As teachers know, some classroom materials invariably work, no matter the group of students. *Barefoot Gen* is one of them.

*Barefoot Gen*, a Japanese animated feature film, tells the story of Gen (pronounced with a hard “G”), a young boy who, along with his mother, survives the bombing of Hiroshima.

The story chronicles their struggles as they try to rebuild their lives from the bomb’s ashes. It is based on the critically acclaimed, semi-autobiographical Japanese comic book series *Hadashi no Gen*, by Keiji Nakazawa. Both the comic strip and the feature film oppose the Japanese government’s actions during World War II and include criticism of the intense poverty and suffering forced onto the Japanese people by their government’s war effort.

The film’s critical eye points to one of the lessons I want students to draw from *Barefoot Gen*: that it is important to scrutinize the relationship between the people of a country and the actions of their government—ours included. I want my students to understand that as thinking human beings, we have the right to disagree and protest when a government’s actions are not in the interests of humanity, as Gen’s father does or as many U.S. people do in condemning the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

I also find the film useful to help students look beyond the demonized and often racist images of the Japanese, particularly in the context of World War II, and to see actual people living, dying, and protesting their government’s actions.

High school students enjoy the disarming and playful nature of *Barefoot Gen*’s cartoon medium. Some students are familiar with the film genre of Japanese animation, or anime, which has gained popularity in the United States.

The film’s effect is hardly playful, however, and students quickly realize that this is a serious film with character development, plot, and real emotion. Its animation allows the intense imagery
The atomic detonation of the bomb named “Little Boy” over the city of Hiroshima killed almost 120,000 civilians and 20,000 military personnel. The explosion reached into the millions of degrees centigrade and obliterated an area of 13 square kilometers. Three days later, the United States dropped “Fat Man” on Nagasaki, killing 74,000 people. These astounding numbers do not include the estimated 130,000 who died within five days of the bombings or those who survived the initial explosion but suffered or died from long-term genetic damage and radiation sickness. (In offering students a broader context for the events of August 1945, I’ve found historian Howard Zinn’s work especially valuable. See the chapter “Just and Unjust Wars” from his book Declarations of Independence [HarperPerennial, 1990] and his article “The Bombs of August,” in the Progressive magazine, August 2000.)

For the post-film discussion, I mainly ask students to share their feelings and thoughts about the movie. Some say that they’ve never cried watching a cartoon before, and most remark that they can relate to Gen’s personal struggles of losing loved ones or fighting to survive in a harsh world. Across race, gender, and nationality, students consistently exhibit empathy with Gen.

I like to follow the discussion with the class using the traditional Japanese poetry forms of haiku and tanka to express their responses to the film. This works best if these can be assigned the same day as watching the movie. First we read aloud some haiku and tanka written by survivors of the bombings from White Flash/Black Rain: Women of Japan Relive the Bomb (Milkweed Editions, 1995).

The images in Barefoot Gen are powerful and devastating to watch. Thankfully, the film ends on an upbeat note of survival, because like Gen, humanity can and will triumph over devastation.


Reality
is this and only this—
the one bone
I place in the bent and burned
small school lunch tin.
—Shoda Shinoe

grabbing sand
beneath the flaming sky
is to be alive
—Kingyo Humiko

looking for her mother
the girl still has strength
to turn over corpses
—Shibata Moriyo

After discussing the imagery and themes of the haiku and tanka examples, I describe the syllabic requirements of these traditional Japanese forms. Haiku requires three lines, with five, seven, and five syllables in each line respectively, totaling 17 syllables. With five lines, tanka similarly requires five, seven, five, seven, and seven syllables respectively, totaling 31 syllables. The examples are translated from Japanese, so they do not make
good syllabic models in English, but their content is powerful enough for students to get the idea. From there, we write. Expressing emotions through poetry is hard work, and trying to make poetry fit into a limited syllable space is even harder. Fortunately, because haiku and tanka are relatively short compared to essays or other writing assignments, students don’t feel too intimidated and, however frustrating they may find the writing, they have fun fitting their words into the puzzle that the traditional forms present. Students’ writing has been outstanding, demonstrating their abilities to empathize with the Japanese people who suffered the bombing.

screams the sound of souls
being devoured, banished
from all existence
—Joseph Tauti

red sky floats above
starts to drip the blackness down
towards the drying deathbed
now scorched by the liquid fire
bleak chariots move the dead
—Amanda O’Connor

Little children scream
They look for their families
which they will not find
—Shanique Johnson

Understandably, the feeling of dread and despair evident in the student examples underscores the immense human suffering. Dropping an atomic bomb on real, live people is serious, and it is important that students recognize this fact.

In the end, the mushroom clouds left by “Little Boy” and “Fat Man” towered over more than just the two cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Those explosions cast their shadows over Asia and Europe, signaling to the rest of the world, especially the Soviet Union, that the United States was indeed the dominant global military power with the devastating firepower to back it up. More important, and more frightening, U.S. officials demonstrated their willingness to use that firepower.”

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This article was previously published in Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 1, a publication of Rethinking Schools. To order Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 1, visit www.rethinkingschools.org or call 800-669-4192.

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