroshima. And put to work. More than anything I wanted to go home. No one was sure what that meant anymore." ^[vi]

In 1951, Amy asks again to go home. An illustration shows a stern American officer refusing her. Then finally, in 1952, the Americans agree to let her return home. ^[vii]

Research for these Culture Notes did not identify any source to support a scenario in which Nisei were compelled to stay in Japan and work for the Occupation authorities. Evidence indicates that while there were often bureaucratic delays, American citizens were repatriated unless they chose to stay in Japan to work on contract. American citizens had access to American diplomatic and Occupation channels to facilitate return. Moreover, Amy's family in the U.S., with access to her birth records, presumably would have been working for her return.



Culture Notes

Pearl: A Graphic Novel

by Sherri L. Smith
Illustrated by Christine Norrie

Graphix, 2024

Fiction, set in Japan

2024 Of Note, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/Middle and High School Graphic Novels

Themes

Suggested themes tied to the five topics discussed in these Culture Notes are:

- Transnationalism, particularly in Japanese American experience
- Identities: familial, ethnic, cultural, national
- Conflict and conflict resolution: familial, generational, cultural, national
- Tradition and memory
- The concept of home

Author: Lynn Parisi, NCTA National Consultant and Founding Director, NCTA and the University of Colorado Program for Teaching East Asia (retired)
2026

Additional Readings

Barada, Leo. "Yurei: Much more than a Japanese ghost." Cádiz, Spain: Ryujin Press, June 30, 2025. <https://ryujinpress.com/yurei/>.

Coffman, Tom. *Tadaima! I Am Home: A Transnational Family History*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018.

Jordan, Brenda. Culture Notes for *Onibi: Diary of a Yokai Hunter*. NCTA website, 2021. <https://www.nctasia.org/award/onibi-diary-of-a-yokai-ghost-hunter/>.

Knaefler, Tami. [*Our House Divided: Seven Japanese American Families in World War II*](#). Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1991.

McDonald, Mary, director. *Nisei Stories of Wartime Japan*. Documentary film, 2011.

Miwa, Larry Fumio and Stephen Hiroshi Miwa. *Gambare Hiroshima—Don't Give Up!* Honolulu: Watermark Publishing, 2024.

Niia, Brian. "Stranded: Nissei in Japan Before, During and After World War II." Seattle: Densho, July 28, 2016. Accessed August 15, 2026. <https://densho.org/catalyst/stranded-nisei-japan-world-war-ii/>



Culture Notes

Pearl: A Graphic Novel

by Sherri L. Smith
Illustrated by Christine Norrie

Graphix, 2024

Fiction, set in Japan

2024 Of Note, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/Middle and High School Graphic Novels

Sakamoto, Arthur, et al. "The Japanese American Family – Part 1," Discover Nikkei. Los Angeles: Japanese American National Museum, 2010.

https://discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2011/1/19/ja-family-1/?utm_source=

Sakamoto, Pamela Rotner. *Midnight in Broad Daylight: A Japanese American Family Caught Between Two Worlds*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2016.

Tomita, Mary. *Dear Miye: Letters Home from Japan, 1939–1946*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995.

Yoshida, Jim. *The Two Worlds of Jim Yoshida: A New and True Story of a Man Without a Country*. New York: William Morrow & Co., 1972.

[i] Brian Niiya, "Stranded: Nissei in Japan Before, During and After World War II" (Seattle: Densho, July 28, 2016); accessed August 15, 2026, <https://densho.org/catalyst/stranded-nisei-japan-world-war-ii/>.

[ii] Leo Baruda, "Yurei: Much more than a Japanese ghost" (Cádiz, Spain: Ryujin Press, June 30, 2025); accessed August 15, 2026, <https://ryujinpress.com/yuurei/>.

[iii] Baruda.

[iv] "Tokyo Rose" entry on Wikipedia, accessed August 15, 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tokyo_Rose.

[v] Murial Chiyo Tanaka Onishi, Densho Digital Repository, 2009, https://ddr.densho.org/narrators/390/?utm_source=

[vi] Sherri L. Smith, *Pearl* (New York: Graphix, 2024), 115–118.

[vii] Smith, *Pearl*, 121–122.