



Curriculum Connections

Catfish Rolling

by Clara Kumagai
Fiction, set in Japan

Amulet Books, 2023

2023 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School Literature

Catfish Rolling is a thought-provoking coming-of-age novel that deals with themes of memory, grief, cultural identity, family relationships, love, and friendship. Set in contemporary Japan, it was written in 2023 by Clara Kumagai, an author of Japanese, Irish, and Canadian descent. The book raises questions about time, science, ecology, and philosophy via a strong plotline and the authentic voice of a complex protagonist.

As a philosophical novel, *Catfish Rolling* could be paired with another time-related novel for classroom study, such as Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, Emily St. John Mandel's *Sea of Tranquility*, or even F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. *Catfish Rolling* would also be an excellent option in a unit on cli-fi (climate fiction), environmental literature, or an interdisciplinary science course.



Literary Notes

The novel is written in first person and narrated mostly in the present tense. It begins in a flashback, with a twelve-year-old Sora Campbell buying mochi at a supermarket when the earthquake strikes. The novel shifts between realistic descriptions of current-day Japan, discussions of time science, and surreal adventures in nonlinear time zones. Chapters move mostly chronologically, and chapter titles are taken from both a traditional lunar calendar and [Japanese micro-seasons](#), a poetic and logical choice for a novel that asks how we measure time. Students should enjoy the good humor in the novel, particularly the banter among characters and the deep emotional conversations. Some will appreciate the philosophical interludes while others may get impatient with them.

Coming-of-Age Novel

Catfish Rolling explores the psychological development of eighteen-year-old Sora Campbell, half Canadian, half Japanese, living in modern-day Japan. She is unsure of



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her relationships, her future as a student, her father's health, and her multi-ethnic identity. As she contemplates life after graduation, she sees her family and future unraveling. At the age of twelve, Sora lost her mother in a massive earthquake; Sora's father is a scientist in the new field of time science, researching the fractured time zones caused by the earthquake. Sora secretly gives tours of the off-limit time zones, still hoping to find her mother. During a visit to Tokyo, Sora connects with Kyra, a Japanese and African American graduate student who helps Sora with her academic research into time zones along with her personal search for meaning. The novel examines how Sora faces the future and heals from her traumatic loss.

Speculative Fiction

Kumagai's speculative fiction was inspired by the March 2011 Tōhoku earthquake. Her novel asks, "What if?" What if the force of the 3/11 earthquake fractured time just as it upended bridges, buildings, and cities? What if time moved at different speeds in certain zones, where people could be disoriented or lost?

Kumagai's premise that time can shift during an earthquake is based on actual NASA calculations that the 3/11 magnitude 9.0 earthquake in Fukuoka changed the Earth's axis and shortened the length of an Earth day—however minutely. NASA's preliminary theoretical calculation indicates that the distribution of Earth's mass during the Tōhoku earthquake caused the Earth to rotate a bit faster, shortening the length of the day by about 1.8 microseconds ([NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory](#)).

In a 2023 interview, Kumagai said, "I learned that the 2011 earthquake was so big that it shifted the earth on its axis so that it spins faster—and as a result, our day is a tiny bit shorter. It also caused Honshu [the main island of Japan] to actually move more than 6 feet east, closer to the North American continent. That actually seems like science fiction to me, even though it's real. So my idea of time breaking came from there, and on a bigger level it also fit in with being caught in the past or painful events that Sora can't help but relive. Using magical realism allowed those memories and traumas to become a physical place, which I think made it more tangible and real."

In the novel, Sora theorizes that "The Shake had moved time as if it were tectonic plates, and cracks must have opened in between. What if you'd been standing on one when they moved? Would you fall between times? Could you disappear?"



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Or: If you had been in one of the slow or fast zones, perhaps you'd been flung far into the past or the future, and had become old and died, or become so young that you ceased to exist, that you became a random little bundle of cells once more." (p. 122-123)

Japanese Mythology and Cultural Imagination

One of the novel's great pleasures is the many references to Japanese mythology, which Kumagai deftly weaves into the story alongside science. The Edo-period story of *namazu*, a giant catfish that thrashes in the center of the earth, causing tremors and shakes, is central to the novel. (See Culture Notes for this book by Brenda Jordan.) Kumagai also incorporates Shintō and other aspects of traditional Japanese culture: Sora and her father place hourglasses at an Inari shrine to track the three time zones and discover that the middle hourglass is frozen in time (p. 133). She realizes the stone statues she finds of Jizō, or Jizō Bosatsu (Bosatsu = bodhisattva), the guardian deity of children and travelers, are dedicated to children who died in the earthquake (p. 94). She learns about *tsukumogami*, objects animated by a Shintō spirit or *kami* (p. 94). Maya tells Sora about Kijimuna spirits—red-haired elf-like creatures who live in the banyan trees, according to Okinawan mythology.

Japanese Calendars: Lunar and Micro-Season

The author explains in the Glossary that the chapter names refer to two Japanese calendars: the lunar calendar (*sekki*) and the seventy-two micro-seasons (*kō*). Each micro-season is connected to an event in the natural cycle of plants and animals, such as "swallows return," "frogs start singing," and "worms surface." As climate change worsens, Kumagai notes: "These markers are becoming increasingly confused and disrupted—there are fewer swallows every year" (p. 419). In an [interview](#), Kumagai adds: "A lot of the time in the book (particularly in the different time zones) is measured or marked by natural events or seasonal changes, just like the *sekki* and *kō* calendars, because clocks aren't reliable, and are in fact sort of arbitrary. So I guess thematically this fits in with Sora's journey—she's not ready for the next step in her life just because school ended; she has to change and grow at her own pace."

For more details on Japanese micro-seasons, see Mark Hovane, "The 72 Japanese micro-seasons," *Kyoto Journal*, 25 April 2023, <https://kyotojournal.org/uncategorized/the-72-japanese-micro-seasons/>

To learn more about the Freeman Book Awards, please visit:

www.nctasia.org/freeman-book-awards/



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Or visit: <https://www.nippon.com/en/features/h00124/>

The Japanese Concept of *Ma*

This is an interesting lens through which to examine the novel. The kanji for *ma* combines 門 (“door”) and 日 (“sun”) to depict a door that allows light to enter: 間. The literal translation is “space between,” but as Kiyoshi Matsumoto defines it, “*Ma* is a Japanese boundary, but it isn’t a line. It is a void, an expanse ... Rather than a static gap, it is the distance that exists between objects as well as between time. It is the silent pause between musical notes, the shadows between the light streaming through blinds, even the interaction between people, whether they are loved or despised. (“The Japanese Concept of Time and Space,” *Medium*, 24 April 2020, <https://medium.com/@kiyoshimatsumoto/ma-the-japanese-concept-of-space-and-time-3330c83ded4c>)

Books on Japanese Mythology

Clara Kumagai recommends the following books for teenagers:

- *A Thousand Steps into the Night* by Traci Chee
- *Across the Nightingale Floor* by Lian Hearn
- *The Beast Player* by Nahoko Uehashi
- *A Thousand Beginnings and Endings*, edited by Ellen Oh and Elise Chapman (an anthology of stories inspired by Asian folk tales, not just Japanese)
- Shigeru Mizuki’s manga (also adapted to anime) about *yōkai*

She also mentions: “One of my favorite legends is a story told in both Japan—where it’s called Urashima Tarō—and Ireland as Oisín in TínanÓg. Both versions center on a man who visits another land, and finds that hundreds of years have passed in the real world.”

(See READER Q&A WITH Clara Kumagai AUTHOR OF CATFISH ROLLING, May 25, 2023, <https://toppsta.com/blog/view/reader-qanda-with-clara-kumagai-author-of-catfish-rolling>)



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3/11 Connections

The triple disaster of March 11, 2011 (earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown) has inspired so many literary accounts that there is now a sizable body of post-3/11 literature. For an overview of the connections between fiction writing and the March 2011 earthquake, see Koichi Haga, *The Earth Writes: The Great Earthquake and the Novel in Post-3/11 Japan* (Lexington Books, 2019).

Catfish Rolling could be paired with one of the numerous memoirs, graphic novels, and short stories inspired by 3/11. The anthology *March Was Made of Yarn: Reflections on the Japanese Earthquake, Tsunami, and Nuclear Meltdown*, by Elmer Luke and David Karashima (Vintage 2012), is a selection of poetry, manga, memoir, and fiction from outstanding Japanese writers, including Hideo Furukawa, Yoko Ogawa, and Yoko Tawada.

The true story of *Kaze no Denwa* (Wind Phone) is an example of healing from the trauma of 3/11. The phone booth was created by Itaru Sasaki in 2010 in Ōtsuchi, a town in the Tōhoku region. Thousands of people have visited the phone booth to speak on the disconnected rotary phone to loved ones they've lost.

- 1) Students could listen to the segment "Really Long Distance" in episode 597 of *This American Life*, titled "One Last Thing Before I Go" and produced by Miki Meek.
- 2) A fictionalized picture book, *The Phone Booth in Mr. Hirota's Garden* by Heather Smith, with illustrations by Rachel Wada (Orca, 2019), tells the story of the phone booth's origin with illustrations influenced by woodblock printing and sumi-e. This Freeman Book Award winner has Culture Notes and Curriculum Connections: <https://www.nctasia.org/award/the-phone-booth-in-mr-hirotas-garden/>

Kumagai cites Studio Ghibli and Hayao Miyazaki as inspirations for her novel, so *Catfish Rolling* could also pair with one of their films, such as *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* or *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*, to compare their respective attitudes toward the relationship between humans and nature. Worth discussing is Miyazaki's 2008 comment about the tsunami in *Ponyo*: "There are many typhoons and earthquakes in Japan, and there is no point in portraying these natural disasters as evil events. They are one of the givens in the world in which we live." (Thomas Sotinel, "Japan's fantasy films act as



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a buffer against the reality of the natural world," *Guardian*, 29 March 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/mar/29/japan-animation-natural-disaster-sotinel>)

Ethical Issues in Scientific Research

The author raises questions about the ethics of risky research, especially if profit is a motive. The novel's protagonist is a researcher, and her father is a physicist who shifts to research on time after his wife dies in the earthquake. Sora joins her father in his investigation of time zones and independently devises her own methods for measuring time. The lab where Sora's father works loses funding because of the dangers of the project: those who stay too long in one zone, or who move too often between zones, experience symptoms of time sickness, including dizziness, memory loss, and hallucinations. The company also studies the use of soil from a fast zone for increased food production. In Tokyo, time has been monetized: the designated fast zones in Tokyo are filled with cram schools (more time to study), beauty parlors (rejuvenation), and hotels (more rest). The phrase "money buys time" is literally true.

Philosophy of Time

The novel includes several discussions of time and its meaning, including one between Sora and her father (p. 108), which offers Aristotle's definition of time "as a measure of motion," and a conversation with Sora's friend Maya, who introduces Heidegger's theory of time (p. 246). Hisakawa, priest at the Inari shrine, mentions the Buddhist belief that time is an illusion (p. 133). Students could research the history of the concept of time.

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RESOURCES:

Children's Books Ireland [Teacher study questions and activities](#)

Reviews of *Catfish Rolling*

[Guardian](#)

[Kirkus](#) Reviews

[Japan Times](#): "Genre-defying novel 'Catfish Rolling' navigates grief in a fractured land"
[Young Adulting](#)

Interviews with Author

[Five questions for Clara Kumagai](#)

[Reader Q&A with Clara Kumagai](#)

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