



Curriculum Connections

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

They don't store anything here. They don't produce anything either. The military land's just waiting to be used up in war.

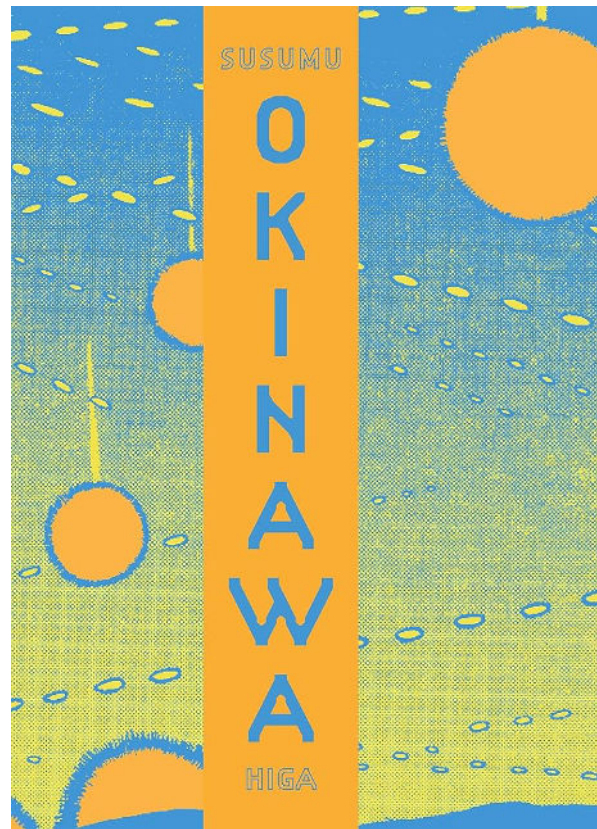
—*Okinawa* (page 443)

Appropriate for Grades: 9–12

Best for Grades: 11–12

Introduction to the Book

Susumu Higa's *Okinawa* is a graphic novel that is less a book "about" war than it is a book written "because of" war. Each of the fourteen chapters is a stand-alone story set in Okinawa before, during, or after the Battle of Okinawa. Although the stories follow a chronological arc, any of the stories could be pulled out and paired as supplementary material with other texts or study units.



The author purposely leaves gaps of information between panels, and he sometimes makes sudden leaps in time and/or space without clarification. As a result, he asks much of his readers in terms of their attention to detail as well as their capacity to make inferences.

Essential Questions

- What does the postwar Okinawa experience say about America?
- Is spiritual wellbeing possible in the context of postwar Okinawa?
- How can art be an act of protest?



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Suggested Activities

Learn to Read Manga. Provide students with any two-page spread. Have them use context clues to determine which page should be read first, which panel on the page, and which text bubble within each panel. For example, they might note the reverse order of the page numbers or examine the flow of conversation and images.

Teacher Note: Manga are traditionally read from the right side of the page to the left and from the top of the page to the bottom.

Illustrate Noise. Explore the different ways by which Higa illustrates noise (especially in the opening three chapters). Choose a setting to illustrate and highlight the sounds using similar strategies to Higa.

Close Reading of Images and Text. Pick a page. What can you learn from just the images? Just the text? Are they conveying the same information or different information? How?

Vocabulary in Context. Several Japanese words are used in the book. Figure out the meanings of the words from the context of the stories and discuss. Why has the author left these particular words in the stories untranslated? By doing so, does he add special value or weight to these words?

Teacher Note: A glossary for these terms is provided in the back of the book.

Photographs. After each chapter in the book, the author includes a photograph of a person or place in Okinawa. Discuss: what connections can be drawn between the photograph and the preceding chapter? Ask students to select fourteen black-and-white photographs they believe capture the story of their own hometown.



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Chapter Summaries with Suggested Discussion/Writing Prompts

Chapter 1: Sword of Sand

The Japanese military arrives on a remote island to prepare for the American attack.

Discussion Question: How does war lead to an imbalance between humankind and nature?

Chapter 2: Sands of the Setting Sun

A Japanese military squad stationed on a remote island refuses to accept the news that the war has ended.

Discussion Question: Why might soldiers in such a situation struggle to accept that the war truly had ended?

Chapter 3: About My Mother

A mother struggles to survive with her children while running from cave to cave in the midst of battle.

Discussion Question: What kind of control do civilians have over their lives in the midst of war? How about over their own actions?

Chapter 4: Call of Sand

A local translator tries to help civilians and soldiers safely surrender to the Americans at the end of the war.

Discussion Question: Is a local who translates for an invading force a traitor to his homeland?

Chapter 5: Soldiers of Sand

When his unit is disbanded, a conscripted man tries to find his way back to his family during the Battle of Okinawa.

Discussion Question: What is it about family that leads people to put their own life at great risk for even the smallest chance of reuniting with family?



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Chapter 6: School

An academic seeks to preserve the written histories of the Okinawans from destruction.

Discussion Question: What do we gain from our recorded history as opposed to memory alone?

Chapter 7: Dirt Thieves

An artist uses clay contaminated by death to make pottery.

Discussion Question: This is the only story in the book given a genre subtitle: Comedy. How is it a comedy?

Chapter 8: Military Landlord

A landlord who receives government money to lease his land is constantly harangued by people looking to take his money.

Discussion Question: Who is really the landlord: Mr. Machida, the Japanese government, or the American military?

Chapter 9: Tolerated Cultivation

An old couple is farming on a military base when a plane crashes 20 meters from them.

Discussion Question: Does Mike represent a net positive or a net negative in the lives of the old couple?

Chapter 10: Island Duty

A pilot is lost after a crash, and the local townspeople help search for him.

Discussion Question: Is monetary payment enough to compensate for the helicopter damage near the end of the story?

Chapter 11: Homecoming

The islanders on an outlying island debate whether to allow the building of a military base in order to revitalize the island.

Discussion Question: Should they build the base and its accompanying bridge to the mainland, or should they leave things as they are? Discuss the pros and cons on both sides.



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Chapter 12: Military Employee

An Okinawan woman works on a military base that faces local protests. She struggles to deal with the ensuing inner turmoil.

Discussion Question: What does it mean if a "military worker" enjoys a salary for employment at a military base and then partakes in protests against that same base?

Chapter 13: The Journey of Jim Thomas

Ten years after the Battle of Okinawa, Jim Thomas, an American soldier, served as the coach of the local boys' baseball team. Forty years later, he returns to Okinawa to much fanfare.

Discussion Question: Does coaching the baseball team well seem like a fair trade for the act of chasing the people off their land in order to build the American military base?

Chapter 14: Mabui

An artist robs Okinawan tombs of their treasures.

Discussion Question: When an ancient tomb is robbed, who loses what?

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