

Lara Saguisag
JSI-AASCU 2017
Project Summary

Japanese Children's and Youth Literature: Words, Images, Contexts

My children's and young adult literature courses typically focus on teaching students how to recognize the ways texts for young people express, reinforce, influence, and interrogate contemporary constructions of childhood and adolescence. In my courses, I aim to expose students to the variety of ways childhood and adolescence are conceptualized and experienced across history and geography. Incorporating the study of Japanese children's literature (picture books, middle grade and young adult novels, manga, and anime) into my syllabus will enable me to fulfill my goal of introducing students to multiplicities of childhood.

In my young adult literature courses, I regularly include a unit titled "Growing Up in a Time of War and Political Conflict." In this unit, my students and I discuss how literary and visual cultures of childhood represent war, war's effect on children, and children's consciousness of and responses to political conflict, violence, and large-scale destruction. By exposing students to a diverse body of texts that depict young people's experiences in wartime, I hope to build awareness of how political upheaval and violent conflict has shaped and continues to shape the day-to-day lives of many children. In the process, I hope to foster a sense of global citizenship and responsibility among my students. My reading list typically consists of texts in the Euroamerican tradition. The inclusion of Japanese perspectives on war (specifically World War II), as expressed in children's and young adult books, manga, and anime, will enrich and complicate my current pedagogical approaches. As children's publishing in Japan flourished in the postwar era, many authors and illustrators produced texts that recorded, alluded to, reflected on, and interrogated the nation's militaristic and imperialistic policies and the consequences of these policies. One notable development is the emergence of "atomic bomb manga," which explicitly record the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In studying various Japanese children's texts, my students and I will pay special attention to the often fraught project of narrativizing the past, especially when addressing young audiences. One strategy I plan to employ is to compare/contrast Japanese texts that strive to teach future generations about peace and the devastating effects of war with materials that deny or express nostalgia for Japan's militaristic, imperialistic past.

This unit will ultimately serve as the foundation for new courses that I plan to develop, including 1) a course on War, Political Conflict, and International Children's Literature, in which Japanese children's literature will serve as one of the case studies; and 2) a study-abroad course that will not only consider how and why Japanese cultural forms for young people repeatedly explore themes of peace and war, but also explore emergent trends, such as the growing body of children's texts about the 2011 earthquake and tsunami and the nuclear disaster in Fukushima. This study-abroad course will also introduce students to the origins and development of Japanese children's literature from the Tokugawa Era to present day and use children's texts as a platform for examining how childhood and youth intersect with social factors such as gender, ethnicity, religion, and economic status. This course will thus use literary study to introduce students to Japanese history and social issues.