



Culture Notes

Okinawa

by Susumu Higa

translated by Jocelyne Allen

edited by Andrew Woodrow Butcher and Christopher Woodrow Butcher
Fantagraphics Books, 2020

Fiction, set in Japan

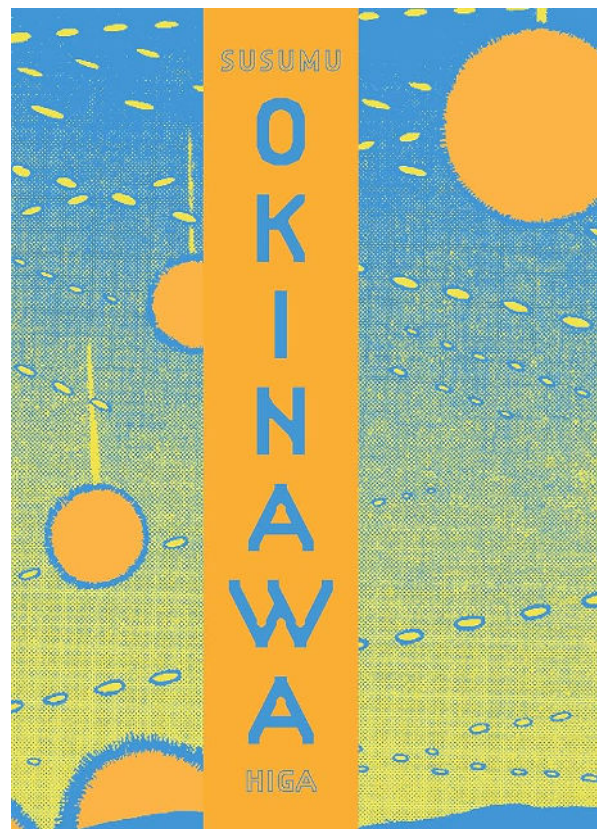
2023 of Note, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult (Middle & High School) Graphic Novels

As a series of short manga stories, Susumu Higa's *Okinawa* may appear to be teachable across a wide range of reading levels; however, for readers to understand the stories, they need the following: 1) strong textual/visual inferencing skills; 2) historical knowledge of Okinawa during World War II; and 3) an understanding of contemporary Okinawan political concerns. The level of knowledge required recommends the book to high school readers. What follows briefly addresses the requisite knowledge of historical and contemporary Okinawa.

Historical Context

Okinawa is the largest of the Okinawa Islands, a small archipelago approximately 1,500 kilometers (963 miles) south of Tokyo. (It is closer to Taiwan than to Kyushu.) All of the stories in this book are set in Okinawa, from preparations for the Battle of Okinawa to the present day.

Historically, Okinawa had been part of the Ryūkyū Kingdom (1429–1879). The Ryūkyū Kingdom thrived as a tributary state of Ming China, which used it as a hub for maritime trade with East and Southeast Asia. In 1609, with an invasion authorized by the Tokugawa shogunate, the Ryūkyū Kingdom also became a vassal of the Satsuma domain. It remained independent in name until its annexation by the Meiji government. For mainland Japanese, Okinawa remained a distant cultural backwater, a place of little importance in the mind of the average citizen.





Culture Notes

Okinawa

by Susumu Higa

translated by Jocelyne Allen

edited by Andrew Woodrow Butcher and Christopher Woodrow Butcher
Fantagraphics Books, 2020

Fiction, set in Japan

2023 of Note, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult (Middle & High School) Graphic Novels

Okinawa was largely ignored during World War II. Nearly all the young men had been conscripted into the Imperial Army. The women, children, and elderly were required to train with bamboo sticks and farm implements to defend against possible invasion. They were also required to feed and support the troops stationed in Okinawa. Not until Japan was faced with an imminent invasion of the Japan mainland did Okinawa become strategically important.

Once Japanese military leaders recognized that a U.S. ground invasion was unavoidable, they adopted the strategy of feigning a “last stand” in Okinawa. The land and the people were to be used as a distraction in the hope of slowing the U.S. approach to the mainland.

Though this tactic ultimately proved to be a fruitless endeavor—Japan surrendered prior to a full-scale U.S. attack on the mainland—the U.S. did take the bait and attacked Okinawa with a constant artillery bombardment. The Okinawan civilians who remained on the island were caught in the crossfire of undermanned, underpowered, disorganized Japanese troops and the unrelenting U.S. air and sea arsenal. Hiding in caves and in tombs and running in circles were the only means of survival amid the cacophony of battle; if they were not dying by shrapnel and flame, they were likely dying by suicide or starvation.

Contemporary Political Context

After the confusion of war and the grief of widespread loss, a new foreign invader found a foothold in Okinawa: the United States. Part of the terms of surrender to the U.S. involved a requirement that Japan allow the U.S. to build and maintain military bases throughout the country as both a check on future Japanese imperial aspirations as well as (and more importantly) a means of maintaining a defensive foothold to sustain the U.S. sphere of influence in East Asia.

Once again, far from the mainland populace and commercial centers of the main islands of Japan, Okinawa was asked to function as the sacrificial space. Having had little to do with the war other than providing the final bulwark, Okinawans have since been



Culture Notes

Okinawa

by Susumu Higa

translated by Jocelyne Allen

edited by Andrew Woodrow Butcher and Christopher Woodrow Butcher
Fantagraphics Books, 2020

Fiction, set in Japan

2023 of Note, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult (Middle & High School) Graphic Novels

required to disproportionately bear the terms of national surrender. To this day, the tiny archipelago of Okinawa hosts almost half of the total U.S. military bases maintained in Japan.

The many U.S. bases on Okinawa have taken large swaths of arable farmland. Military exercises and troop transports impact the physical environment, damaging the land and sea. Barbed-wire fences and military structures mar sightlines, and the noise levels from passing aircraft are intrusive and ever-present. Moreover, local economies and policies have had to be completely reengineered to allow the citizenry to coexist with the military complexes, which bring in thousands of American troops.

Traditional Okinawa farming, fishing, and trade practices cannot sustain the Okinawan economy alone, and local politicians have to balance relations with the U.S. government, the Japanese government, and the Okinawan residents. The resulting decisions consistently favor government entities over the local residents, creating geopolitical and legal challenges.

Okinawa, the Book, in Context

Susumu Higa sets his stories within the historical and contemporary contexts described above. They are written from the perspective of a contemporary resident, and convey the themes of discontent and protest effectively, as well as the tone of resignation and frustration running throughout his work.

Although each story could be used as a standalone text in a variety of units, they might all be better understood if the following book and film were used in conjunction with the units, better situating readers in the context from which the author is drawing his material:

1. *The Girl with the White Flag*. Tomiko Higa's memoir describes a young child's experience when she is trapped in the middle of the Battle of Okinawa.
2. *Anpo: Art x War*. Linda Hoaglund's film, through the lens of Okinawan art, provides audiences with a better understanding of contemporary protests against U.S. military bases in Okinawa. <https://anpomovie.com/>



Culture Notes

Okinawa

by Susumu Higa

translated by Jocelyne Allen

edited by Andrew Woodrow Butcher and Christopher Woodrow Butcher
Fantagraphics Books, 2020

Fiction, set in Japan

2023 of Note, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult (Middle & High School) Graphic Novels

Note on Japanese Terms in the Text

The author uses about a dozen Japanese words in the text. He provides a glossary at the back of the book, which offers definitions, but the meaning of the words is clear from the context in which they are used.

Author: Josh Foster, Educator & Learner
2024