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Miki Takeuchi

Picturebooks often reflect the époque, and this has become apparent since the disaster of 11th March 2011 when a severe earthquake of an un-heard of magnitude shook north-eastern Japan and the subsequent tsunami and nuclear plant disaster caused tremendous damage. Japanese people’s outlook turned from the expectation of a comfortable, prosperous future to an unpredictable dystopian one, and this is reflected throughout many of the picturebooks published since the disaster. There were significant changes in picturebooks such as expressing emotions and imposing questions, and this paper explores various post-3.11 publications to consider some of the trends.

**Background: why literature is needed after disaster?**

Almost everyone in Japan can remember what they were doing on 11th March 2011. Each personal experience of the disaster exemplifies a unique experience which may have been terrifying or traumatic enough in itself. Such experiences can be intensified or allayed through the imagination and the experiences of others which can often be better understood in more far-reaching ways through stories, be personal or fictional.

My own experience was terrifying enough – of a tremor which was initially small and slow but didn’t seem to stop, both physically and metaphorically. The ground shook more and more violently as if something had woken under my feet – but even this feeling conjured by my imagination had its limitations. That night, the TV was full of shocking scenes of the disaster and never-ending fires.
Gradually, people became aware that the tragedy was far beyond what we could imagine. The next day on 12th March, the disaster accelerated when one of the four nuclear power plants in Fukushima Daiichi exploded. The news spread rapidly all over the world that the earthquake had destroyed many important sites, including airports and ports and the transportation network. Production activities dropped sharply and the residents in north-eastern Japan all suffered from a shortage of commodities and power. The shelves of stores were empty. Most of the train stations, schools and other public places were dark and dimly lit in order to save energy. I felt like this was the beginning of the END. Maybe these feelings were shared more or less, among the citizens in the Tokyo Metropolitan area at that time, but they may be different for people from elsewhere. For example, while I experienced the fear of the first huge tremor in an underground shopping center, then the public pandemonium caused by the many aftershocks and the personal panic of being on immobilized public transport as I was on my way to pick up my young son from primary school, my husband who was working overseas at the time had completely different impressions. He came back to Japan a month after the disaster. Of course he knew about the earthquake through the media and he felt worried about the situation, but his reaction was slightly different from us, not so nervous. The same could be said about my experiences and feelings compared to those of people in the Tohoku region since the situation was so much worse there. Most people cannot fully understand the feelings of those in Fukushima who were directly affected by the nuclear fallout and who lost everything including their livelihoods. There is a definite difference between knowing details and experiencing the actual event. Information and details can be shared through the media but feelings are more difficult to convey because everyone can have different personal experiences of the same incident.
Atsuko Asano wrote about these kinds of different feelings and experiences in *Special Lectures on 3.11: How You Should Live* (特別授業3.11 君たちはどう生きるか, Figure 1), a collection of essays by renowned authors for young people, published in March 2012. Asano begins with her experiences of visiting the evacuation area in Tohoku:

There is a big gap between the people who encountered the disaster and lost everything and those of us who didn’t really experience it firsthand. I don’t think this gap can be ever fully bridged even though we can make an effort to talk, listen and understand one other (13).2

Even though Asano admits the difficulty of bridging any gap in experience, she suggests that the “imagination” is key:

Trying to understand an experience which one hasn’t actually experienced is difficult, but even without this actual experience, one should be able to have similar experiences through the power of imagination (25).

It is her belief in the “power of imagination” which enabled her to write a new book, *Beyond*, which is additional volume of her dystopian fantasy, *No.6* series. Asano says that she could not end her long fantasy with an easy happy ending and wrote another volume to show her idea of future vision.3

Asano stresses the importance of expressing oneself to overcome tragedy, especially with regard to 3.11:

To reconsider and help overcome the disaster, one must express oneself through writing, singing, dancing, talking or playing with friends. Just open yourself up, come out from your shell and express the real you (25).

Disasters evoke emotions which encourage artists to express all possible feelings
through creative work, and picturebooks published since 3.11 offer a rich source of such expression.

**Various Picturebooks and categories**

Post-3.11 picturebooks can be divided into four categories:

1. Factual
2. Emotional
3. Questioning
4. Philosophical

**(1) Factual picturebooks**

A good example of a factual picturebook is *Run Upward! Fleeing from the Tsunami* (はしれ、上へ！つなみてんでんこ, Figure 2) which is based on an actual experience of the earthquake. Kamaishi City in Iwate prefecture has its own proverb “Tsunami Tendenko,” which means one should flee and save one’s own life if a tsunami is coming. Six hundred children were saved from the gigantic tsunami by following this adage and running to a nearby mountain which they climbed to avoid the danger. The climactic scene of the book, which covers four double spreads with open-out leaves, creates a powerful impression of a real episode (Figure 3). The facial expressions of the children and adults show their desperation and fear as they flee from the tsunami which is so huge it looks like it is about to swallow them whole. Even though this picturebook is based on fact, it has the power to conjure a similar scene and convey some of the feelings of what it would be like...
to face such a terrible calamity.

Another picturebook in the factual category is *Hana’s Quick Walks* (はなちゃんのはやあるき はやあるき, Figure 4), based on another account of actual events at a kindergarten on the coast of Iwate Prefecture. Ninety children and fourteen staff members ran as fast as possible from the tsunami and all fortunately survived. People said it was a miracle, but thought the reason for their survival was the kindergarten’s monthly emergency drills. In the picturebook, Hana always walked slowly during the drills but after the principal tells her that she should walk faster if she wanted to save herself, Hana trained hard and gradually became quicker. The book therefore records the disaster and conveys an important lesson for future generations. For child readers, this book encourages them to think of these future possibilities and trains their imagination.

(2) Emotional picturebooks
Some picturebooks combine fact with emotion. An example of this is *The Road of Flowering Dogwood Trees* (ハナミズキのみち), which arose out of a mother’s
deep sadness for her son who was lost to the tsunami at Rikuzentakata in Iwate Prefecture. It is about a mother who misses her son so desperately that she cannot stop crying. After three monotonous double spreads of the earthquake and tsunami, she suddenly hears her son’s voice asking her to plant some of his favorite trees, Flowering Dogwoods, as a sign that people is safe. From this page on, the pictures are bright and colorful as the son’s voice recalls memories of his childhood. Dogwood Trees line the pages as if in response to the boy’s request, and the bright colors of the flowers provide an impression of hope. This book has been reprinted every year since and readers have been inspired to make the son’s request a reality by planting a row of flowing dogwood trees along the road in Rikuzentakata, thus showing the power of a mother’s dream and of imaginative emotional picturebooks.

Many fictional picturebooks which convey strong emotions have also been created about 3.11. Shuhei Hasegawa’s work offers a good example. His picturebooks are unique and he hasn’t made many during his long career. Hasegawa made his debut with an autobiographical picturebook about being a victim of milk poisoning, *I Don’t Like Hasegawa* (はせがわくんきらいや, Figure 5). Since the earthquake, however, he has created two which conjure deep emotions: *The Swimmer* (およぐひと) in 2013 and *I Miss You* (アイタイ) in 2014. The narrator of *The Swimmer* is a man who by coincidence happened to be in the disaster-stricken area at the time of the tsunami. He talks about what he saw in the moment. There was a man who was swimming against the flow of people (1).
I want to go this way to get back home (6).
Maybe this man wants to save his loved ones but as he swims, he becomes transparent and finally disappears into the water (8-10). The man then explains people he met one after another: a young mother with her baby who is so scared that she is frantically trying to escape from the leaking radiation (11-16). In the end, it becomes apparent that he is talking to his daughter, when she says,

You were on the spot and saw everything with your own eyes. Please tell me about what you saw and what exactly happened. Of course, I saw news about the disaster on TV and in the newspapers, but was that everything? Was it the same as what you saw? (23-26).

The father begins to answer with, “What I saw was…”, but then he becomes lost for words: (Figure 6)

What I saw was a man was trying to get back to his home, a mother wanting to get as far away as possible. All of them were ordinary people just like us who didn’t appear in the news....

Then he simply stopped talking (28).

He simply hugs his daughter, with his eyes full of tears.

Sorry, but I cannot explain it in words yet, but I will certainly tell you one day when I feel ready.

His daughter answers,

I see, I will wait (30).

This picturebook describes the circumstances of many people’s suffering but more particularly, it conveys the sadness of the father and the sheer inexpressibility of most aspects of the broader disaster.
(3) Questioning picturebooks

Just after a disaster people are shocked and at a loss. Gradually, however, many questions come to mind: Why did this disaster happen? Why did it happen to me and my family? Why do we have to suffer from this difficult circumstance? Did I do something wrong to deserve punishment? How can I survive from now on? These feelings may be strongly shared among the victims in Fukushima.

One such questioning book is *The Farm of Hope* (希望の牧場, Figure 7) by Eto Mori, the renowned young adult (YA) novelist. After the earthquake Mori was concerned about that many cows were being slaughtered because they were affected by radiation exposure. After she heard about an exceptional farm where such cows were being cared for instead of being killed, Mori visited with an illustrator and an editor, and they created this book. The book questions the meaning of farm production through the seeming lack of profit in caring for cows which could not be sold as meat. The protagonist-owner of the farm questions “hope and life” but never gives up. This farmer addresses the audience in a monologue throughout:

> Everybody else fled from the radiation, but I stayed at my farm alone. I kept my cows which I could no longer sell or eat. The local government ordered me to kill cows several times. All the farmers obeyed the order except me: they killed their cows. I decided not to kill my cows because I am a cowherd. Day after day, I fed my cows and cleaned their sheds. He kept his daily routine as a cowherd, just as he had before the earthquake. People began to call his farm “The Farm of Hope”. The farmer asks himself (and
the reader) several times, “Is there any hope here? Is there any meaning in life?” On the last page, he declares:

“I will continue to consider this forever and never give up. Whether there is hope or not, I will remain here with my cows because I am a cowherd.”

This is a sad book but is also very powerful in its ability to make people think about the meaning of life. The questions the farmer raises are difficult to answer, and the situation is tragic because the cows are sick with radiation and his and their future seem hopeless. However, the cowherd does not complain to the local government. His calm monologue encourages readers to contemplate the following questions: Is there any hope? What is the meaning of life? Who is to blame for this situation? Should the cows continue to live such a miserable life? Thus this is definitely one of questioning books.

*Open the Window Because the Morning has Come* (あさになったので まどをあけますよ, Figure 8) by Ryoji Arai is another picturebook which questions life. Arai developed the idea for the book from his travel experience to Tohoku after the earthquake and held workshops with many students. While there are different scenes on each page of the book – from mountain villages, through the countryside or coast to high-rise buildings in the city – the same phrase is repeated in each spread: “Open the window because the morning has come”. Whereas this repetition may evoke the fear of loss of the simple daily routine of opening a window in the morning and feeling the breeze and fresh air, it may also conjure reassurance through such routine. Further, the repetition of the same phrase
alongside the different pictures arouses reader interest by stimulating questions and ideas about possible meanings and feelings.

Another example of a book arising from the Fukushima disaster which raises questions is *The Spinach is Crying* (ほうれんそうは ないでいます, Figure 9) by Minoru Kamata and Yoshifumi Hasegawa. *The Spinach is Crying* interrogates ecological sustainability through an emotional depiction of food: the sadness of vegetables, grains and fish which cannot be eaten due to radiation contamination. Their sadness encourages consideration of ecology and the environment through the anthropomorphization of non-human elements.

The land is crying. The sea is crying. The sky is crying. Trees are crying. Flowers are crying. Animals are crying. All of them are crying, but they don’t want to cry anymore.

This picturebook is a powerful representation of the impossibility of restoring nature to its pre-disaster condition.

Picturebooks which question the nuclear disaster also remind us about other nuclear tragedies such as the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and the nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands by the United States in the 1940s and 50s. Memories of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima have been evoked in two recent picturebooks inspired by the Fukushima disaster. They are both penned
by poet Arthur Binard who writes in Japanese. Binard’s interest in nuclear power can be traced back to his earlier book about a fishing crew’s irradiation from nuclear fallout after nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands. *This is Home, Ben Shahn’s The Fifth Fukuryumaru.* (ここが家だ ベン・シャーンの第五福竜丸, Figure 10) presents a compilation of American artist Ben Shahn’s oil paintings on the topic. This and the following books reveal the risk of human-made nuclear power which humans cannot control.

*I am Searching* (さがしています, Figure 11), with photographs by Tadashi Okakura, was published in 2012, which focuses on fourteen items damaged by the atomic blast and selected from the approximately 21,000 donations from the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Archives. Photographs include a clock, cotton work gloves, an iron kettle and a melted lunch box. Each is accompanied by their first-person words which tell of their recollection of the moment the bomb hit Hiroshima and are still looking for their owners who would surely have died instantly. The first, the clock, stopped at exactly the same time as the atomic bomb hit Hiroshima, being 8:15 on 6th August in 1945. The desperate longing of the items reveals the fear of the nuclear weapons and the insanity of humankind.

Another book about the Hiroshima bomb since
3.11 is *The Dome’s Story* (ドームがたり, Figure 12) in 2017 by the same author, Arthur Binard, and illustrator Koji Suzuki. The book is about how the atomic bomb killed 400,000 in Hiroshima and the upper part of the building near the center of the blast to expose the steel framing, now known as “the atomic dome”, has become a World Heritage site. This picturebook, like *I am searching*, personifies the dome as it tells of its construction, the atomic bomb, and the history of nuclear power used for generating electricity. The artist’s depiction of invisible nuclear radiation particles as small fragments of shattered glass suggests the implications of any future nuclear power plant explosion. Moreover, the anthropomorphized face of the dome gazes out to confront viewers with the seriousness and suggest the fearsome consequences of radiation to both humans and nature. It also shows some of the risks of radiation contamination in order propose the shutting down of nuclear power stations before any other such disaster hits Japan, and demonstrates how feeling regretful after a disaster is useless.

(4) Philosophical books

The question to use nuclear power pushes people think of wider issues of life: *How should we live?* To think of this kind of philosophical issue, one good book which reminds readers of is *How You Should Live* (君たちはどう生きるか, Figure 13) by Genzaburo Yoshino. This is not a picturebook, but a book written 80 years ago as the last volume of ‘A Library of Books for Young People’ (「日本少国民文庫」). The aforementioned Special Lectures on 3.11: How You Should Live is a homage to this book which was published during
Japan’s dark época in 1937; a military coup d’état had compromised the democratic government; Japanese society was in favor of the war; the war against mainland China had already begun; and the majority of publishers obeyed the Japanese government’s pro-war stance. This series, however, refused to comply and continued to be open-minded forwards to foreign cultures in their publishing policy, publishing 16 books from 1935 to 1937, some of which were reprinted after the war. *How You Should Live* is one which has been repeatedly published since that time. Last year’s version was the biggest yet and demand has sky rocketed, with teachers and librarians recommending the 2017 textbook version, which together with the comic book version, sold a total of 2.6 million copies within 18 months. Many commentators have tried to analyze why this book is so appealing now.

The book is about a 15 year old boy who is in his second year of junior high school. His father has passed away and he lives with his mother. His uncle, an ex-editor, has many books and loves reading. The uncle loves his nephew and nicknames him Copelkun, named after the philosopher Copernicus. Copelkun always thinks deeply about finding better way to live life as a human being. When he betrays his best friend, however, and he is crushed by his own mental defectiveness, his uncle writes helpful messages in a notebook and gives it to Coplekun. His uncle’s messages encourage Copelkun to overcome his defects, and he makes up his mind to keep thinking deeply about important issues of life.

In an article “Around *How You Should Live*, now”, the novelist Kaho Nashiki suggests that the humanist values of the difficult war period are being appreciated now because of the close attention Coplekun’s uncle and mother pay him. The moral is that young people need to think deeply about life and the future while adults around them should keep nurturing them with affection.
Such philosophies are also taken up in picturebooks such as those by the renowned author, Shinsuke Yoshitake. Four of his books have been listed favorites with primary school students (Popura, 2018). It indicates not only adults but also children are wanting for books related to philosophy recently.

Yoshitake’s first book, *It Might Be an Apple* (りんごかもしれない, Figure 14), uses the concept of ‘apple’ to illustrate how to think more deeply and broadly about seemingly simple things.

One day, the protagonist comes home from school and says, “Hey, what’s that?”

The book continues:

On the table, there was an apple. But wait a minute. It might not be an apple at all. (2)

Suddenly he starts doubting whether this is an apple or not. If not, he thinks:

It might be a huge cherry. It might be filled with jelly. It might be all peel with no apple inside. Or it might be half apple and half orange.

It might be a red fish, curled up into a ball. (3-4)

His imagination doesn’t stop. He thinks that it might be an egg, a ball, an alien? And so on. He also imagines how its tastes; sour, spicy, or like rubber. Finally, he eats it and discovers, “It’s delicious!” (29).

Yoshitake successively published two more similarly philosophical books: *Can I Build Another Me?* (ぼくのニセモノをつくるには) and *What Happens Next?* (このあとどうしちゃおう). Whether children can understand philosophy or not, they love Yoshitake’s picturebooks because they are interesting, humorous and stimulate the imagination, making readers think and see ordinary things in
different ways. Children may feel uncertainty of the future after 3.11 and welcome the opportunity to think inspired by philosophical picturebooks.

**Conclusion**

This paper identifies several types of picturebooks which have arisen since the triple disaster in 2011, and indicates the potential power of picturebooks to make people think deeply. The Fukushima triple disaster completely changed Japanese people’s values and priorities in their lives. We must think about our lives and future seriously. This is one of the reasons why philosophical picturebooks and children’s books have recently become so popular. The different categories, factual, emotional, questioning and philosophical, also reflect the process of people’s reactions and thoughts after 3.11 and other disasters. These four steps recognize the lessons, the values and future visions which can be absorbed from 3.11.

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Note

1 This paper was first presented as “Post 3.11 Japanese Children’s books and Picturebooks” at Hong Kong Open University in May, 2018.
2 All translations are my own.
3 “Interview with Atsuko Asano, what No.6 asked and what was questioned by No.6” in Perfect Guide of No.6. (Kodansya, 2011, pp90-97)
4 Children’s vote for No1 book in 2017 (小学生がえらぶ! こどもの本総選挙, www.poplar.co.jp)