

# Haiku and Hiroshima

## Teaching About the Atomic Bomb

By WAYNE AU

AS TEACHERS KNOW, some classroom materials invariably work, no matter the group of students. *Barefoot Gen* is one of them.

*Barefoot Gen*, a Japanese animated feature film, tells the story of Gen (pronounced with a hard “G”), a young boy who, along with his mother, survives the bombing of Hiroshima.

The story chronicles their struggles as they try to rebuild their lives from the bomb’s ashes. It is based on the critically acclaimed, semi-autobiographical Japanese comic book series *Hadashi no Gen*, by Keiji Nakazawa. Both the comic strip and the feature film oppose the Japanese government’s actions during World War II and include criticism of the intense poverty and suffering forced onto the Japanese people by their government’s war effort.

The film’s critical eye points to one of the lessons I want students to draw from *Barefoot Gen*: that it is important to scrutinize the relationship between the people of a country and

the actions of their government—ours included. I want my students to understand that as think-

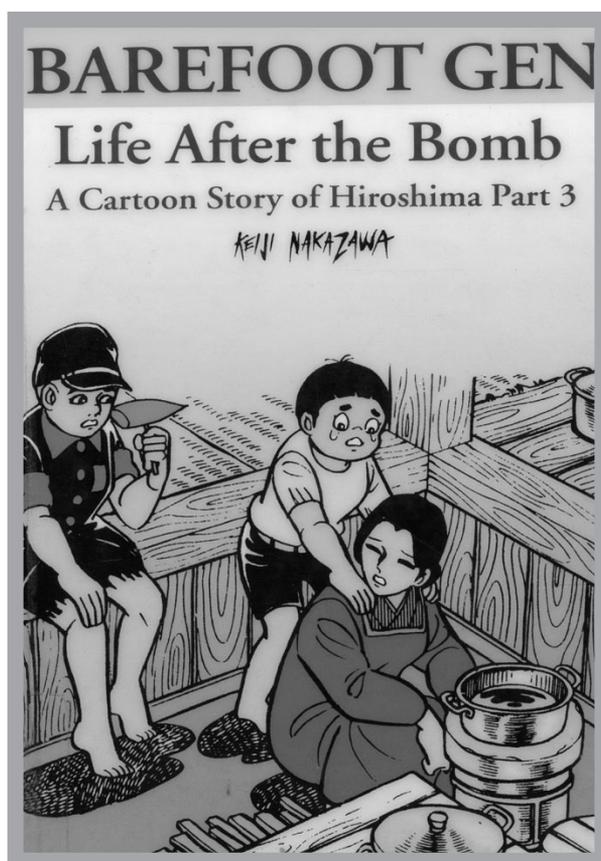
ing human beings, we have the right to disagree and protest when a government’s actions are not in the interests of humanity, as Gen’s father does or as many U.S. people do in condemning the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

I also find the film useful to help students look beyond the demonized and often racist images of the Japanese, particularly in the context of World War II, and to see actual people living, dying, and protesting their government’s actions.

High school students enjoy the disarming and playful nature of *Barefoot Gen*’s cartoon medium. Some

students are familiar with the film genre of Japanese animation, or anime, which has gained popularity in the United States.

The film’s effect is hardly playful, however, and students quickly realize that this is a serious film with character development, plot, and real emotion. Its animation allows the intense imagery



*The animated film Barefoot Gen is based on Keiji Nakazawa’s semi-autobiographical comic book series depicting Japanese life after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.*



A page from *Barefoot Gen: Life After the Bomb, A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*, Vol. 3. by Keiji Nakazawa © 2004.

of the atomic explosion and its aftermath to take shape on screen, in front of our eyes.

The atomic detonation of the bomb named “Little Boy” over the city of Hiroshima killed almost 120,000 civilians and 20,000 military personnel. The explosion reached into the millions of degrees centigrade and obliterated an area of 13 square kilometers. Three days later, the United States dropped “Fat Man” on Nagasaki, killing 74,000 people. These astounding numbers do not include the estimated 130,000 who died within five days of the bombings or those who survived the initial explosion but suffered or died from long-term genetic damage and radiation sickness. (In offering students a broader context for the events of August 1945, I’ve found historian Howard Zinn’s work especially valuable. See the chapter “Just and Unjust Wars” from his book *Declarations of Independence* [HarperPerennial, 1990] and his article “The Bombs of August,” in the *Progressive* magazine, August 2000.)

The images in *Barefoot Gen* are powerful and devastating to watch. Thankfully, the film ends on an upbeat note of survival, because like Gen, humanity can and will triumph over devastation.

For the post-film discussion, I mainly ask students to share their feelings and thoughts about the movie. Some say that they’ve never cried watching a cartoon before, and most remark that they can relate to Gen’s personal struggles of losing loved ones or fighting to survive in a harsh world. Across race, gender, and nationality, students consistently exhibit empathy with Gen.

I like to follow the discussion with the class using the traditional Japanese poetry forms of haiku and tanka to express their responses to the film. This works best if these can be assigned the same day as watching the movie. First we read aloud some haiku and tanka written by survivors of the bombings from *White Flash/Black Rain: Women of Japan Relive the Bomb* (Milkweed Editions, 1995).

*Reality*  
*is this and only this—*  
*the one bone*  
*I place in the bent and burned*  
*small school lunch tin.*  
 —Shoda Shinoe

*grabbing sand*  
*beneath the flaming sky*  
*is to be alive*  
 —Kingyo Humiko

*looking for her mother*  
*the girl still has strength*  
*to turn over corpses*  
 —Shibata Moriyo

After discussing the imagery and themes of the haiku and tanka examples, I describe the syllabic requirements of these traditional Japanese forms. Haiku requires three lines, with five, seven, and five syllables in each line respectively, totaling 17 syllables. With five lines, tanka similarly requires five, seven, five, seven, and seven syllables respectively, totaling 31 syllables. The examples are translated from Japanese, so they do not make

good syllabic models in English, but their content is powerful enough for students to get the idea. From there, we write. Expressing emotions through poetry is hard work, and trying to make poetry fit into a limited syllable space is even harder. Fortunately, because haiku and tanka are relatively short compared to essays or other writing assignments, students don't feel too intimidated and, however frustrating they may find the writing, they have fun fitting their words into the puzzle that the traditional forms present. Students' writing has been outstanding, demonstrating their abilities to empathize with the Japanese people who suffered the bombing.

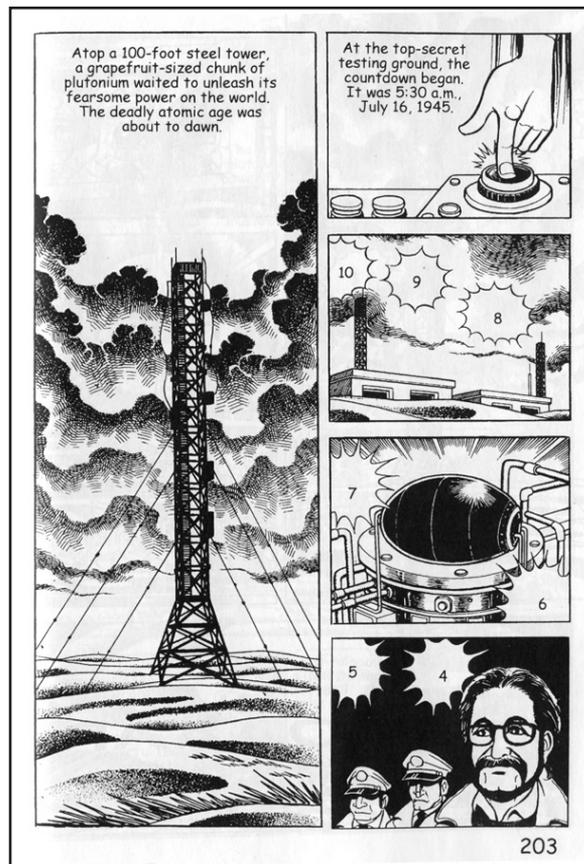
*screams the sound of souls  
being devoured, banished  
from all existence*  
—Joseph Tauti

*red sky floats above  
starts to drip the blackness down  
towards the drying deathbed  
now scorched by the liquid fire  
bleak chariots move the dead*  
—Amanda O'Conner

*Little children scream  
They look for their families  
which they will not find*  
—Shanique Johnson

Understandably, the feeling of dread and despair evident in the student examples underscores the immense human suffering. Dropping an atomic bomb on real, live people is serious, and it is important that students recognize this fact.

In the end, the mushroom clouds left by “Little Boy” and “Fat Man” towered over more than just the two cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Those explosions cast their shadows over Asia and Europe, signaling to the rest of the world, especially the Soviet Union, that the United States was indeed the dominant global military power with the devastating firepower to back it up. More important, and more frightening, U.S. officials demonstrated their willingness to use that firepower.” ■



A page from *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima, Vol. 1*, by Keiji Nakazawa © 2004.

**Wayne Au** (wayne.wk.au@gmail.com) is an editor of *Rethinking Schools* magazine and is an assistant professor of secondary education at California State University, Fullerton.



This article was previously published in *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 1*, a publication of *Rethinking Schools*. To order *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 1*, visit [www.rethinkingschools.org](http://www.rethinkingschools.org) or call 800-669-4192.

This article is offered for use in educational settings as part of the **Zinn Education Project**, a collaboration of *Rethinking Schools* and *Teaching for Change*, publishers and distributors of social justice educational materials. Contact *Rethinking Schools* directly for permission to reprint this material in course packets, newsletters, books, or other publications.

For more information:

**Rethinking Schools**  
www.rethinkingschools.org  
800-669-4192

**Teaching for Change**  
www.teachingforchange.org  
800-763-9131