
MEDIA, ARTS, AND CULTURE REVIEW

Nakazawa Keiji, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*.
USA: Last Gasp of San Francisco, 2004, 284 pages, \$14.95

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When it exploded at 8:15 am, August 6th in 1945, Nakazawa Keiji was six years old, only one mile away from ground zero.² He survived the blast and heat due to the school's concrete wall next to him which functioned as a sort of shelter. The next thing he saw was the completely devastated, nightmarish landscape of the city. It wasn't until much later that he knew the explosion was caused by the atomic bomb dropped in Hiroshima. The bomb deprived him of all his family except for his mother and a newly-born baby sister. Several years later, he wrote a story about his wartime and postwar experience through the eyes of a boy. Nakazawa's *Barefoot Gen* [*Hadashi no Gen*] is a semi-autobiographical *manga* [Japanese comic] based on his experience of the atomic bomb and the subsequent suffering and struggles in the postwar Hiroshima.³

Nakazawa was born in 1939 and grew up in Hiroshima. His father was a *Nihonga* [Japanese traditional painting] painter and also active in an experimental theater troupe. During World War II, Nakazawa's father was outspoken about his anti-war, pacifist ideas which often caused him trouble, including imprisonment under the military regime of those days. Influenced by his father, young Nakazawa gradually learned the brutality and contradictions of the wartime government and sentiment. What Nakazawa also inherited from his father was a talent of drawing, which was later manifested in his manga works. Along with many other contemporary manga artists in Japan, *Shin-Takarajima* [*New Treasure Island*] (1947), by the "god of manga" Tezuka Osamu, inspired young Nakazawa to pursue his career in the promising field of manga in postwar Japan. In 1962, he became a professional manga artist and began writing sport and adventure stories. He wrote the manga, *I Saw It* [*Ore wa Mita*] (1963), which narrates his own experience as the survivor

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2 Japanese names are listed in Japanese order, meaning the family name comes before the given name.

3 As of March 1st, 2009, there were 8 volumes of *Barefoot Gen* translated into English. The last 2 volumes will be released in future by the Last Gasp of San Francisco.

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of the atomic bomb. His editor then allowed him to explore it further. The result was an over 2000 page-long manga, *Barefoot Gen*.

The story of *Barefoot Gen* is developed around a schoolboy named Nakaoka Gen, modeled on Nakazawa himself with slight modification. From this boy's perspective, *Barefoot Gen* narrates stories about the people who faced oppression and persecution by police, teachers, and militarists during wartime; the social confusion and the rampancy of gangs; the discrimination of *hibakusha* - people who were exposed to radiation and suffered not only from disfigurement and radiation sickness, but were also discriminated against by other citizens - and the recovery of Hiroshima. Documenting the social and historical accounts of the tragic incidents of the period, *Barefoot Gen* also focuses on the vitality and strength of Gen who never succumbs to the hardships he encounters just as the opening image of wheat symbolically suggests the strength of it which springs back no matter how many times it is trampled.

In Japan, *Barefoot Gen* is perhaps one of the most well-known comics read by different generations. It was first serialized in 1973 in a weekly boy's magazine, *Shōnen Jump*, one of the bestselling magazines in Japan. It then continued to appear in various journals and newspapers until 1985, when it was eventually authorized in four volumes. The manga soon became popular among parents and educators in Japan; consequently, *Barefoot Gen* has been selected as one of the "recommended books" for school children, along with other important literary works. Because of this, many Japanese people have the opportunity to read this manga in either classrooms or libraries when they are young. Considering the horrible depictions within the work, such as the people dragging their own melted skin, maggot-infested disfigured bodies, and burned-out corpses, the manga may be considered too graphic for children especially in North America. But Nakazawa does not hold back the horrible depictions because, for Nakazawa, they represent both what he witnessed after the bomb and the ugliness and grotesqueness of war itself.

Although the majority of the manga is based on Nakazawa's own experience, there are several sequences that seem fictional. In an interview, Nakazawa remarks that *Barefoot Gen* is a combination of true stories that happened to him and other people in Hiroshima.⁴ This statement indicates that the manga embodies both his personal, autobiographical memoir and the collective memory of the survivors and their sufferings during and after the dehumanizing, brutal conditions after the bomb. Yet, *Barefoot Gen* also offers a glimpse of hope with the narration of the vivacious lives of Gen and other orphans, the appearance of a few humane and good-hearted people, and even humorous episodes. The true strength of the manga, then, comes not only from its historical documentation of horrifying atrocity, but also from its powerful dexterity of story-telling.

⁴ "Keiji Nakazawa interviewed by Alan Gleason" in *The Comics Journal* #256 (October: 2003). pp. 38 - 51.

It is often pointed out that many Japanese representations of the war in literature, film and other cultural productions tend to depict the Japanese only as the victims of war, downplaying the aspect of being the perpetrator of it. But Nakazawa's work is explicit in revealing the violence and brutality conducted by the Japanese. His criticism is emphatically aimed at Japanese militarists and political leaders, as well as the Japanese citizens who participated in and supported the war. His criticism is especially harsh, which led Art Spiegelman, the author of *Maus* (1986), to state in the introduction for the English translation of the work, "Nakazawa may make the work a little bit too pleasurable for American and British readers."

In recent years, there has been a revisionist movement in Japan that has brought about a new 'white-washed' account of Japanese imperialism in historical textbooks. Within such a reactionary move, *Barefoot Gen* remains an important reminder of the horror and folly of nuclear warfare. As of today, *Barefoot Gen* has been translated into English, French, German, Korean, Russian, Spanish, Indonesian, Esperanto, and Norwegian. The message of Nakazawa's *Barefoot Gen*, thus, is shared by the younger generation of Japan as well as by people in other countries.