

# SCBWI Japan Translation Group JAPANESE CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

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## A Memoir in Translation Opens a Hidden Door

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*By Malavika Nataraj, Singapore*

Two years ago, I attended a concert where I heard an Okinawan all-women's group sing melodious ballads about the rich, natural beauty of the Ryukyu Islands. The shaman-like lead singer, with her waist-length grey hair, played an ancient snakeskin *sanshin*. As the beautiful voices rose in song, I felt their pain and sadness vibrating within me.

From then on, I was fascinated by Okinawa with its waving palms and turquoise waters—Japanese, yet so different. I wanted to understand the pain of the Okinawan people, their pride and their plaintive cry for peace. It was at about this time that I came across *The Girl with the White Flag*, and feeling inexplicably drawn to it, began to read.

The book begins with Tomiko Higa's recollections of an almost idyllic childhood, growing up on a farm in rural Shuri, the old capital of the Ryukyu Kingdom. After her mother's death, she spends early childhood years with her father, digging up sweet potatoes from their field for lunch and listening to the wisdom he has to share. But soon, the threat of war looms large and seven-year-old Tomiko must prepare to flee with her siblings, when her father does not return from a trip into town. Hiding in caves that dot the coastline nearby, the children travel south with other refugees to find shelter, away from falling bombs and gunfire. Not long afterward, Tomiko's brother Nini falls prey to a bullet-wound in his head, and little Tomiko becomes separated from her two older sisters.

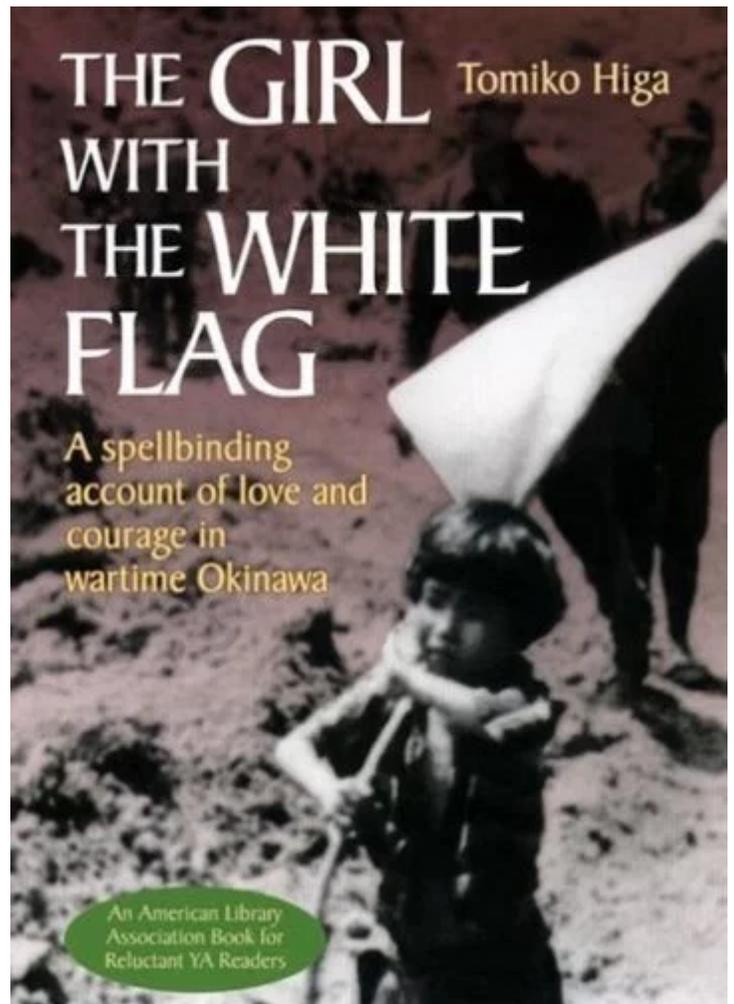
Here begins Tomiko's solo, nightmarish journey of survival. She spends weeks searching for her sisters, dodging the bullets and bombs that chase her very footsteps. Hiding in the tall pampas grass, ducking in and out of caves, she somehow lives on, all the while believing that her dead brother's spirit is watching out for her. Throughout her ordeal, she also believes that her father's voice is in her head guiding her and keeping her alive.

And maybe it is. For in this miraculous tale of survival in a land torn apart by war, a seven-year old child with no real survival skills finds raw carrots in an abandoned field, food in the haversacks of dead soldiers, and drinkable water where all the rivers run red with the blood of her fellow Okinawans.

After weeks of traversing this landscape, little Tomiko finally stumbles upon an underground cave, inhabited by an old, ailing couple. Grandma and Grandpa, as she calls them, become her family for a little while, before the old man sends Tomiko out of the cave, telling her that she is too young to die with them, that she must live. So into the sunlight she finally emerges, waving a white cloth torn from Grandpa's clothing, tied to a stick.

At the end of the Second World War in 1945, a young American war photographer named John Hendrickson was documenting the surrender of Japanese civilians on the island of Okinawa, when he stopped to take a picture of a little girl holding a white flag.

This photograph re-surfaced in Japan decades after it was taken, and the girl in the picture became a symbol of strength, love and hope—an emblem of survival and peace in a place once devastated by war. The child, meanwhile, had grown up and rebuilt her life, burying her painful memories. It wasn't until the discovery of the photo set off a chain of rumours about the girl's identity, that Tomiko Higa thought of sitting down and penning her own true story.



(<http://www.renaissancebooks.co.uk/Authors/57-/Dorothy-Dorothy-Britton>) Left: Dorothy Britton ([RenaissanceBooks.co.uk](http://www.renaissancebooks.co.uk))

When Dorothy Britton—a well-known poet, translator and composer who spent a large part of her life in Japan—translated Higa's book into English, she opened a door hidden behind a tangle of vines, and let the English-speaking world into a place it knew very little about.

In today's world where terrorists, bombings and security threats are all a part of our lives, the desire for world peace is as close and as personal as it was—and still is—for the Okinawan people.

Dorothy Britton loved Japan and deeply understood the sentiments of Japanese people. She was often described as being "Japanese but in western skin." During her lifetime, she wrote poetry and articles about the country she loved and also translated several well-known works such as Tetsuko Kuroyanagi's famous memoir *Totto-chan: The Little Girl at the Window*, as well as *A Haiku Journey (Oku no hosomichi)* by the famous poet Matsuo Basho. Britton also authored the historical work *Prince and Princess Chichibu* and translated *The Japanese Crane* by Tsuneo Hayashida. Britton passed away

(<https://ihatov.wordpress.com/2015/03/28/in-memory-of-dorothy-britton-and-miyoko-matsutani/>) in 2015, at her home in Hayama, a week before her memoir *Rhythms, Rites and Rituals: My Life in Japan in Two-step and Waltz-time* was to be released.

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