



Book Review: The Bamboo Sword

Written by Margi Preus

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This historical fiction novel is based on a true story and focuses on a thirteen-year-old Japanese boy, Yoshi. It is set in the 1850s, a time when Japan was opening a door to the West, ending 250 years of cultural isolation. The book is a companion to *Heart of a Samurai* (Preus, 2010), a 2011 Newbery Medal Honor Book about the life of Manjiro, America's first Japanese resident in the 1840s.

Japan had traded extensively with European countries since the 1540s, but in 1641, Shogun Ieyasu Tokugawa banned communication under *Sakoku*, the locked country policy, because he was afraid Christianity would weaken his authority. This isolation lasted for approximately 250 years, until Commodore Matthew Perry of the United States Navy sailed to Japan on Black Ships and demanded diplomatic relations.

Yoshi longs to become a samurai, an elite swordsman, but his dream does not come true due to his servant-class status. Although becoming a samurai is not achievable, Yoshi continues his sword practice with a bamboo stick he imagines is a sword. He believes that the sword is the only solution to everything.

The arrival of Americans in Japan is a turning point in Yoshi's life because he becomes an apprentice bodyguard for Manjiro, who is on his way to Edo (former name of Tokyo) as an ambassador of American trade for the emperor. He also encounters Jack, an American boy separated from his companions and the Black Ships, and builds a close relationship. Yoshi is also intrigued by American culture and the English language he learns from Manjiro and Jack. As he learns about America, he becomes caught between Japanese and American cultures and struggles to find his own place. He is also encouraged to look for solutions and perspectives beyond his sword, and becomes determined to "to see more, to know more" and even "to be more" (p. 236).

The story takes place in the 19th century and has an underlying theme of intercultural learning. Through dialogue between Yoshi and Jack, Yoshi and Manjiro, and the Japanese officers and Matthew Perry, readers encounter the challenges and difficulties faced by people engaged in intercultural communication. Readers are also given a glimpse into Japanese lifestyles, society, culture, traditions, and the relationship between Japan and the U.S. during that time.

*The Bamboo Sword* can be paired with books that address cultural identity and cross-cultural experience themes, including the author's own works, such as *Heart of a Samurai* (2010). *Manjiro: The Boy Who Risked His Life for Two Countries* (Emily McCully,

2013) is a picture-book biography about Manjiro's exploration of America and his life in Japan. This book shows readers his life journey. *Commodore Perry in the Land of the Shogun* (Rhoda Blumberg, 1985) is a 1986 Newbery Honor Book that gives readers the opportunity to see the international interactions during the 19th century from multiple perspectives, including both the Japanese and American perspectives.

Margi Preus is an American writer who writes popular plays, picture books, and novels for young readers. She is also a children's literature instructor at the College of St. Scholastica and the University of Minnesota-Duluth. She has received numerous awards, including a 2015 ALA/ALSC Notable Book award for *West of the Moon* (2014) and a 2013 Notable Book for a Global Society award for *Shadow on the Mountain* (2012). She has traveled extensively, including Japan, and acknowledges experts in Japan along with other research sources. Her website has additional information and access to her books.

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