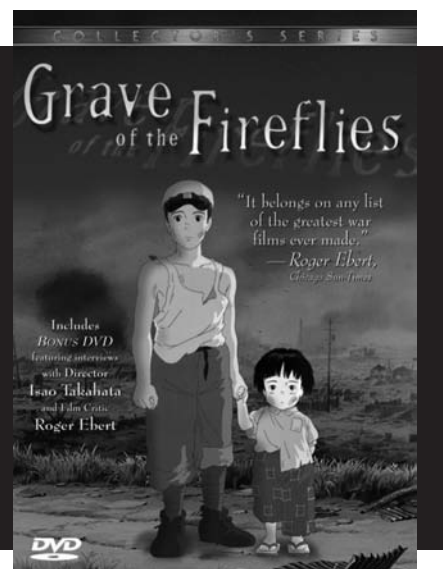


Grave of the Fireflies and Japan's Memories of World War II

By Masako N. Racel

"September 21, 1945 . . . That was the night I died," says the spirit of Seita, a fourteen-year-old boy, at the beginning of the 1988 animated film, *Grave of the Fireflies*.¹ The movie opens in a train station in Kobe, Japan. Orphaned and alone, he lost his family and home during the firebomb raids, and he finally succumbed to weakness and delirium caused by slow starvation. The boy dies clutching his only possession, a small candy tin that had become his four-year-old sister's funeral urn. Seita spent his last days trying to care for his sister Setsuko, but he was unable to keep her alive, and with her passing, he lost the will to persevere. The movie then flashes back to the beginning of the story and recounts, through Seita's eyes, the tragic events that brought the children to this end. Their story provides a window into the troubled and chaotic world that existed in Japan during the final months of World War II.



Nosaka Akiyuki (1930–) originally published *Grave of the Fireflies* as a novel in 1967. While it received the Naoki Award that recognizes new literary talent, fame truly arrived with Studio Ghibli's animated adaptation of the book in 1988. Within a few years of its release, *Grave of the Fireflies* became one of the most watched war films in Japan. To this day, it is shown on national television around August 15, the day the Japanese celebrate as "End of the War Day." Teachers use the film with middle and high school students, and both a TV dramatization and a new feature film live-action version of "Fireflies" has been produced and released.²

***Grave of the Fireflies* and Post-World War II Literary Works**

Grave of the Fireflies is a work of fiction and a semi-autobiographical story. Born on October 10, 1930, author Nosaka Akiyuki spent his youth in Kobe during a period of economic crisis and growing Japanese militarism. Like Seita in the story, Nosaka was fourteen years old in 1945 when the aerial bombings of Kobe began. Left orphaned and homeless by a bombardment, he and his sixteen-month-old sister went to live with a relative. Some of the story's scenes, such as collecting fireflies for his sister, and taking her to the beach, are based on Nosaka's own experiences. However, later in his biography, Nosaka states that the story is a "lie" and that he was not as kind to his sister as Seita was to her. Nosaka even blames himself for her death, since he ate the food he should have shared, and confesses he hit her head in order to make Seita stop crying. Nosaka wrote *Grave of the Fireflies* to honor his little sister and to cope personally with the tremendous sense of guilt he felt as a survivor.³

Grave of the Fireflies is part of the genre of post-World War II literary works that address the wartime experiences of ordinary Japanese people. Most of the stories take place in 1945. Daily air raids, the unparalleled devastation of the atomic bombs, Japan's surrender, and the subsequent Allied occupation seemed to have a cathartic effect on the

Japanese postwar mindset, generating the birth of a strong pacifist movement. This new pacifist mindset, coupled with the US-imposed 1947 constitution and the now-famous Article 9 where "the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation," caused many people in the archipelago to call the new era, *Sengo*, literally meaning, "after the war."

The aerial bombing and starvation experienced by the Japanese during 1945 was so widespread that for millions of people the very term "war," became associated with the tragedies of 1945, whereas "peace" represented a hoped-for permanent end to misery, hunger, and suffering. Numerous postwar authors, filmmakers, TV producers, and educators have sought to preserve the painful memories of 1945 as a means of teaching younger generations the precious value of "peace" and to quell any resurgence of militarism.

In this context, books, literature, poetry, and even *manga* (comics books as ubiquitous in Japan as newspapers in America) depicting the war from the perspectives of the common people became popular. Examples include Ibuse Masuji's *Kuroi Ame* (*Black Rain*, 1965) a story that treated the experience of Hiroshima; Takagi Toshiko's *Garasu no Usagi* (*The Glass Rabbit*, 1972), a story for young readers about a girl who experienced the Tokyo air raids; and Nakazawa Keiji's *Hadashi no Gen* (*Barefoot Gen*, 1973–1974), a manga about a boy living in the aftermath of Hiroshima. All of these stories aimed at preserving memories of World War II devastation are well known because they have been adapted for film and TV and many educators have promoted them.⁴

Japanese as Victims

For US classroom use, it is recommended that *Grave of the Fireflies* be shown without a lot of background information in order to elicit students' honest reactions. Many American students, now two generations removed from the events, simply find the movie sad and moving. Other students who believe Japan was the aggressor and its actions at Pearl

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Nosaka wrote *Grave of the Fireflies* to honor his little sister and to cope personally with the tremendous sense of guilt he felt as a survivor.

Screen capture from *Grave of the Fireflies*.
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Harbor started the war take exception at what they see as the depiction of Japanese as victims. Mistreatment of American POWs and other atrocities, such as the Bataan Death March, also impact the amount of sympathy some students feel for the plight of Japanese civilians during the war. This provides a good chance for a classroom discussion on how American and Japanese collective memories of World War II differ.

After hearing students' initial reactions, ask them for whom they believe the film was originally intended and what they think is the main message of the film. By recognizing that the film is intended for Japanese young people, US students may better understand why it is so popular in Japan. A discussion of such issues as why many teachers, writers, film makers, and other intellectuals feel so strongly that the young should know about the horrors of 1945 provides a good chance to discuss Nosaka and the historical context in which the events depicted in the story took place. Other aspects of the novel, such as the nuances of its title, may be pointed out to the students. Although the English title, *Grave of the Fireflies* is an accurate translation of the Japanese, *Hotaru no Haka*, (*hotaru* means fireflies; *haka* means grave), it does not fully convey the meanings implied to a native reader.

Here the term *hotaru*, or fireflies, is not written using the normal *kanji* characters; instead the author creates a phonic equivalent by combining the characters for "fire" and "to drop." The spoken title conveys one idea, but when the actual characters in the title are read, there is an additional message (a technique also seen in Japanese poetry). By exploring the different meanings of the title and the images used in the film, American students can begin to better conceptualize the story from a Japanese perspective.

It is important to broaden the discussion and ask American students how they think other Asian populations victimized by the Japanese during World War II might view the story. Where appropriate, teachers can provide students with examples of Japanese atrocities toward other Asians such as the Nanjing Massacre, use of Korean "comfort women," and the Japanese army's biological experiments in Manchuria. Teachers can also recount recent international tensions, including outraged protests by victims of wartime Japanese aggression

in reaction to politicians like former Prime Minister Koizumi and others when they visited Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine.

The shrine is dedicated to members of the Japanese military who died in wars during the imperial period (1868–1945). "Spirits" interned in the shrine include convicted war criminals. Japan's Ministry of Education and Science's 2005 approval of a new middle school history textbook that justified Japan's wartime actions, even though less than one percent of Japanese students use the book, garnered international

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Most contemporary Japanese perceive the common people of the imperial period as victims who were “deceived” (*damasareta*) into sacrificing themselves by powerful military leaders.

controversy and is also an appropriate topic for this aspect of the discussion. The larger point is that after more than sixty years, other Asians still have collective “memories” of World War II that are quite different than those of many Japanese. Such discussions should help reveal that people and/or governments actively *choose to remember* events in specific ways and that the roles of the government and schools are very prominent in the process of creating collective memories.

Grave of the Fireflies has been criticized for its depiction of the Japanese as victims of the war with no reference to Japan’s role in instigating the conflict. Why do many Japanese choose to see themselves as victims and why are they so determined to focus almost exclusively on the events of 1945? Teachers and students can better consider the question by learning more about Japan’s imperial period. In the late nineteenth century, the early twentieth century, the 1930s, and until the near end of World War II, although Japan was involved in several wars and military actions, none of the fighting took place on Japanese soil and (with the exception of Japan’s military action in the Russian Civil War) Japan was always the victor. Most Japanese people had never experienced the type of dramatic and horrific events that they endured in late 1944 and 1945. Suddenly during this brief period, the sight of B-29 bomber planes was ubiquitous, and most of Japan’s major cities experienced frequent bombardment and widespread destruction.⁵ Added to the constant fear of air raids was a widespread shortage of food. Thus, for many ordinary Japanese, the year 1945 was the year that truly represented their “war” experience and formed the focal point for subsequent antiwar sentiments.

Indeed, the movie implies that the Japanese people were victims of a government who demanded their service and sacrifice. The children in the story are victims on many levels; they lost their mother in an air

raid and their father in a naval battle; they lived in an environment of constant fear; they were denied an education and lacked the basic necessities of life. They had their innocence and their lives stolen from them. American students can compare their own lives to those of Seita and Setsuko, making it possible for them to relate to the experiences of the characters.

Some argue that by depicting inaction of bystanders in the train station and adults surrounding Seita and Setsuko, the film director is subtly criticizing the Japanese people for allowing children to die.⁶ The film most certainly depicts a starkly abnormal time when death was so omnipresent that people became desensitized and were primarily concerned with their personal survival, often losing their sense of compassion. As stated earlier, a major objective of this movie, and the larger genre, is to teach Japanese young people to hate war and the political orders that seemingly facilitate it. The enemy here is not the vaguely defined Allies, but the war itself and the system that led to the tragedy.

Ultimately, the old Meiji Constitution is usually blamed for causing the war since it allowed military leaders to bypass the political mechanisms that could have averted conflict. In the Meiji Constitution, the emperor—not the people—had ultimate sovereignty. Theoretically under the emperor’s control, the military was allowed to act independently of political institutions. Most contemporary Japanese perceive the common people of the imperial period as victims who were “deceived” (*damasareta*) into sacrificing themselves by powerful military leaders.

Directly following the war, many Japanese were ashamed and remorseful for their part in the conflict. With the passage of time, however, much of the original guilt has been replaced by feelings of victimization and a fervent belief that war should be avoided at all costs. Media and ed-

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educational accentuation of the suffering of the common Japanese people in 1945 resulted in a national collective memory that is focused upon civilians, not soldiers. Constant exposure to literature and film designed to preserve painful memories of the plight of non-combatants, such as *Grave of the Fireflies*, created a shared vision of the past by the *Sengo* (after-war) generation, even among people who were not alive during the war years. The resulting lack of empathy on the part of many contemporary Japanese for victims of imperial wartime aggression is one negative result of the genre of which *Grave of the Fireflies* is a part.

Studio Ghibli's movie, *Grave of the Fireflies*, is an excellent teaching tool for exploring Japanese and foreign collective memories of World War II. This certainly includes the collective memories American young people have about one of the twentieth centuries' most horrendous events.

Sample Discussion Questions for American Students

1. What lessons are the writers, filmmakers, and TV producers trying to convey to Japanese youth? How do you think young Japanese viewers are supposed to feel? Are they supposed to be angry with someone or something?
2. What symbols are used in the movie, and what meaning do they have?
3. Who or what are the enemies in the story? Who are the victims? Who is responsible for the tragedy?
4. How do you think other Asian groups might feel about or react to *Grave of the Fireflies*? What about American viewers? Are their feelings different, and if so why?
5. Do the resurrections of the ghosts (Seita and Setsuko) at the beginning and end of the movie have meaning?
6. How did scarcity affect the way people acted in the movie? How might a period of scarcity affect a generation in the years to come? Does this period explain why Japan became a successful material culture from the 1960s to the present day? How did the Great Depression and World War II change Americans?
7. How does the selectiveness and whitewashing of history impact the creation of collective memory? What are the dangers of collective memory? Is this why we never seem to learn the lessons of the past?
8. What are the benefits and costs of manipulating a nation's collective memory? Do you feel that the Japanese people have gone too far in how they changed their memories of the war? Have American memories of World War II been modified in a similar manner? What about the Việt Nam War? ■

NOTES

1. Commercially available on DVD in English, Studio Ghibli's anime version of *Grave of the Fireflies* is an excellent tool for helping American high school or college students understand how many contemporary Japanese perceive World War II and the strong pacifist movement in Japan. Additionally, the movie can generate dialogue on collective memories of World War II among Americans and Asians who were victims of Japanese aggression and on outsiders' images of Japan.
2. Nosaka Akiyuki, *Amerika Hijiki; Hotaru no Haka (American Seaweed; Grave of the Fireflies)* (Tokyo: Shinchō Bunko, 1972); Nosaka Akiyuki, *A Grave of Fireflies* trans. James R. Abrams, Jr. *Japan Quarterly* (Tokyo) 25:4 (Oct–Dec 1978), 445–463; *Grave of the Fireflies*, animated film directed by Takahata Isao (New York: Central Park Media, 1998, originally Tokyo: Studio Ghibli, 1988); *Hotaru no Haka*, TV drama (Tokyo: Nihon Television) aired on Nov. 1, 2005 at <http://www.ntv.co.jp/hotaru/>; *Hotaru no Haka*, directed by Hyugaji Tarō (Tokyo: Tokyo TV, Baidai Visual, Pony Canyon, etc., 2008) at <http://www.hotarunohaka.jp/>.
3. Nosaka Akiyuki, *Nosaka Akiyuki: Adoribu Jijyosen, Sakka no Jiden 19 (Autobiogra-*

phy of Nosaka Akiyuki) (Tokyo: Nihon Tosho sentā); Ozaki Hideki, “Kaisetsu (Commentary)” in Nosaka Akiyuki, *Amerika Hijiki; Hotaru no Haka (American Seaweed; Grave of the Fireflies)* (Tokyo: Shinchō Bunko, 1972), 224–229; James R. Abrams, Jr., “Translator's Note,” in Nosaka Akiyuki, “A Grave of Fireflies” trans. *Japan Quarterly* (Tokyo) 25, 4 (Oct–Dec 1978): 461–463; Hiroko Cockerill, “Laughter and Tears: The Complex Narratives of Showa Gesaku Writer Nosaka Akiyuki” *Japanese Studies* (Abington, Oxon, England) 27, 3 (Dec 2007): 295–303.

4. Ibuse Masuji, *Kuroi ame (Black Rain)* (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1970; originally published in 1965); Ibuse Masuji, *Black Rain; A Novel*. Trans. John Bestler (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1969); *Kuroi Ame/Black Rain*, a movie directed by Imamura Shōhei (New York: Fox Lorber Home Video, 1991; originally released in Japan, 1989); Takagi Toshiko, *Garasu no usagi (The Glass Rabbit)* (Tokyo: Iwasaki Shoten, 1979; originally published 1972); Takagi Toshiko, *The Glass Rabbit*, trans. by James M. Vardaman, Jr. Kodansha English library, 21 (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1986); *Tokyo Dai Kūshū: Gasaru no Usagi (Tokyo Air Raid: The Glass Rabbit)*, a movie directed by Tachibana Yuten (1979); *Gasaru no Usagi*, an animated film directed by Shibuichi Setsuko (2005); Nakazawa Kenji, *Hadeshi no Gen* (Tokyo: Yubunsha, 1993) 10 vols; Nakazawa Keiji, and Art Spiegelman. *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima* (San Francisco, Calif: Last Gasp of San Francisco, 2004); *Barefoot Gen* a movie (Los Angeles: Orion Home Video, 1995); Fuji Television also made a TV drama, *Barefoot Gen* aired on August 10, and 11, 2007.
5. Tokyo experienced 106 air raids, Kobe 128, Nagoya 63, and Osaka 33, as well as many other smaller cities that were bombed and destroyed. A map of bombarded Japanese cities can be found at <http://www.footnote.com/image/29021741/> contributed by the National Archive.
6. Rather than taking care of them, war orphans, along with disabled veterans and widows, were often stigmatized in post-war Japan. See John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company/New Press, 1999).

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