Loss in Picture Books about the Tōhoku Earthquake

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Abstract

This thesis consists of an analysis of two Japanese picture books about death of a loved one during the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami on March 11th, 2011. I apply a broad theoretical framework to place the picture books within a larger literary and cultural context. These books deal with a topic that is doubly traumatic: the trauma of a sudden natural catastrophe is entangled with the death of a loved one. My thesis investigates how the creators of the picture books make the topic accessible for children, how these narrative and artistic choices affect the stories being told, and what tropes and themes they have in common.

Mother's Lullaby (*Kaasan no komoriuta),* written by Konno Hitomi and illustrated by Imoto Yōko, follows three bear siblings after the death of their mother. Konno and Hitomi create distance between the story and the events of 3.11, which gives the reader more space to process complex and difficult emotions. It also makes the book more accessible to a larger audience, and makes it possible to include a narrative that discusses guilt and responsibility as a counterpoint to the story of the grieving bears.

Sunflower Hill (Himawari no oka), written by Hakata Tan and illustrated by Matsunari Mariko, presents the reader with a group of mothers whose children have died in the tsunami. In the aftermath of the disaster, the mothers decide to grow sunflowers at a hill close to the place where their children died. This creates both a memorial and a signpost for any other disasters. Hakata Tan's documentary-like text is offset by Matsunari Mariko's childlike, and then liminal, pictures, creating a space where the living and dead can coexist.

While the two books approach the themes of grief and trauma in very different ways artistically, they both deal with several of the same themes in similar ways, from their depiction of mothers to their treatment of religion. Both books also balance a need for distance from the details of the disaster with a need for authenticity.

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1 *Introduction*

On March 11th, 2011, the east coast of Japan was struck by a triple disaster. At 14:46 local time, an earthquake with a magnitude of 9.0 on the Richter scale could be felt as far as Southern Kyushu. The earthquake itself lasted only six minutes, but the damage it caused was considerable. The quake unleashed several tsunamis that devastated six prefectures, and triggered a large-scale accident at Fukushima 1, Japan's fourth oldest nuclear power plant. The combined disaster left almost 16,000 confirmed dead, and, as of 2015, more than two thousand people were still missing. It had such a profound impact that some Japanese scholars have suggested moving from defining our time as being after World War Two (*sengo*) to after the disaster of 3.11 (*saigo*) (Iwata-Weickgenannt and Geilhorn 2017).

Children are not exempt from disaster, though we may wish it were otherwise. If anything, they are *more* vulnerable than adults, as they are still developing in the areas of social, mental and physical health. A child has less experience and fewer resources than an adult, and they are often reliant on adults in times of crisis. These factors make children more likely victims of natural disasters, but also leave them more susceptible to long-term impacts on their psychological, physical, and social development. Traumatic experiences related to natural disasters in childhood can have a ripple effect through a person's life, potentially affecting individuals, as well as their families and communities, for years to come (Weissbecker et al 2008). The Tōhoku earthquake is no exception. According to a 2014 study of three of the prefectures that were hit the hardest, 34% of the 198 children interviewed were suffering from signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (Quigley 2014).

What stories do we tell children to help them make sense of the senseless? In my thesis, I will be looking at how two sets of Japanese picture book writers and illustrators approach writing about the Tōhoku earthquake for a younger audience. There are many ways to talk about disaster and its impact, but for simplicity's sake, I am focusing on books that feature the death of a close family member. These books deal with a topic that is doubly traumatic: the trauma of a sudden natural catastrophe is entangled with the death of a loved one. How do the creators of these picture books make the topic accessible for children? How do these narrative choices affect the stories being told?

1.1 Background and theoretical framework

This thesis makes liberal use of theory from a number of different fields, but I am primarily leaning on a number of theoretical texts about children's literature and children's picture books. I also base my methodology on ideas from second generation cognitive literary theory. I believe there is a particularly interesting synergy especially between theories about picture books and second generation cognitive literary theory, as I will elaborate on below. In addition to this general framework, I also make use of trauma theory and the concepts authenticity and distance to explain how the authors and illustrators of picture books engage with and present emotionally difficult topics.

1.1.1 Children, childhood, and children's literature

There are children everywhere, but what it *means* to be a child – and what we put into the category of "childhood" – is far from straightforward. From a purely biological point of view, children are defined primarily by being *young,* but also by their state of *being in development*: A child is developing physically, cognitively, and emotionally at a rapid pace. Because they are not yet fully developed, they are vulnerable to environmental factors and the disruption of safe, familiar routines, which in turn makes them more dependent on adult caretakers to survive and thrive (Messenger Davies 2010). This also plays out when children read. Young children do not have the same reading comprehension skills as adults, and read texts differently and for different reasons than an adult reader. Very young readers can have a hard time interpreting abstract phenomena, which makes explaining concepts like death at a level where they can understand a challenge (Appleyard 1991).

Still, this biological definition has its limitations. Biology is messy, and children grow and mature at different rates. While we may base ourselves on averages, any attempt to set a clear end date on childhood will always be arbitrary. Messenger Davies notes that not only do chronological age and maturity not necessarily match up, but the way in which we legally define maturity and adulthood are also not always consistent (2010). For example, people are considered to be adults in Norwegian society when they reach the age of eighteen, but are not legally allowed to drink until they reach twenty-two. When we think about "childhood" as a clearly bounded category, what we are *really* thinking about is not so much a product of clear-cut, rock-solid biological facts as it is a social and cultural construct.

"Childhood" as a social and cultural construct has changed throughout history, but also between cultures. Philippe Aries, a French demographic historian, ties the emergence of the idea of childhood as having value in and of itself to the seventeenth century, though this is not a universally accepted claim. In his 2001 book *Medieval Children,* Nicholas Orme criticises Aries' view, drawing published texts and songs to argue that this shift in perception had already occurred by the Medieval ages. As another counterpoint, Neil Postman theorises that modern childhood was "invented" with the invention of the printing press in late fifteenth century Europe, and the spread of literacy that followed (Messenger Davies 2010).

Views on children and childhood in Japan have also changed a great deal over time. According to Frühstück and Walthall, children in medieval Japan were essentially left to grow up on their own. By the late seventeenth century, however, children's education was becoming common. By the late nineteenth century, the view that children were "treasures above all else" had become pervasive in most parts of Japan (Frühstück and Walthall 2017).

The constructs of "childhood" and "children" are not apolitical. Sabine Frühstück draws a line between how children and soldiers were presented – and equated with each other – in the years leading up to World War Two, and the need to prepare children to be dutiful soldiers for the nation (Frühstück 2017). Stefan Tanaka goes as far as to argue that childhood has become a significant metaphor for processes inherent to the Japanese nation state (Frühstück and Walthall 2017). In the Meiji era (1868-1912), there was a strong trend of clearly separating childhood from sexuality and violence, perhaps in part influenced by the larger national push toward being seen as civilized and respectable by Western Europe (Piel 2010, Kimbrough 2015). Today, children in Japan, as well as much of the rest of the world, are often seen as fundamentally *innocent* – and it follows that this innocence is often something that is at *risk.* If innocence is integral to being a child, the loss of innocence becomes an almost existential threat (Messenger Davis 2010). This view of children and childhood influences what is seen as "appropriate" literature for younger readers. The element of danger, along with the child reader's cognitive and emotional development, makes writing about emotionally difficult or complex topics for children especially complex.

1.1.2 The difficulty of defining children's literature

Like childhood, children's literature can also be surprisingly difficult to define. Traditionally, attempts to define this area of literature have rested on a combination of subject matter (is it *appropriate* for children?) and readability (is it at the right reading level for children?). This has also been the case in Japanese children's literature research. The opening chapter of *Nihon jidou bungaku gairon* (*Overview of Japanese Children's Literature,* Nihon Bungakukai 1976) gives an overview of several Japanese scholars' definitions of what constitutes children's literature. At the time it was published, most of the definitions covered by the overview had the following three elements in common:

1. Written by adults for children. In the context of translation, this can be extended to encompass works translated by adults for children. (There are also crossover categories – i.e., works that were originally written for adults but are adapted for children, and works that were written or translated for an audience of children but are also read by adults out of their own interest.)
2. Contains pedagogical elements in the broad sense – i.e., has a socializing function.
3. Arouses children's interest and emotions (e.g., through the theme, plot, protagonist, or language). (Wakabayashi 2008, 228)

Even with this definition, however, we run into problems. While children's literature is generally written by adults for children, the second and third element are more nebulous. Ideas of what children should learn and how they should be socialized change with time and between cultures, and this can sometimes make it difficult to recognize socializing elements in books from the outside or at a distance. Furthermore, a number of current children's book theorists argue to what extent didacticism is necessary or even desirable (Mjør 2012). The third point is also highly subjective. It is difficult to assess what "arouses children's interest and emotions" without treating children as a monolith; what interests one child may not interest the next. If a work must appeal to children to be considered a children's book, how many children must it appeal to before we can call it that? If a book stops engaging children's interest and emotions over time, does it stop being a children's book?

In Japan, many scholars consider Iwaya Sazanami's (1870-1933) *Koganemaru* (1891) to be the first true Japanese children's book. The book follows the farm dog Koganemaru as he goes out to avenge his father. Before writing *Koganemaru*, Iwaya translated German fairy tales for a Japanese audience, and the book is also inspired by Goethe's *Reineke Fuchs* (translated by Inoue Tsutomu in 1884). This "birth" of Japanese children's literature owes a lot to the translations of Western works (Wakabayashi 2008). Much like the modern Japanese concept of childhood, the advent of the modern Japanese children's book coincides with the building of a modern Japanese nation state. Because of this, it is difficult to separate the birth of the Japanese children's book from the political rhetoric of the Meiji period.

Defining *Koganemaru* as the first Japanese children's book provides an interesting case study when considering the criteria of the Nihon Bungakukai. *Koganemaru* was explicitly written for a child audience; it had elements; part of its purpose was explicitly to entertain the child reader (Wakabayashi 2008). Still, *Koganemaru* is not the first Japanese book to be aimed at children. In her summary of research on toys, games, and printed material sold by book dealers for the children of wealthy merchants in the Edo period (1600-1868), Ann Herring notes that collections of *akahon*[1] and *otogizōshi*[2] were identified as works for mothers and nannies to read to children. This leads her to conclude that Koganemaru, rather than being the beginning of something entirely new, should be considered a milestone on an ongoing contiuum (Piel 2010). Judy Wakabayashi draws a distinction between *Koganemaru* and earlier works, drawing on Joan Ericson:

> As Ericson (2001:viii) points out, however, "the emphasis was on the acquisition of literacy and the propagation of state-sanctioned neo- Confucian morality, not in cultivating themes specific to children." The use of *akahon* as primers meant that they were on the whole limited to the relatively small number of children attending school. Ericson warns, therefore, against conflating *akahon* with the "Western experience" of what constitutes children's literature. (Wakabayashi 2008)

While earlier literature like *akahon* fulfil the two first points of the list, Wakabayashi writes, their purpose is not to entertain. This means that if we use the three points from the Nihon

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[1] "Red books". A type of pulpy picture book popular in the Edo period (Piel 2010).

[2] From togi, "talking companion", and sōshi, "manuscript".

Bungakukai above, *akahon* and *otogizōshi* from the Edo period cannot qualify as children's literature (2008). However, R. Keller Kimbrough disagrees with Wakabayashi. In an analysis of a child's collection of woodblock-printed picture books from the 1660s and 70s, he finds that, in addition to being child-centered, the books have a "plain disinterest in didacticism and conventional morality" (Kimbrough 2015).

Part of the difficulty with the definition of the Nihon Bungakukai is that having a socializing function and "arous[ing] children's interest and emotions" are both broad but also to some degree subjective, culturally dependent categories. In *Kamigata Kodomo ehon no gaikan* (*Overview of children's picture books of the Kyoto-Osaka region*), Nakano Mitsutoshi points out that while we tend to think of children's books as preserving, revealing, or appealing to the "spirit of childhood" (*dōshin)*, people in the Edo period considered children's books to be books that could quickly introduce children to the adult world (quoted in Kimbrough 2015). This change in what people considered to be at the heart of children's literature can perhaps be tied to the introduction of the idea of childhood as something valuable in and of itself. The introduction of Western ideas of childhood, as well as changing political values of social norms, came together to create a paradigm shift in what people at the time thought of as children's literature.

The question of what is and is not a children's book becomes even more complicated when considering the history of Japanese *picture* books. Japan has a long history of narratives that combine picture and text. The *otogizōshi* and *akahon* of the Edo period are examples of this, but word-and-image narratives have a much longer history. In her account of the history of picture book-like narratives for children in Japan, Masaki Tomoko draws a line as far back as the *emakimono* ("picture scroll") of the Heian era (794-1185). These scrolls began to be made around the tenth century, and combined both picture and text to tell a narrative (Masaki 2013).

While *emakimono* were not aimed at child readers, Masaki argues that the culture of the Heian era had a tendency to lump women and children together, and to view women as more childlike. Because of this, women and children had a degree of co-ownership of a shared culture. The conflation of woman and child makes it difficult to separate women's literature from children's literature. Furthermore, she speculates, women would read *emakimono* with children, in a situation that while very different, still mirrors the way parents read with their children today (Masaki 2013). While somewhat speculative, this strain of scholarship challenges the idea that there were no "real" narratives for children until after the introduction of European children's literature to the Japanese literary market.

All this to say: Our views on what is and isn't literature for children are not constant, and are influenced both by political and social factors. This makes using a list of criteria like the one compiled by the Nihon Bungakukai becomes difficult. In *The Narrator's Voice: The Dilemma of Children's Fiction,* Barbara Wall problematises definitions like the one provided by the Nihon Bungakukai, quoting John Rowe Townsend's somewhat off-the-cuff assertion that "[t]he only practical definition of a children's book today – absurd as it sounds – is "a book that appears on the children's list of a publisher" (1971, quoted in Wall 1991)". Wall moves away from the idea of *children's literature*, redefining it instead as *writing for children*. In this view, the *content* of books (whether it is pedagogical or interesting for children or not) is less important in determining if a book qualifies as "writing for children" than the book being written with a child reader in mind (1991). This view is consistent with the first point of the definition by the Nihon Bungakukai, but sidesteps points two and three.

While they are less useful as a firm definition of children's literature, the two remaining points of the definition are still interesting insofar as they highlight a central tension within children's literature: The didactic-literary split. In brief, this split describes two positions within children's literature theory: The idea that children's literature should be *didactic* and tied to socialisation and children's reading, and the idea that children's literature should be *literary,* cultivating aesthetics or perspectives tied to literary theory. The dynamic between the two positions have been an essential part of the field of children's literature theory since its inception, though most children's book scholars do not take categorical positions on the subject (Mjør 2012). The tension between the two is worth considering when looking at more emotionally demanding subjects. How do we balance between telling stories for children pedagogically and artistically? How much space is there for artistic expression when the topic is so very difficult?

1.1.3 Narrator and narratee

The distance between the author and a child reader is larger than the distance between the author and an adult. There are several reasons for this. First, most children rely on their parents or other adults for their reading materials. Even in situations where they are not dependent on an adult for money to *buy* books, such as when visiting a library, younger children are still dependent on adults for physical access. Therefore, people who create children's books cannot just aim their marketing at *children*; they must also market to adult sensibilities around what is appropriate for children to read.

Second, literature is communication between author and reader. However, the reader does not exist in the text itself; they are only implied through the way the text addresses them. As the author is not a child themselves, and the way they interact with the child reader (whoever they imagine that reader to be) is influenced by their view of children and childhood. If our views on what childhood is change over time, so do our ideas of what stories – and what ways of *telling* stories – are "appropriate" for children. In *The Narrator's Voice*, Barbara Wall introduces the concept of narrator and narratee to describe this relationship. They are both distinct from the real author and reader. Wall's narrator is not the real author, nor the narrating character within the book, but the "author" that a reader infers from the text. Conversely, the narratee is the hypothetical reader the work is addressed to. Further, Wall describes three separate ways of addressing the reader – double address (where the narrator makes comments "winking" at the adult reader, often at the child reader's expense), single address (where the narrator addresses the child alone), and dual address (where the narrator speaks to the child and adult alike) (Wall 1991).

1.1.4 Picture book theory

Picture books add another layer of complexity to the mix. In addition to addressing the reader through text[3], a picture book also addresses readers through pictures. Unlike illustrated books, where the text can be read independently of the pictures, and illustrations rarely add anything to the narrative that was not already in the text, the text and image of a picture book are equally important, and cannot be read separately from each other without fundamentally changing the narrative (Nikolajeva and Scott 2001). The relationship between the two is complex, and can take several different forms. In their research on different picture book typologies, Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott create the following overview of how different picture books use the relationship between picture and text:

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[3] While much of picture book scholarship uses "text" to refer to the joint sum of words and picture, I have chosen to use it to refer simply to the written, verbal text. When referring to both picture and text together, I will instead use the term /iconotext/.

- *The symmetrical picture book*, where the story features two mutually redundant narratives. Nothing is in the text that isn't in the picture, and vice versa.
- *The complementary picture book,* where text and picture fill each others' gaps.
- *The "expanding" or enhancing picture book*, where the verbal narrative depends on the visual narrative to make sense.
- *The "sylleptic" picture book*, where two or more narratives exist independently of each other. We see an example of this in *Mama Has Become a Ghost* (*Mama ga obake ni nachatta,* Nobumi 2015), where the backgrounds are full of ghosts on their own adventures while Mama and her son grapple with her death.
- *The "counterpointing" picture book*, which features two mutually dependent narratives. Nikolajeva and Scott list several varieties of counterpoint, including counterpoint in address (dual address), counterpoint in style (where, for example, the text might be read as serious, but the picture adds an humorous, ironic twist to the words), counterpoint in genre or modality (where there is a tension between the "objective", textual narrative and the "subjective", visual narrative) and counterpoint in characterisation. Counterpointing can introduce a level of irony, ambiguity, or depth to the text (Nikolajeva and Scott 2001).

Narrative techniques such as counterpointing also open up for situations where the text and picture address different audiences, or address adults and children in different ways at the same time. This is possible in part because picture and text do different jobs within the narrative, as we process them differently. Pictures communicate setting, external characterisation, and atmosphere well, but are less suited to express internal states and continuous movement. Text, on the other hand, cannot convey setting and atmosphere as quickly or in the same way as a picture, but is needed to convey dialogue and internal states. Because of these inherent differences, they also offer different perspectives on the same story – even in a completely symmetrical picture book (Nikolajeva and Scott 2001).

While there are exceptions, most picture books are primarily aimed at – or at least *marketed* towards – younger children. What age range counts as "younger children" in the case of children's books is fairly flexible. Most of the articles I found did not specify a target age. Still, *Fukuinkan Shoten*, a Japanese book retailer, recommends picture books for children from the age of ten months when the books are read with an adult (*Fukuinkan Shoten* n.d.).

According to children's writer Matsui Tadashi, "picture books are not books that children are made to read. They are books adults read to children (quoted in Kodama Takano 2011, 1)." The typical reading situation when it comes to the picture book involves three parties, (book, reader, and listener,) rather than the two parties of Barbara Wall's concept of narrator and narratee.[4] This three-part reading situation fits well with J. A. Appleyard's definition of children below the age of six as *social* readers (1991). In this more social reading situation, the text is modulated and filtered through the adult reader. This happens both through the physical aspects of the reading situation (the tone of their voice, the expression on their face, the tension of their body), but also in the reader's ability to explain and give more context to the listener (Takano 2011).

1.1.5 Picture Book Studies

The academic study of picture books is relatively new, but scholars have approached picture books from different angles over time. While this is not a comprehensive overview, I will briefly mention a few different approaches. In *Words about Pictures* (1988), Perry Nodelman approached the genre from a semiotic perspective.[5] It marked a turning point in the study of picture books; before Nodelman's examination of them, picture books were rarely studied seriously, and when they were, they were primarily assessed on their educational merit (Sahn 2019). Nodelman wrote extensively about the relationship between picture and text in picture book iconotexts, arguing that the two both amplify and define each other. "Words can make pictures into rich narrative resources," he wrote, "but only because they communicate so differently from pictures that they change the meanings of pictures. For the same reason, pictures can also change the narrative thrust of words (1988, 196)".

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[4] This is not to say that many children don't read picture books alone, or that parents don't also read books that are not picture books to their children.

[5] Semiotics is the study of signs. We use signs to interpret the world around us (University of Eastern Finland n.d.). A drawing of a tree, for example, signifies the actual tree outside; when I say the word "tree" to you, you think of your idea of a tree.

In *How Picturebooks Work* (2001), Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott attempt to create "a consistent and flexible terminology, a comprehensive international metalanguage, and a system of categories describing the variety of text/image interactions (6)". Like Nodelman, they make use of semiotic terminology, in addition to hermeneutic analysis and reader-response theory. Hermeneutic analysis "starts with the whole, proceeds to look at details, and so on, in an eternal circle known as the hermeneutic circle (Nikolajeva and Scott 2001, 2)". Nikolajeva and Scott tie this way of looking at text to the format of the picture book, where the reader shifts their focus from image to text and back again. Reader-response theory, on the other hand, is concerned with textual gaps, as well as what the *reader* brings to a text. This is also relevant to picture book studies, Nikolajeva and Scott point out, as both the text and images of a picture book are full of gaps the other can fill – but they also leave gaps for the reader (2001).

There are a number of other approaches to the study of picture books. Many approaches focus on the educational value of picture books, dealing with topics like socialisation and language acquisition. Some, like Ellen Handler Spitz' *Inside Picture Books* (1999), take a more interdisciplinary angle by involving developmental psychology (Nikolajeva and Scott 2001). Others, like *Skal vi leke en bok? Språktilegnelse gjennom bildebøker* (*Shall we play a book? Language acquisition through picture books*, 2014) by Ingvild Alfheim and Cecilie D. Fodstad, are primarily practical, and attempt to help people who work with children to become better equipped to interpret and talk about picture books with a younger audience (Alfheim and Fodstad 2014). We also find works that focus specifically on the *art* of picture books, like Lyn Ellen Lacy's *Art and Design in Children's Picture Books* (1986). Nikolajeva and Scott argue that these books are purely art criticism, rather than picture book criticism, as they only focus on the visual half of the books. Other works, like William Feaver's *When We Were Young. Two Centuries of Children's Book Illustrations* (1977) and Bettina Hürlimann's *Picture-Book World* (1967), attempt to give historical or international overviews of specific themes or stylistic trends (Nikolajeva and Scott 2001). *Postmodern Picturebooks: Play, parody, and self-referentiality* (Pantaleo and Sipe 2008) looks at contemporary picture books through a frame of postmodernism, and attempts to clarify what it means for a picture book to be postmodern.

While I make use of several strains of theory for this thesis, the picture book theory I use is mostly that of Perry Nodelman and Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott. I had originally intended to make more use of *Postmodern Picturebooks* in my analysis as well, but the framework outlined in Pantaleo and Sipe's introduction turned out to be far from an ideal match with the books I am analysing. Pantaleo and Sipe emphasise ambiguity, boundary blurring, explicit intertextuality and self-referentiality, and playfulness in their list of characteristics – things the picture books I have read about the Tōhoku earthquake largely avoid. I attribute this at least partially to the seriousness of the subject matter, though it might be interesting to do a larger study on Japanese picture books and their position on Pantaleo and Sipe's proposed continuum of postmodernity.

1.1.6 Cognitive literary theory

Cognitive literary theory combines cognitive science and philosophy of the mind when considering literary works. Historically, dominant views within cognitive science and philosophy of the mind have considered the body to be less important when trying to understand the nature of cognition (Wilson and Foglia 2017). According to proponents of these views, the mind processes information in a way that is fairly independent from specific brains, bodies, and sensory modalities. Kukkonen and Caracciolo categorise these strains of cognitive science as *first generation*. In contrast, second generation approaches the mind as a part of a larger continuum that combines biological phenomena and cultural practices (Kukkonen and Caracciolo 2014). Simply put: You are your body and your cultural experiences, and your thoughts cannot be separated from that context.

The term "second generation cognitive science" is interchangeable with a different label: "E-approaches". The E's stand for four different types of cognition:

- Embodied
- Embedded
- Extended
- Enactive (Kukkonen and Caracciolo 2014)

According to *embodied* cognitive science, cognition is fundamentally tied to the body, and not just the brain (Wilson and Foglia 2017). Reading a horror novel might make you feel sick to your stomach with fear; conversely, if you are already feeling sick, it is likely to influence how you experience the story. The smell or taste of a particular food might send you spinning into recollection, like the madeleine does for the protagonist in Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913). *Embedded* cognitive science sees cognition as deeply dependent on the surrounding natural and social environment of an actor. This strand of science focuses on ways that actors off-load cognitive processing onto the environment, and is especially concerned with the ways cognitive activity is distributed across both the agent and their physical, social, and cultural environment (Wilson and Foglia 2017). An example might be how an established couple remember different types of information, relying on the other to fill in the gaps of their own memory, or the way we save phone numbers to our mobile phones. *Extended* cognitive science takes it a step further, claiming that cognitive systems not only *depend* on an actor's surrounding environment, but that it extends beyond the boundary of an individual organism; the environment can to some extent be *part of* the actor's cognitive system (Wilson and Foglia 2017). Finally, *enacted* cognitive science, or enactivism, emphasises how cognition is shaped by interactions between an actor and their environment (Ward, Silverman, and Villalobos 2017).

While the four E-approaches describe similar phenomena and sometimes overlap, conflating them is somewhat problematic, as there are some distinctions between the theories and methodological approaches that follow from each of them (Kukkonen and Caracciolo 2014). The idea of an extended cognition, for example, is far more radical than an embodied one. Still, the different E-approaches share a commitment to critiquing and replacing first generation approaches to cognitive processes within cognitive science. They also challenge standard positions in the philosophy of mind, such as the idea that the mind and the brain are one and the same (Wilson and Foglia 2017).

While I am using E-approaches as a background for my methodological approach, rather than heavily involving it in my theoretical analysis, I believe that looking to the different E-approaches (in particular, embedded, embodied, and enacted cognitive science) gives us an interesting angle to picture book interpretation. The reason for this is twofold: Firstly, because of the format of the picture book itself, and secondly, because of the typical reading situation surrounding it.

Because picture books combine images and the written word, they contain several ways to convey meaning; as we have seen, pictures and text provide meaning in different ways. The role of pictures is particulary interesting. As they communicate more universally than words, there is no need to decode a system of writing to take them in. This is not to say that images do not need decoding, or that interpretation does not depend on culture. In fact, our ability to read meaning into pictures is largely dependent on prior experience. As in text, younger readers of picture books have a tendency toward focusing on smaller, singular, and not always relevant details, and are not always able to take in the larger whole of the pictures (Nodelman 1988, Appleyard 1991). Still, while text requires some amount of decoding and interpretation to become meaningful, some features of pictures do not only carry conventional meanings, but also prompt immediate, unconscious reactions. Julia Kristeva suggests that colour is one aspect of pictures that causes such a response (quoted in Nodelman 1988). I believe the premises of embodied, embedded, and enacted cognition make an interesting backdrop for the impressions we find in picture book iconotexts.

As I have mentioned earlier, the reading situation surrounding the picture book is often social. It typically involves a (sometimes preliterate) child being read to by an adult. This social reading effectively makes up a kind of embedded or enacted cognitive system.

1.1.7 Trauma

Trauma occurs when a person is confronted with intense emotional stress that overwhelms their external and internal resources. Our verbal (as opposed to non-verbal) memory is sensitive to this kind of extreme stress, and we may lose our ability to put words to our experience, which makes it difficult to process and move on from the experiences afterwards. Giving words to the experience may become necessary for healing to occur, allowing a person to put their trauma into a narrative (Bloom 1999). Fiction becomes one way of giving words to children who have experienced trauma – whether it is the trauma of a natural disaster or of loss. In fact, many trauma researchers stress the importance of art and stories in the healing process both for children and adults (der Kolk 2014, Weissbecker et al 2008). For children, Weissbecker et al also highlight the importance of safe and structured play with caregivers (2008). Because of the format of the picture book and the typical reading situation of younger readers, picture books may be especially suitable for younger children when dealing with traumatising topics, in part because the format of the genre combines pictures and text to tell stories, giving both words and concrete visual representations of trauma, grief, and the healing process that follows after. Equally important is the social reading situation. An adult can help provide a safe, structured reading environment, as well as provide extra context, reassurance, and soothing when necessary.

Trauma is not just limited to the individual. In *Collective Trauma and Healing*, Jack Saul discusses trauma on a community level. Large-scale disasters cause strain on local communities, and challenge the ability of local systems to respond to the needs of the people who live there. Saul refers to this type of trauma as "collective trauma": " the shared injuries to a population's social, cultural, and physical ecologies (Saul 2014, 1)". This collective trauma occurs on top of and in conjunction with individual trauma (Saul 2014).

Both individual and collective trauma play a role in the lives of children who experienced the Tōhoku earthquake, but not every child reader is directly traumatised by the events of 3.11, and picture books about the Tōhoku earthquake have a broader audience than victims of the quake alone. However, due to the sheer scale of the disaster, children throughout Japan are likely to have been exposed to it indirectly, either through knowing people who have been impacted or through the heavy media coverage of the events. Because of the sheer scale of the disaster, it may be useful to not just think about it in terms of personal trauma, but also in terms of *cultural* trauma. According to Jeffrey C. Alexander, "[c]ultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (2004, 1). The quintessential example of a cultural trauma is the Holocaust, while the most clear example in recent Japanese history is the bombing of Hiroshima.[6] With cultural trauma, as well as with personal trauma, expression and acknowledgement is important. According to philosophers like Avishai Margalit, knowing the truth about a cultural trauma (that is, making the trauma that happened explicit, open, and conscious) has a healing power on a group scale (2002). This line of thought often comes up in relation to the Holocaust.

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[6] Unlike these events, the Tōhoku earthquake and following tsunami did not involve any human perpetrators – however, the impact of the quake was worsened by actions by human actors leading up to 3.11 and by the way it was handled by the Japanese government in the aftermath, blurring the line between "natural" and "human-made" disaster (Creighton 2015, DiNitto 2017).

Despite the differences between different types of trauma, people who study them stress the idea of trauma as something that needs to be *articulated* - either to oneself, to the local community, or to the world - for the metaphorical wound to heal. If trauma cannot be acknowledged (by individual actors, larger groups of people, or states) it cannot be addressed; if it cannot be addressed, it cannot be ameliorated; if it cannot be ameliorated, it cannot end – though some there is a question to what degree it can ever *truly* be articulated in the first place (Kidd 2005).

1.1.8 Children's literature about trauma

What does children's literature about trauma look like? In her research on children's books about the Holocaust, Hamida Bosmajian looks at how self-censorship on the part of creators can have a negative effect on the final product if it is not done with critical consciousness. Separating the description of Nazi persecution of the Jews from their geographical and historical contexts, for example, may give a child reader the sense that the threat has no geographical or historical end. On the other hand, a story that places too much emphasis on a visionary hope for the future threatens to make light of the horror, underselling the need for change to avoid similar future apocalypses. Despite the difficulty of this balancing act, Bosmajian concludes that the work of recollecting and imagining these tales about trauma and the Holocaust is necessary "to help free our civilization from its consuming obsessions and deathbringing powers (1989, 211)".

Much of the literature that deals with trauma has undeniable ties to psychoanalysis. In "*A" is for Auschwitz: Psychoanalysis, Trauma Theory, and the "Children's Literature of Atrocity"*, Kenneth B. Kidd criticizes this relationship. In his critique, he brings up the psychoanalytic trope of the dead or wounded child, which frequently appears in stories about trauma. This metaphor is strengthened by the historical development from seeing children as *economically useful* to *emotionally priceless.*[7] Childhood becomes at once "sacrosanct and violated" (Kidd 2005, 131). The problem with this trope, according to Kidd, is that it infantilises both characters and audience. They are reduced to innocent victims that have been acted upon by perpetrators. The larger cultural and historical contexts of the situation disappear; moral and ethical quandaries are flattened and reduced to black and white solutions. This is particularly egregious in stories about events that feature two opposing human actors (Kidd 2005). Trauma related to natural disasters, like the Tōhoku earthquake, is less complicated to deal with. An earthquake does not happen to you on purpose, and does not have human motivations.

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[7] Kidd specifies the American child and relates this turn to the increase of trauma stories published in the 1990s, but when we consider kids as outlined above, I believe we can at least draw a similar line in Japanese culture.

While natural disasters do not create the same "victim versus bad guy" narratives, stories about these events still require care on part of authors and illustrators. In *Surviving the Storm: Trauma and Recovery in Children's Books about Natural Disasters,* Paula T. Connolly writes:

> While some researchers have proposed ways of mitigating child trauma, particularly through supporting family and school structures (Pfefferbaum et al.), authors writing for children have also sought to address the effects of natural disasters, and in so doing model ways for children both to imagine and cope with trauma. Translating such large-scale destruction to a young audience is a difficult task in terms of not minimizing the tragedy yet also not overwhelming young readers (2012, 1).

For Connolly, too, books become a way for children to navigate the traumatic realities of natural disasters. She breaks down three different approaches to trauma within children's literature: The animal story, which allows the reader to emphatically identify with the (animal) characters, while at the same time removing some of the human tragedy from the story and narrowing its scope; the eye-witness account, which uses the testimony of children to show not only the disaster, but also how it has affected them; and young adult fiction, which allows for a more in-depth exploration of how individuals cope with trauma (Connolly 2012). While the final of Connolly's three categories is not relevant to my analysis, both *Sunflower Hill* has elements of the eye-witness account, though the eyewitnesses are second-hand witnesses in the form of bereaved mothers. *Mother's Lullaby*, on the other hand, is a clear-cut animal story.

Connolly's approach to trauma fiction for children comes from the opposite side from Bosmajian. Where Bosmajian stresses the importance of tempering hope with realism, Connolly stresses the importance of tempering trauma and pain with *hope*:

> These books […] provide testaments to the violence, loss, and trauma endured by those who suffer large-scale natural disasters. But they also show that children can

> recover from trauma; they model ways in which their worlds and their sense of themselves can be healed. There is—they promise—a new world beyond the devastation of disaster (2012, 8).

We can at least partially chalk this difference in focus to the lack of an intentionally malicious agent in stories about natural disasters. Despite the difference in focus, Connolly and Bosmajian, as well as Kidd, all grapple with a central tension within children's literature about traumatic events. On one side, the need to keep the story grounded in reality and being clear about the events that lead to trauma; on the other, the need to make that trauma "safe" and personal to a younger reader.

In my thesis, I look at books that attempt to address events that are doubly traumatic. The Tōhoku earthquake and the tsunami that followed was traumatic in and of itself. The books I have chosen also deal with the loss of a (or, in some cases, several,) close family member, which compounds the trauma. These books may help Japanese readers articulate and address trauma related to both the natural disaster and the death of a loved one.

This is not to say that all readers of picture books about the Tōhoku earthquake are people who directly experienced and are traumatised by the events of that day. Children who have directly experienced the earthquake are not necessarily even their primary audience. In addition to hitting individuals and local communities, the events of 3.11 also had a significant cultural impact on the rest of Japan, and people in these areas make up a larger potential market. Children in other parts of the country are also likely to have been exposed to news coverage and images of the tsunami and the damage that followed it. Even for an adult, the images alone can be scary and upsetting; for a child, the impact is likely worse. Literature and other art can allow children and their parents to explore natural disaster in a safe, contained environment. Learning more about the earthquake and the situation around it can help make the the topic less frightening.

In addition to being helpful in helping children deal with the events of 3.11 in particular, picture books about the Tōhoku earthquake may also have a second, more general function. While the Tōhoku earthquake was particularly severe, Japan is no stranger to extreme weather, and earthquakes and extreme weather phenomena are not uncommon. It seems reasonable to expect that books about one natural disaster could be used to help contextualise other, similar disasters. Books about the Tōhoku earthquake can be helpful for children both as a proactive measure – when they focus on how to *escape* the situation – and a retroactive one – when they instead focus on the emotional fallout.[8]

The format of the picture book and the age range of the typical reader presents some challenges for authors and illustrators. For one, the format calls for a text that is relatively pared down compared to other kinds of literature. This can make representing complex themes in a complex way a challenge, and the pictures need to carry a heavier narrative and thematic load. Authors and illustrators are also likely to feel that the younger audience requires more sensitivity in how the events are depicted. Still, for a picture book to be about the Tōhoku earthquake, it must in some way be *about the Tōhoku earthquake.* If the author and illustrator remove it too far from the events of 3.11, or generalise or soften them too much, the book loses its specificity and connection to the event. It becomes a story about something else – whether that is natural disasters or grief or trauma in general – or it minimizes the tragedy. This is a similar underlying tension to what we find in the articles by Bosmajian, Kidd, and Connolly. It is also a central concern in my analysis. For simplicity's sake, I will refer to this relationship as the tension between the need for *distance* and the need for *authenticity*.

Writing for children about trauma involves negotiating several complex and often intersecting relationships. Some of these include the authors' relationship to childhood and, relatedly, how they believe a child should be addressed, especially when dealing with sensitive topics. How, and to what effect, do authors and illustrators of Japanese children's picture books navigate these relationships?

1.1.9 Children's books in the aftermath of the Tōhoku earthquake

The aftermath of the Tōhoku earthquake saw the release of several picture books for younger readers. While they show a range of different characters that meet the disaster in different ways and with different outcomes, they can be roughly separated into books about the practical circumstances around the disaster, and books about the emotional fallout. The practical books, such as *Run upwards! Protect Yourself from the Tsunami* (*Hashire, ue he! Tsunami tendenko,* Shida Kazuko and Itō Hideo 2013), and *Hana-chan's fast, fast walk*

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[8] These picture books, as far as I can tell, are rarely concerned with ecocriticism.

(Hanachan no hayaaruki hayaaruki, Ube Kyōko and Kanno Hiroko, 2015), deal with how to safely evacuate when faced with a natural disaster.

Many of the books that deal with the emotional fallout of 3.11, on the other hand, are less concerned with the concrete facts of what happened that day. Instead, they are primarily concerned with dealing with the aftermath, and the fallout that comes with death. In most of these books, the person who has died is either a mother or a child, though there are some exceptions. *I Became the Ocean: The story of a small soul extinguished by the Great East Japan Earthquake* (*Boku wa umi ni natta – Higashi nihon daishinsai de kieta chiisana inochi no monogatari,* Usa 2014) for example, deals with the death of a pet, while Imoto Yōko's *The Wind Phone (Kaze no denwa,* 2014) show a series of grieving families who use a disconnected phone booth to talk to their dead loved ones.) While all of these books centre on death and its aftermath, they deal with these topics in a variety of different ways.

The Well Water and My Dad (Idosui to otōsan, Chiba Naomi and Abe Etsuko 2012) is about a girl whose father dies during the events of the Tōhoku earthquake. While it is not explicitly based on a true story, both creators are from Iwate prefecture. Iwate is one of the areas that were hit the hardest by the tsunami, Chiba and Abe's story paints a realistic picture both of the disaster and its immediate aftermath. While the protagonist's father dies, he appears alive and well throughout the story, which ends with him surrounded by forest animals.

The Moon Shell (Tsuki no kai, Nagita Keiko and Komine Yura 2013) is set in the aftermath of the disaster, and tells the story of a survivor who has lost her mother and moved from the impacted area to her grandmother's house in the mountains. She meets a mysterious boy who gives her a shell that lets her meet with the dead when the moon is full. Neither of its creators are from the Tōhoku area, and they don't make any claims about authenticity. *The Moon Shell* is not based on a true story, and is one of the few books I researched that did not make any claim to be; Nagita and Komine do not use authenticity as a selling point.

If *The Moon Shell* is the farthest from the "real" events of 3.11, *Dogwood Lane* (*Hanamizuki no michi,* Asanuma Mikiko and Kuroi Ken 2013) is perhaps the closest. Asanuma Mikiko wrote the story after losing her own adult son in the disaster. The story is written from his perspective, though in the story, he has become a child. The book is as much of a portrait of the town of Rikuzentakata and its relationship with the ocean, however, and spends a lot of time both on establishing the setting before the storm, and in showing the rubble that remained afterward.

While I was initially intending to write about six, and then three, books, I eventually narrowed my scope down to two: *Mother's Lullaby* (*Kaasan no komoriuta,* Konno Hitomi and Imoto Yōko 2012) and *Sunflower Hill* (*Himawari no oka,* Hakata Tan and Matsunari Mariko 2012).

1.2 Methodology

In my thesis, I will be looking at two picture books that feature the death of a family member due to the Tōhoku earthquake. These picture books are, as far as I can tell, deemed appropriate for children below the age of six. This will not be a quantitative study, as the sample size is very small; instead, I am interested in focusing closely on each of the books and how their creators mediate between distance and authenticity to tell stories about a difficult topic, as well as what themes they use in the telling of it.

While "picture books that feature the death of a family member due to the Tōhoku earthquake" might seem like a hopelessly narrow category of literature, I was able to find a surprising amount of books that fit the bill. At the beginning of this project, I used Yoo Kyung Sung's list of picture books about 3.11 in "Japanese National Trauma: Changing Trends in Japanese Picture Books Since the Tōhoku Earthquake" as a starting point, and then supplemented my list by manually looking through picture books related to the Tōhoku earthquake on Amazon Japan, as well as making use of recommendations on EhonNavi, a Japanese picture book review site that also curates lists of children's picture books by topic.

The books were partially chosen based on their descriptions in Yoo Kyung Sung's article, EhonNavi's lists, and their descriptions on Amazon Japan. In the end, I cut my list down to two:

- *Mother's Lullaby (Kaasan no komoriuta)* by Konno Hitomi and Imoto Yōko (2012)
- *Sunflower Hill (Himawari no oka)* by Hakata Tan and Matsunari Mariko (2012)

Mother's Lullaby is also based on a true story, but not on a larger initiative. Instead, it is inspired by a personal anecdote: A time capsule letter written by a mother in 2009 arrived to her children in the summer of 2011, months after her death in the Tōhoku earthquake. Like *The Wind Phone, Mother's Lullaby* is told second hand; the anecdote it is based on was sent to Konno Hitomi in a letter by a fan.

Sunflower Hill is based on a real life initiative by grieving mothers in the aftermath of 3.11. It features interviews with a group of bereaved mothers who plant sunflowers in memory of their children, and uses documentary tropes in its text to achieve a sense of realism. At the same time, the realism of the text is juxtaposed with pictures that gradually become more fantastical.

Mother's Lullaby and *Sunflower Hill* both deal with death in the family and base themselves on real, lived experiences, but even from the cursory descriptions above, there are clear differences in the way their creators approach the topic. The creators use these true stories in very different ways. While *Mother's Lullaby* uses the anecdote it is based on as a starting point to tell a more general story that might be used when talking to children about *any* natural disaster, the majority of the text of *Sunflower Hill* consists of condensed excerpts from interviews, and – verbally, if not visually – it sticks to a strictly documentary writing style, with the illustrations providing a more fantastical counterpart to the text.

Writing for children about trauma involves negotiating several complex and often intersecting relationships. Some of these include the creators' relationship to childhood and, relatedly, how the creators believe a child should be addressed, especially when dealing with sensitive topics; the relationship between the in-text narrator and the implied reader (or narratee); and the relationship between the local and the national, as well as individual and cultural trauma. How, and to what effect, do authors and illustrators of Japanese children's picture books navigate these relationships? Who is the intended audience?

While the picture books I will be looking at all deal with the Tōhoku earthquake and its aftermath, they mediate between giving space to traumatic details and relatively factual depictions of the events, and using a range of techniques to minimize or soften the impact of the disaster on the readers in different ways. How much space is the earthquake and tsunami given in the text? What techniques are used to distance the reader from or bring the reader closer to the events of the Tōhoku earthquake, and what effect do these choices have? How do the authors approach trauma and mourning?

I also want to highlight two recurring themes that occur in both Mother’s Lullaby and Sunflower Hill:

Women, grief and giving care. The caregivers presented in the source material are almost all women. Fathers are largely absent. In *Mother's Lullaby,* it’s the older sister who does most of the comforting of the baby of the family, despite the father still being alive; in *Sunflower Hill*, it is the grief of the mothers that is being foregrounded, and the fathers appear only briefly.

The dead returning through nature. This is a core theme in all the three picture books I will be analysing. The dead return to the living through nature, and take on different forms. In *Mother's Lullaby*, Mother Bear returns to her family through birdsong. In *Sunflower Hill,* the children come back as sunflowers. In both books, the dead also watch the living from the stars.

1.3 Structure and chapter descriptions

In chapter two, I discuss *Mother's Lullaby* (*Kaasan no komoriuta),* written by Konno Hitomi and illustrated by Imoto Yōko. *Mother's Lullaby* follows three bear siblings after the death of their mother. Konno and Hitomi create distance between the story and the events of 3.11, which gives the reader more space to process complex and difficult emotions. It also makes the book more accessible to a larger audience, and makes it possible to include a narrative that discusses guilt and responsibility as a counterpoint to the story of the grieving bears.

In chapter three, I discuss *Sunflower Hill (Himawari no oka*), written by Hakata Tan and illustrated by Matsunari Mariko. *Sunflower Hill* presents the reader with a group of mothers whose children have died in the tsunami. In the aftermath of the disaster, the mothers decide to grow sunflowers at a hill close to the place where their children died. This creates both a memorial and a signpost for any other disasters. Hakata Tan’s documentary-like text is offset by Matsunari Mariko's childlike, and then liminal, pictures, creating a space where the living and dead can coexist.

In my conclusion, I discuss the two works in juxtaposition, looking at how do they balance between authenticity and distance, how do their narrative choices differ, and what themes they have in common. Additionally, I argue that they each present a different way to mitigate trauma.

2 Bears

Mother's Lullaby (Kaasan no Komoriuta 2012) is based on real events. Elementary school student Nozomi's mother died in the Tōhoku earthquake. Six months later, Nozomi received a letter from her, telling her how proud she was of her and how much she loved her. Nozomi's mother had written the letter in 2009, author Konno Hitomi explains in the afterword of *Mother's Lullaby*, and came about as part of a promotional stunt by a Japanese *randoseru* company (Konno and Imoto 2012).[9]

The company invited customers and their families to write "time letters" about their feelings on the day and their hopes for the future. It pledged to send the letters back one thousand days later; this coincided with the aftermath of 3.11 (Konno and Imoto 2012). Konno's afterword – and the anecdote itself – juxtaposes a hopeful beginning with a tragic end. The anticipation of entering elementary school is held up next to the death of Nozomi and her siblings' mother. This, along with the letter that arrived in the aftermath of Nozomi's mother's death, makes their loss all the more poignant. In *Mother's Lullaby,* the letter has become a lullaby, but the general shape of the story is the same: A mother's words return to her children after her death, giving solace and metaphorically reuniting them with her.

Mother's Lullaby was first published in October of 2012, roughly one and a half years after the Tōhoku earthquake. It is written by Konno Hitomi and illustrated by Imoto Yōko, and published by *Kin no hoshi-sha.* Konno is an author and a singer-songwriter, while Imoto is an illustrator and author. They have both published a wide range of picture books, both as a team and with other illustrators. Neither of them are from the Tōhoku area themselves.

Konno and Imoto are not strangers to writing books "based on a true story". Several of their other works, like *The Bear Headmaster* (*Kuma no kōchō sensei,* 2004) are also based on letters Konno received while doing performances at elementary schools across Japan. In a similar vein to *Mother's Lullaby*, the resulting books deal with emotionally weighty topics. *The Bear Headmaster,* for example, features an elementary school teacher that teaches his pupils important life lessons while he himself is dying from terminal cancer (Yomiuri Shinbun 2012). Konno and Imoto's brand, such as it is, consists in converting real, personal stories into more generally applicable narratives. Their use of animal characters also softens the impact of trauma, and helps make the stories more relatable for a larger audience.

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[9] A *randoseru* (from the Dutch word "ransel") is a sturdy, hard-sided backpack made from real or faux leather. It is a fairly standard part of Japanese elementary school life; most children receive one before starting school at age six, and are expected to keep the same *randoseru* for most of their time in elementary school (Gordenker 2012). *Randoseru* are typically quite expensive, and it is not unusual for children to receive them as presents from grandparents or other family members to commemorate their entry into Japanese school life (COMZINE 2004). The *randoseru* marks a child's transition into a new phase in life, and signals new beginnings.

Though the book is based on the true story of a family that survived the events of 3/11, this is not immediately obvious from a cursory reading of the book. In *Mother's Lullaby*, we meet a family of bears who lose their mother in a devastating storm. In the aftermath, they struggle to calm down the youngest bear, who will not stop crying because Sister Bear does not know the lullaby Mother Bear uses to sing him to sleep. The *manekkodori,* (lit. "mimicking bird",) a fictional bird that mimics what it hears, overheard Mother Bear's song while she was still alive, and eventually repeats it where the bear family can hear it, metaphorically returning Mother Bear to them after her death.

In this chapter, I discuss the ways in which Konno and Imoto distance the plot of *Mother's Lullaby* from the Tōhoku earthquake. Additionally, I look at the book's use of gender and religious themes. Finally, I discuss how Konno and Imoto handle the subject of blame.

2.1 Creating distance to create clarity

Throughout *Mother's Lullaby,* Konno and Imoto use several different techniques to create distance between the iconotext and details that would connect it directly to the Tōhoku earthquake, despite the focus on the Tōhoku earthquake both in Konno's afterword and the media coverage of the book. The natural disaster of *Kaasan* could be any natural disaster; there are few hints in the text that points to any one specific event. The story is abstracted on several levels, most related to setting and character. The level of distance makes it less difficult to process emotionally. It also sets up a less complex situation that allows children to focus on a few characters in a specific situation, rather than get distracted by outside details. This is a common feature of animal stories that deal with disaster (Connolly 2012). Stripping the story of specific details also makes it easier to apply the book to a wider variety of natural disasters. Japan frequently experiences earthquakes and violent weather, and the Tōhoku earthquake is not the only natural disaster in which someone has or will lose a loved one. This has the benefit of making the book relevant for a longer period of time than books that very specifically deal with the Tōhoku earthquake.

2.1.1 Unnamed forests: Distanced setting

One of the ways that Konno and Imoto put distance between the narrative of *Mother's Lullaby* and the events of 3.11 is to make the setting less detailed. The place where the story takes place is no longer a prefecture in the Tōhoku area, but a nameless forest; the time is no longer March, 2013, but the autumn of an undefined year.

Mother's Lullaby takes a relatively minimalist approach to its backgrounds, and the setting is largely implied, rather than shown. Instead of drawing detailed environments, Imoto makes use of simple monochrome or two-tone gradient backgrounds that do not draw attention away from the characters or the text. The visual and textual details that *do* make it into the images are generally doubled in the text: The *manekkodori*'s tree ("[...] the *manekkodori* that lives in a tree [at the edge of] the woods", spread 3), the storm clouds gathering in the distance ("large, large clouds, [larger than he] had ever seen", spread 5), fallen trees and branches in the aftermath of the storm ("Trees had been [thrown down] … Roots and branches had been washed away...", spread 10).

The simplicity of the backgrounds lets the reader focus their attention on other parts of the story, putting a stronger emphasis on the text and characters. In addition, the abstraction of the setting helps to both generalise the story, (because this could be any forest, it looks a bit like it could be a forest the reader knows, too,) and, perhaps paradoxically, to create distance from the actual tragedy that occurred (because it could be any forest, it is not a real forest at all). In this familiar-but-distant place, Konno and Imoto have the space to deal with the impact of the disaster in a more candid way while still being gentle toward younger readers. Because of the abstracted setting, Konno and Imoto are freer imply the impact of the storm on the forest in the images or the text.

Imoto's backgrounds change with the impact of the storm (spread 8 and 10). While they still keep to gradients that characterise most of the images of the book, Imoto creates a sense of threat and vast, overwhelming space through the sudden absence of characters, as well as a number of small, but effective details. The idyllic image of Mother Bear picking apples against a white background (spread 7) stands in sharp contrast to the following spread, where the storm hits. Here, Mother Bear is missing, but in her place, we see apples and leaves scattering, giving the impression of a violent impact. The storm has pulled the apple tree out by the roots, and the background is given additional texture (and threat) by dark shapes that suggest waves.

A little later (spread 10), we see the aftermath of the storm: The tree trunk has been overturned, its roots sticking out of the ground; broken branches litter the background. Because of the lack of detail, it is hard to tell if the uneven, undulating lines that make up the landscape are waves or muddy, displaced ground. Although the bears are in the text, they are completely missing from the image:

> [Voices crying out] in search of family could be heard from all over the forest.
> Father Bear and the children were searching around for Mother Bear
> together, too.
> "Mo–om!"
> "Mo–om!"
>
> "Mo–om!"
> "Mo–om!"
>
> (*Mother's Lullaby,* spread 10)

The lack of visible characters both in this and the eighth spread of the book creates a dramatic contrast to every other page of *Mother's Lullaby,* making them feel instantly less safe and more desolate. The formatting of the text itself plays into the sense of abandonment, too. The increasing font size, coupled with how the lines of dialogue "bounce" across the pages, creates a textual equivalent to an echoing effect, and makes the image feel like a larger space. The space that is implied in the image – as well as the multitude of voices crying out in the text – gives the viewer a sense of the scale of the disaster. These elements come together to create a setting that is truly desolate, both in the violent devastation of its physical space and the emotional anguish of its (implied) inhabitants.

2.1.2 Seasonal significance

The iconotext of *Mother's Lullaby* is also removed from the Tōhoku earthquake by its location in time. The text has no references to a year or time period, and the use of animal characters and simple backgrounds mean that there are no details to hint at a period in the images, either. Just as the forest in *Mother's Lullaby* could be any forest, the year the book takes place in could be any year.

In contrast, the season the story of *Mother's Lullaby* is set in is less ambiguous. Interestingly, it is not the season of the Tōhoku earthquake. While the earthquake took place in March, the events of *Mother's Lullaby* have been moved to autumn. This is not explicitly stated in the text, but instead implied indirectly through details in the iconotext: the bears' den is full of orange and yellow leaves; when the storm hits, Mother Bear is picking apples. Old leaves would not be unusual to find in a bear's den at any point of the year, but the colourful leaves of *Mother's Lullaby* are featured prominently throughout the book, with no symbols of spring to contrast them. Instead, the autumnal associations are strengthened by Mother Bear's apples.

Historically, seasons and their associated imagery have been a prominent part of Japanese visual and literary culture. In part, we can trace this to Japan's strong tradition of poetry. The thirty-one-syllable *waka* (classical poetry), which was the main literary genre of the premodern period, has been particularly influential in this respect. *Waka* poets began to establish seasonal poetry and tropes around the turn of the eight century, and the tropes that were established around this time remained fairly consistent over the next thousand years, gradually increasing and becoming more refined over time (Shirane 2012).

The seasonally coded topics found in classical Japanese poetry have different emotional associations. One of autumn's stronger associations is sadness. Love poems that reference the season often feature the sorrow and loneliness of separation and abandonment (Shirane 2012). By setting the story of *Mother's Lullaby* in autumn, Konno and Imoto tap into these background associations. They resonate strongly with the story *Mother's Lullaby* sets out to tell – and though the love poetry of long-dead *waka* poets focused on romantic love, rather than familial, the core of these poems, like *Mother's Lullaby*, is the sudden absence of a loved one.

Fallen leaves and apples are clear seasonal markers, but they each also have symbolic significance in themselves; one from traditional Japanese poetry, and one from without. Colourful leaves (*momiji*, the ancient word for "bright foliage") had become a common feature of Japanese poetry about the season by the Heian period (794-1185). "Carpets" of fallen leaves on the ground were associated with brocade, emphasising the colours and brightness of autumn. At this point in time, the season had yet to acquire the heavier associations of sadness and heartbreak (Shirane 2012). The leaves of *Kaasan,* too, give a bright contrast to the darker, scarier parts of the story. In the bears' den, they add to the feeling of warmth and safety in the scenes. This is true even in the aftermath of Mother Bear's disappearance; here, the presence of warmth does not necessarily mean the absence of sadness.

Brightly coloured autumn foliage still has a place in Japanese culture today; the leaves turning colour is a yearly event that draws crowds of both foreign and native tourists. Every year, forecasts for what times are better for seeing the leaves turn in different parts of the country are published by a multitude of sources in both Japanese and English (Kōyō Meisho 2018, Japan Rail Pass Blog 2018). While some traditional seasonal markers are harder to recognise without proper context, autumn leaves are visible enough both in a cultural context and in "every day" nature that even very young children are likely to recognise them as a sign of the season without difficulty.

The second seasonal marker in *Mother's Lullaby* is the apples that Mother Bear picks before her death. Unlike fallen leaves, apples were not part of the seasonal vocabulary of the seventh century. In fact, apples did not begin to be widely cultivated in Japan until the Meiji period (1868-1912) (Japan Guide 2010). In the context of *Mother's Lullaby*, it might make more sense to consider the apple in terms of its American symbolism. While they have several connotations in American culture, apples (and apple pie in particular) are tied to the image of the ideal American family. The idiom "as American as motherhood and apple pie" is used to describe things "that most Americans consider to be very good and important" (Cambridge Dictionary n.d.). The apple (and pie) becomes a symbol of a wholesome, all-American family and "traditional" American values (Wiktionary 2018). The idealised mother figure is central to this idiom, not only because of the outright mention of her – after all, if not her, who made the pie?

This connection between apples, idealised family life and “traditional” values resonates with the depiction of family we find in *Mother Lullaby*. The book also uses apples as a metaphor for Mother Bear’s love for her family, and, by extension, for Mother Bear herself. On the seventh spread of the book, we see Mother Bear picking apples. She is smiling, absorbed in the task. As she works, she says:

> “Let’s pick many and bring them home.
> Because Baby and Big Sister and Big Brother and Dad, too,
> all love apples.”
> (*Mother’s Lullaby,* spread 7)

With this, the narrative ties the apples to Mother Bear and her care and attention for her family. The scene signals to the reader that Mother Bear is a wholesome, ideal wife and mother. When the apple tree and its apples go flying as the storm hits on the next spread, the apples become a direct stand-in for Mother Bear herself. As I have mentioned above, Mother Bear is missing in the illustration; we see the impact only on the apple tree she had just been standing next to. Making the apples a visual metonymy for Mother Bear underlines the violence of the situation further.

The decision to change the time of *Mother’s Lullaby* from early spring to autumn distances it further from the events of 3.11, but also add layers of extra context to the story. The Tōhoku earthquake occurred on the cusp of spring. This is the season when things are born; when they begin to grow and thaw out. While this may create an interesting juxtaposition from a literary point of view, the change of temporal location in *Mother’s Lullaby* instead creates a visual landscape that is much more thematically congruent with both the plot and the emotional core of the story.

2.1.3 Animal stories

Mother Bear uses animal protagonists to tell a story about human grief. This is not an uncommon use of animal stories. Jeanette Winter’s *Mama* (2006), for example, deals with the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, and Usa’s *I Became the Ocean: The story of a* *small soul extinguished by the Great East Japan Earthquake* (*Boku wa umi ni natta : higashinihon daishinsai de kieta chiisana inochi no monogatari,* 2014), which follows a dog trying to get back to its loved ones after the Tōhoku earthquake. In the more adult end of animal stories about trauma, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1991) tells the story of his father's experience of World War Two and the Holocaust, representing Jews as mice and Germans as cats. Konno and Imoto frequently use animals in their stories, too, from *Mother Bear* and *The Bear Headmaster* (*Kuma no kōchō sensei* 2004) to Imoto's more recent solo venture, *The Wind Phone* (*Kaze no denwa* 2014), which also features survivors of the Tōhoku earthquake as animals.

Two features in particular make animal stories well-suited for telling stories about difficult topics. According to Paula T. Connolly,

> Using animal stories to describe natural disasters often has the two-pronged effect of providing child readers with a means of sentimental identification while simultaneously removing the focus from human tragedy, and thus emotionally distancing the young reader from descriptions of human death. (2012, 2)

The scope and fallout of disasters on the scale of the Tōhoku earthquake can be difficult enough to deal with for adults, let alone children. The use of animal characters (along with an abstracted setting) allows Konno and Imoto to narrow down the scope of their story, cutting out much of the emotional baggage that comes with showing humans suffering.

Animal protagonists don't only exist in stories about heavier topics. Children's literature in general is full of animal stories.[10] Part of the reason for this, as Connolly mentions, is sentimental identification. Cute characters that are not easily pinned down as being of any particular social status or ethnicity also open up for reader identification from a much broader audience, and allow writers and illustrators to sidestep issues related to class and race (Nikolajeva and Scott 2000).[11] Most of these animal protagonists are not truly animal. Instead, they are extended metaphors for people; children in animal suits. The animals of *Mother's Lullaby* is no different. Beyond their names (Mother Bear, Sister Bear, and so on) and their visual appearance, the bear family is essentially a human family with the serial numbers filed off.

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[10] We find animal stories in adult literature as well, but animal stories are particularly prevalent in children's literature. This is partially related to cultural narratives related to children, such as the idea that they are more innocent and closer to nature than adults. These narratives are othering, creating distance between adults and children, but also have thematic resonance with some current narratives around animals and animal rights (Walsh 2002).

[11] This is not to say that all animal characters are created equal, however, as different animals are more likely to

Mother's Lullaby is not the only story about the Tōhoku earthquake that features bears. In Kawakami Hiromi's short story *God Bless You*, *2011* (*Kamisama 2011,* 2012), a bear invites the human protagonist for walk along an irradiated river. In her analysis of Kawakami's short story, Kimura Saeko draws a line between the bear and a larger tradition of bear tales in Japanese literature and folklore. Folk tales about bears are especially prevalent in Hokkaido in Northern Japan, as bears figure heavily in the religion of the Ainu who live in the area. Kimura argues that these bear tales represent a meeting between humans and nature. The bear in these tales is a god of nature interacting with people, and the stories become metaphors for the relationship between humans and nature as a whole (Kimura 2013).

While the characters of *Mother's Lullaby* are bears, however, Konno and Imoto do not lean on this symbolic backdrop. Because they are essentially human beyond their immediate appearance, the family of bears cannot function as representatives of nature. As there are no *actual* humans in the story, they also cannot be presented in juxtaposition with humanity, either. Instead, *Mother's Lullaby* is, at its heart, a human-versus-nature story where the animals are the closest the reader gets to human representatives, facing off against the untameable nature of the storm.

In a sense, the teddy bear is closer to the bears of *Mother's Lullaby* than the bears of Japanese folk tales. While the *kind* of animals the family of *Mother's Lullaby* are is ultimately fairly arbitrary, their character designs bring an extra measure of comfort to younger readers. The entire family looks cute and cuddly. They are made up of soft, rounded shapes, without any sharp angles. Even when they are distressed, the bears are mostly holding each other and smiling, with gentle, upturned mouths and closed, half-circle eyes. While the spreads that depict the storm are unsettling and empty, members of the bear family appear on every

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be associated with different groups of people. A study of 100 popular picture books in of 2017, for example, found that female animal characters were more likely to be smaller and more vulnerable creatures, like cats and birds, while male animal characters were more likely to be wilder and more dangerous ones, like tigers and bears (Ferguson 2018).

other page, balancing out the frightening destruction with a sense of safety, softness, and community.

2.2 Family roles

Outside of their appearance, the bears are primarily defined by their family roles. This is signalled by their names, as all the bears are named after their positions in the family. The bears in *Mother's Lullaby* are all named after their family roles: The mother is referred to as Mother Bear (*Kaasanguma*), the brother and sister as Brother Bear (*Niisanguma*) and Sister Bear (*Neesanguma*), the father as Father Bear (*Tōsanguma*), and the baby simply as Baby (*Bōya,* lit. "Son"). This use of kinship terms as names is not uncommon in picture books. According to Nikolajeva and Scott, names that refer to family are easier for very young readers to relate to than concrete names. Additionally, kinship names underscore the importance of a character's relation to other family members, and serve to make the characters more universal (Nikolajeva and Scott 2001). Mother Bear is not just the mother of this particular family of bears; she also functions as a stand-in for any mother. The family of bears are a kind of ideal family; a blueprint onto which the reader can project themselves.

The bear family all act in ways that are stereotypical of their family roles. Mother Bear is caring, and dies while picking apples for the family. In her lullaby, she presents a small portrait of each other family member, and repeats over and over how much she loves them. She is the *heart* of the family, the emotional centre that keeps it together. Her absence leads to the breakdown of the family as a whole, not just because it is sad that she is gone, but also because losing her means losing the family's emotional regulator.

Baby, on the other hand, is characterised primarily by needing care, and by his relationship with Mother Bear. The two of them, along with the first verse of the lullaby, is introduced on the first two-page spread of the book:

> “I love, I love, I love you
> And we are always, always together,
> Baby and mama together.”
>
> Mother Bear hugs Baby
> and sings a lullaby.
> (*Mother’s Lullaby*, spread 1)

In *Mother’s Lullaby,* the relationship between mother and child is fundamental. It is so basic to the bear family’s world that when Baby no longer has Mother Bear, nothing is able to comfort him but the *manekkodori* singing the entire lullaby, metaphorically bringing her back to him.

The relationship between Baby and Mother Bear stands in stark contrast with the relationship between Father Bear and all three children. Father Bear is absent for most of the book, but when he appears, it is to protect the children during the storm (“Father Bear desperately protected the children”, spread 9) and, after the *manekkodori* repeats Mother Bear’s song to the children, to reassure them about their mother on the final spread:

> “Mother was always thinking only about us,”
> Father said, while looking up at the sky. (…)
> (*Mother’s Lullaby,* spread 15)

The verse of Mother Bear’s lullaby about Father Bear also underlines his position as a strong protector:

> “I love, I love, I love you
> who are always, always protecting us
> thank you, strong dad.”
> (*Mother’s Lullaby,* spread 14)

Father Bear is responsible and strong enough to protect the family physically, but he has no place in their grief. After protecting them during the storm, he only returns once the *manekkodori* starts singing Mother Bear’s lullaby to the family. He is absent as the children attempt to process their feelings, and unable to protect them emotionally.

In their introduction, Brother and Sister Bear express gentle sibling jealousy as they overhear Mother Bear singing her lullaby to Baby, though they are never able stay awake long enough to hear the entire song. While Brother and Sister Bear are very similar before Mother Bear's death, their roles diverge in the aftermath. After Mother Bear is gone, Sister Bear has to step in to take care of Baby:

> Baby wouldn't cheer up, and did nothing but cry every day.
> With all her might, Sister Bear sang Mother's lullaby to him.
> "I love, I love, I love you
> And we are always, always together,
> Baby and mama together."
>
> But Baby cried in an increasingly loud voice:
> "It's different from Mama's!"
> (*Mother's Lullaby,* spread 11)

Despite Father Bear still being alive and there being two siblings, the work of taking care of Baby falls to Sister Bear alone. She unsuccessfully attempts to fill the space that Mother Bear left behind. No matter how hard she tries, she fails, because she only knows the first verse of Mother Bear's Lullaby. When the children *do* get to hear the rest of the song, the verse about Sister Bear emphasises how hard she works ("hard-working big sister," spread 14).

In contrast, Brother Bear is less present once Mother Bear dies, and does not share the burden of taking care of Baby directly. However, he still provides emotional support for Sister Bear when she is unable to make Baby stop crying. Mother Bear's lullaby emphasises his kindness ("I know big brother is kind," spread 14). Because he is male, taking care of Baby is not part of his role.

Precisely because the characters are so stereotypical, *Mother's Lullaby* reproduces normative structures in its representation of the grieving process. This is glaringly obvious when it comes to gender. In *Mother's Lullaby,* taking care of a baby is specifically *women's* work, while protection from physical danger is the realm of men.

In Japan, cultural constructs of womanhood has a history of being tied to motherhood and being a good homemaker. In the Meiji era, women were encouraged by the state to be "good wives and wise mothers" (*r*yō*sai kenbo*). The image of normative femininity in the post-war period was also tied to motherhood and the private sphere of the home. During the Allied occupation, the American middle-class wife was presented as an ideal model of womanhood. In the 1960s, being a housewife had become the norm for Japanese women.[12] At the same time, the state-sanctioned corporate samurai became the ideal model for masculinity, and middle-class men became increasingly divorced from the private sphere of the home. As the state became more economically competitive and the birthrate began dropping in postwar Japan, mothers experienced a growing pressure in child-rearing, and the cultural construct of motherhood became tied to being a self-sacrificing nurturer (Dalton 2013).[13]

While these discourses are pervasive, Japanese people do not mindlessly reproduce them, but are influenced by, interact with, and mediate their gender identity in relation to them. In making Mother's Lullaby, Konno and Imoto interact with and reproduce them. The book presents an image of gender that is both conservative and normative. Mother Bear fits the image of a self-sacrificing nurturer perfectly. Father Bear, on the other hand, is cut off from the private sphere of the home, unable to step into the role of an emotional caretaker after Mother Bear dies.

The gender divide in *Mother's Lullaby* compounds the grief the family is experiencing. While Sister Bear attempts to soothe Baby, she cannot fill the role of Mother Bear. The relationship between mother and child is special and privileged, and Sister Bear is *not* a mother, let alone Baby's. The idea that Father Bear might step in and take care of Baby when Sister Bear fails is unthinkable, too. This is Mother Bear's domain, and he does not belong there. His relationship to Baby does not have the same emotional weight to it, either. Because Baby is defined by, and made to feel safe through, his relationship to Mother Bear, the only way to soothe him is to metaphorically bring back Mother Bear. This is also the only way to heal a family that can no longer function as it should because it is missing one of its central parts.

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[12] In Japan, women who work part-time can also be viewed as or identify as housewives (Dalton 2013).

[13] The underlying expectation that women are responsible both for child-rearing and their husbands' well-being also undercuts the present-day governmental push toward getting more women into full-time jobs (Oi 2015).

2.3 Ancestor worship and metaphorical returns

Typical religious practice in Japan is made up of an amalgamation of Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism, and has become such a common part of everyday life that it is difficult to distinguish from custom. Of the three religions, Buddhism is commonly associated with death and funerals (Hood 2013). Part of the Buddhist tradition is the veneration of one's ancestors and petitioning their spirits for protection and prosperity (Nelson 2008). These ancestral spirits are commonly enshrined in a household altar, and given daily ritual attention by descendants, usually the wife of the head of the household (Williams 2015). Rituals like these become a representation of caring and concern for the spirits of those who have come before, but also gives the living a space to remember deceased loved ones; in a sense, the rituals are as much for the living as they are for the dead (Traphagan 2012).

There are no Buddhist altars in *Mother's Lullaby,* but the concept of the spirits of deceased family members returning to give aid to the living still plays a central part in the book's plot. As things seem most fraught, Mother Bear's spirit is metaphorically returned to the family through the *manekkodori* singing the lullaby to them in Mother Bear's voice. The song becomes a metaphor for both Mother Bear and her love of her family. The sharing of the full song becomes a way to symbolically return her spirit to her loved ones, and restores balance to the family unit. For the bears, singing the song becomes a ritual of ancestor veneration in itself.

The lullaby is not the only way in which Mother Bear lives on after her death. In the final spread of *Mother's Lullaby*, Father Bear tells the children about how their mother cared about them as they look at the stars:

> "Mother was always thinking only about us,"
> Father said, while looking up at the sky.

> At that moment, a large star was shining.[14]
>
> (*Mother's Lullaby*, spread 15)

When Father Bear talks about her, the star(s) above seem to answer through shining. The juxtaposition of the dialogue and the star (or stars) links Mother Bear to the celestial bodies above. She is in effect watching over the family from Heaven.

The image of loved ones separated by the vast distances between stars and planets in *Mother's Lullaby* echoes the legend of Orihime and Kengyū. The two lovers were separated by Orihime's father, the emperor of heaven, when their love for each other caused her to neglect her weaving. As punishment, they were placed on opposite sides of the Milky Way, and are only allowed to meet once a year, on the seventh day of the seventh month. In Japan, this day is celebrated as the festival of Tanabata, during which people hang poems written on colourful slips of papers onto bamboo fronds. According to folklore, the breeze carries the meaning of the poem to its intended recipient (Ashkenazi 2003).

Both *Mother's Lullaby* and the legend of Orihime and Kengyū tell stories about people who love one another being suddenly torn apart from each other, unable to meet again outside of very specific and brief circumstances. In the legend, the separation is done by Orihime's wrathful father; in the book, it is the wrath of nature. While *Mother's Lullaby* does not deal with the conflict of love against duty, the themes of longing and sudden, unexpected parting are the same. The imagery of poetry being carried on the wind to a specific recipient during the Tanabata festival also has similarities to how the lyrics of Mother Bear's song is carried back to her family by the *manekkodori*.

2.4 The Manekkodori and blame

While the iconotext of Mother's Lullaby is mostly symmetrical, with few details appearing in the images that don't also appear in the text, the *narrative* consists of two counterpointing stories that intersect. The story begins and ends with the family of bears, but at the midway point, the story briefly switches focus to follow the *manekkodori.* The bear family stay fairly static throughout the story, in part because Mother Bear's return allows them to regain balance, leaving the *manekkodori* with *Mother's Lullaby*'s most dynamic character arc.

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[14] Japanese does not specify whether a noun is plural or singular. This sentence can also be read as "the large stars were shining".

The fictional *manekkodori* (lit. "mimicking bird") is named after its function. At the beginning of *Mother's Lullaby*, it enjoys nothing more than to imitate the other animals in the forest. Eventually, the other animals become so used to the *manekkodori* repeating other people's warnings for fun that they begin to ignore it. This causes problems when the *manekkodori* is the only one who realises the storm is coming:

> "It's a storm! A storm is coming!
> Everyone, quickly, run away!
> Hurry, hurry and run!"
> The *manekkodori* loudly warned [the animals] throughout the forest.
>
> But because everyone thought the *manekkodori* was imitating someone again, no-one took it seriously. (…)
>
> (*Mother's Lullaby*, spread 6)

This marks the last time we *see* the *manekkodori*, but not the last time the other characters *hear* it. When the family of bears are at their most distressed, they hear the *manekkodori* imitating Mother Bear's lullaby, emotionally rescuing them.

The parts of *Mother's Lullaby* that relate to the *manekkodori* borrow heavily from Aesop's fable about the boy who cried wolf. In the fable, a shepherd boy repeatedly lies about seeing wolves, only to not be believed when real wolves show up, leading to the death of several sheep (Fables of Aesop 2019). While the *manekkodori* does not tell direct lies, it repeats the other animals' words out of context in ways that are misleading, and the end result is the death of Mother Bear. Although *Mother's Lullaby* is primarily a story about grief, Konno and Imoto also include Aesop's moral in the narrative: If you habitually lie or mislead people, they will not believe you when you are actually telling the truth.

With the *manekkodori*'s story, Konno and Imoto introduce the subject of *blame.* They can safely do so without alienating or accusing anyone who was involved in the lead up or response to the Tōhoku earthquake because the iconotext of *Mother's Lullaby* is so distanced from the real events of 3.11. The *manekkodori* is unable to save Mother Bear (and, presumably, many others,) because of its own previous irresponsible behaviour. It is implied that this makes the bird responsible for the fallout, too. While there is nothing to be done to *stop* the storm, the *manekkodori* could still have helped save the lives of other animals if it had not already wrecked its own credibility.

The implied responsibility and blame of *Mother's Lullaby* is personal. The narrative of the *manekkodori* mirrors many real-life responses to the Tōhoku earthquake, as the aftermath saw the rise of a discourse of national reflection and self-blame. The focus on personal responsibility in the case of 3.11 contributed to obscuring and distracting from governmental and structural responsibility (DiNitto 2017). While there is no government or larger societal structures to distract from within the fictional world of *Mother's Lullaby*, the story still feeds into the same phenomenon. If it is a personal failure, it can be mitigated on a personal level. Structural issues are larger and more ingrained, and harder to grapple with for younger readers. In *Mother's Lullaby*, the *manekkodori* gets redemption through metaphorically returning Mother Bear to her family. While it cannot *fix* the problem, it can mitigate it, and it is its personal responsibility to do so.

2.5 Conclusion: Reaching for a larger audience

Konno and Imoto create distance between the Tōhoku earthquake and the iconotext of *Mother's Lullaby* by stripping the setting of details that would tie it to a specific place or time period. Changing the season from early spring to autumn creates distance, too, and has the added effect of sparking literary associations to grief and longing. This distancing helps create a space where readers can encounter grief and trauma without it becoming too visceral or overwhelming. It also makes the book relevant for a larger audience, and in a larger number of disasters, than those who have been directly affected by the Tōhoku earthquake.

The use of animal characters becomes another way for Konno and Imoto to create distance, and also opens up for sentimental identification. The cute character designs help make the story less frightening, though there is little *animal* left in the characters beyond their appearance. Instead, the characterisations of the bear family largely reflects their gender and family roles. The use of stereotypically gendered characters further distances the story of *Mother's Lullaby* from the real people who experienced the Tōhoku earthquake.

Mother's Lullaby is both conservative and normative in its use of gender stereotypes. In the world of the bear family, the loss of a mother means the complete breakdown of the family unit, and Father Bear cannot fill the role. Emotional regulation and the sphere of the home is the domain of mothers, which leaves Sister Bear to fill a role she has no possibility of managing to fill. There is no space in the family's grief for Father Bear. Instead, the spirit of Mother Bear is metaphorically returned to the family through her lullaby being repeated by the *manekkodori*.

The harmony of the family (and the regaining of it) is central to the story of *Mother's Lullaby.* The storm destroys it, and upsets the bear family's way of life. The *manekkodori* is not believed when it counts because of how it has previously attempted to upset the harmony of the other animals' everyday lives, but redeems itself by restoring harmony to the bear family at the end of the story. This focus on harmony, like Konno and Imoto's representation of gender, creates a story that is largely conservative.

This conservatism ties in with *Mother's Lullaby*'s attempt to tell a story about a large, traumatic moment for a wide audience. Despite the implied critique of the *manekkodori*, *Mother's Lullaby* does not cast blame on anyone with a recognisable real world counterpart. It is not specific enough to be offensive, and it does not challenge existing conventions. Writing a story that reinforces, rather than challenges, social norms makes it easier to reach a larger (and younger) audience. It is also easier to tell stories for younger audiences about an emotionally difficult topics if they are not otherwise challenging. In the end, Mother's Lullaby sacrifices artistic exploration for the sake of a space where a larger audience can confront difficult themes.

3 Sunflowers

The earthquake struck at 14.46. Classes at Okawa elementary school had ended at 14.30, but most of the students were still in the building when the earthquake hit. Students and teachers quickly made their way out to the school playground, but an out of date emergency manual made it difficult for them to know where they should go next. While some teachers suggested a hill behind the school, it was quickly dismissed as an evacuation spot because violent aftershakes might make climbing it unsafe. Instead, the teachers and students began to move toward the nearby river, aiming for a nearby traffic island (Lloyd Parry 2017).

The tsunami came.

The river swelled and rose and swept with it students and faculty alike.

In the aftermath, a group of women who lost their children in the tsunami came together through an informal project to commemorate their lost children: They began growing sunflowers on the hill by the school. At the time, some of the children were still missing, and the mothers would work on growing and caring for the sunflowers when they were not assisting with the search. The flower beds became a place where the women could meet to share their troubles and encourage each other to keep their spirits up (Nihon Keizai Shinbun 2012).

Hakata Tan was born in Tokyo in 1944, and has a background in creating documentaries and children's programming for NHK, as well as other Japanese television channels. He first encountered the story of the mothers of the Okawa school children in a newspaper article. He was immediately taken by the story, and thought it might make a good picture book:

> Around the time when the sun was setting, two mothers showed up in a mini-car, and began to water the sunflowers. Those figures, backlit [by the setting sun], sadly beautiful, looked like a Millet painting. At the time, I thought it would be good if [the story] about the mothers and the sunflowers was made into a picture book (*Sunflower Hill* 2012 (2014), 33).

Inspired by the article, Hakata contacted the mothers, and worked with them to create a picture book script. The resulting story was illustrated by Matsunari Mariko, an illustrator from Oita prefecture with a number of other picture books under her belt. The book was released by Iwasaki shoten in August, 2012, under the title *Sunflower Hill* (*Himawari no oka*).

There are no backlit human figures in the distance in the published version of *Sunflower Hill*. Instead, brightly coloured flowers and smiling faces greet the reader on nearly every page. This was a deliberate decision on the part of the creators – in the afterword, Hakata emphasises the importance of having “children laughing on every page”, in contrast to the heavy subject matter.

After a short “introduction” of the children at Okawa elementary school and their deaths in the tsunami, *Sunflower Hill* follows the mothers in their efforts to grow sunflowers in memory of the children they have lost. The narrative functions as a framework for a series of short “interviews” where each woman talks about her child – or children – to the reader. Narratively, it takes its cues from documentary filmmaking, while the visual style is childlike, reminiscent of a child’s drawing. Over the course of the story, the children who have died begin to appear among the flowers. Through Matsunari Mariko’s illustrations, the field of sunflowers becomes a liminal space where the living and the dead can temporarily coexist.

This interplay between the factual, non-fiction text and the fantastical elements of the illustrations creates a very different world than what we find in *Mother’s Lullaby.* Like *Mother’s Lullaby*, *Sunflower Hill* was inspired by a real event the author heard about second-hand, but they incorporate the events they were based on in very different ways, both in terms of narrative and textual and visual stylistic choices. *Mother’s Lullaby* presents a retelling that is stripped of specific details, making it more widely accessible. In *Sunflower Hill*, on the other hand, specific details are at the core of the narrative. This is a story about *these* mothers, planting flowers on *this* hill, telling the reader about *these* children. The eight mothers are credited as co-authors along with Hakata, and the afterword includes letters from each of them, describing their children at length. Excerpts of the letters are also used as part of the story itself.

In this chapter, I will take a closer look at how Sunflower Hill combines a fact-focused, “documentary” text with images that gradually become more fantastical. I will also look at how it incorporates religious themes, and how it deals with gender and community.

3.1 Structure

For the most part, *Sunflower Hill* is nonfiction. Unlike *Mother's Lullaby*, which also bases itself on real life events the picture book author has not experienced themselves, Hakata Tan's text sticks close to reality, and does not spend a lot of time on the internal lives of the people that appear in the book. The closest he gets to depicting this is in *Sunflower Hill'*s “prologue”. The prologue consists of the book's title page and the following two and a half spread. Though it is not marked as such in the book itself, the narrative undergoes a few key stylistic changes between these pages and the main bulk of the text. In these opening pages, Hakata introduces the reader to Okawa elementary school and its students, and explains what happened when the tsunami washed up over the school. After introducing the titular sunflower hill on the title page, and Okawa elementary school's one hundred and eight students on the first double spread, the text turns to the events of the Tōhoku earthquake:

> It happened on the 11th of March, 2011.
> At forty-six minutes past two in the afternoon,
> there was a very big earthquake.
> The children quickly gathered in the snowy school yard.
> There were children who had stayed home that day, and children whose parents had quickly come to pick them up, too.
> The remaining seventy-eight children[15]
> were shaking **from fear** and cold (*Sunflower Hill,* spread 2).

Even here, the text sticks largely to the facts. That the remaining children were scared is not a large assumption for the author to make, but within the context of the story, it becomes a powerful emotional detail.

The image of the children shaking from fear and cold in a snow-covered school yard stands is contrasted with Matsunari's illustration. The viewer is placed far away from the school and its students. The faint outline of a hazy, tree-covered hillside in the distance is the only clearly recognisable feature, stretching across the pages in a horizontal line, surrounded by vague impressions of snow, sky and water. The colours are cool, washed out greys and whites and blues. Thick, white snowflakes are dotted across the entirety of the page. The overall effect is that of an impressionistic landscape painting. The reader is quite literally distanced from the events of the text. The distance, along with the colours, creates a sense of placidity*,* amplified by the relatively stable, horizontal line of the hill in the horizon. In juxtaposition with the words, the distance and placidity of the illustration becomes jarring, throwing the detail of scared, shaking school children into sharp relief. Distancing the scene from the reader visually creates space for the text to deal with the horror of what is happening in the text.

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[15] While Okawa elementary school had a total of 108 students, several of them had already gone home by the time the earthquake hit, as lessons had ended at two thirty that day (Lloyd Parry 2017).

The illustration on the next spread places the viewer at a distance, too, watching that same hill. Still, there are two important differences. First: While the viewer is still positioned far away from the hill, this spread puts them noticeably closer to it. Individual trees are visible, even in Matsunari's impressionistic style. So is the outline of a single brown building. Presumably, this is Okawa elementary school, though it is not explicitly identified as such. Second: The seasons have changed. The hill is still floating between a diffuse, pale blue ocean and a diffuse, pale blue sky, but the snow is gone. The hill is painted in rich, vibrant shades of green. Time has passed.

The time of the text is slightly out of step with the time of the picture. The text on the right-hand page still follows the children at Okawa elementary school on the eleventh of March:

> "A tsunami is coming!"
> At the time the children turned and started to walk toward the flowerbeds on top of the hill, a big tsunami came and swallowed them all up.
> It took the lives of seventy-four children and ten teachers.
>
> (*Sunflower Hill,* spread 3)

The dissonance between the placid summer day of the image and the dramatic events of the text is once again striking. The reader is again distanced from the visual impact of the tsunami, but now the distance is a fact of both physical and temporal space. The gap between text and image once again creates distance, but this distance is even larger than that of the previous spread. This is perhaps fitting, as the tragedy of the text is larger, too.

While the text on the right-hand page of the third spread tells the reader about the tsunami that struck on the eleventh of March, the text on the left-hand page introduces the reader to the children's bereaved mothers, months later. This transition – both in time and in the people we follow – marks the end of the prologue, and the beginning of the main part of *Sunflower Hill.*

> "I want [the children] to be brought back home quickly"
> "I want to hug [my child], just one more time"
> The mothers [of the lost Okawa pupils] searched for their children day in and day out.
> Lifting debris, digging through dirt, searching the bottom of the sea.
> (*Sunflower Hill,* spread 3)

While there is only one line of dialogue in the first four pages of *Sunflower Hill*, the rest of the book is significantly more dialogue-heavy. Rather than incorporating the words of the eight mothers credited with co-writing the book into the narrative itself, Hakata instead quotes them. Still, they do not appear to be co-writers in the more traditional sense – while it is difficult to know from a reader's perspective, the narrative outside of direct quotations appears to be Hakata's work. In a sense, the mothers are interview subjects, and the line between their dialogue and Hakata's text seems, at least at first glance, fairly clear-cut. While some of the quotes are necessarily abbreviated, given the space constraints of the picture book format, Hakata has taken pains to include longer excerpts of the mothers' accounts of their children in the afterword. In this way, *Sunflower Hill*'s "authenticity" is further supported and supplemented by its paratext.

At this point in the story, the pictures change. The first three spreads, as well as the title page, all position the reader at a distance from the characters. In the first spread, the children at Okawa elementary school are far enough away to fit all one hundred and eight pupils. The two next spreads, of the hill in winter and summer, place the reader even farther away, with no human figures in sight. After the third spread, as the story moves to follow the mothers, the illustrations are consistently place the reader *closer* to the characters. Each person takes up more space in the illustrations than they do in either the title page or the first spread. There are practical reasons for this – for one, the later spreads in *Sunflower Hill* are not trying to introduce a school's worth of children. Still, this closer perspective creates a stronger connection between the reader and the characters. The reader is kept at a distance from the events of *Sunflower Hill'*s "prologue". In contrast, the rest of the book invites the reader to be a part of the mothers' heart-to-heart conversations while they take care of the sunflowers.

This is shift in point of view is reflected in the text, too. On almost every other page, the flow of the story is halted, allowing each mother to talk about the children they have lost. While some of these spreads do have other narration, they still consist primarily of dialogue, and follow a specific pattern, with some variation from mother to mother. The woman who is speaking highlights one or two of their child's personality traits, followed by a line outside of the dialogue that gives the child's year in school.

> "Ai-chan[16] loved sports.
> She loved everyone in the family, and just like her name[17], she was a child who was loved by everyone.
> She looked like a sunflower in every photo, with her smiling face.
> Her life was short, but she was always happy."
> Ai-chan was a sixth grader (*Sunflower Hill,* spread 5).

The narrative of *Sunflower Hill* combines mundane everyday tasks with these small interviews with each mother. Each interview creates a snapshot of a child, an abbreviated summary to give the reader a sense of what was lost, attempting to summarise each child's personalities into a single page. While these memorials technically slow down the narrative flow of the story, they are ultimately the heart of *Sunflower Hill*. While the surrounding story is not unimportant, it is in one sense mostly important because it creates the space for these memorial pages to happen. Narratively, the story of the mothers planting sunflowers creates a frame story around the memorials. A frame story is a narrative that contains one or more other narratives that are the story's primary focus (American Heritage Dictionary of the English

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[16] "Chan" is a honorific used to refer to children and some women.
[17] In addition to being a name, "ai" is also Japanese for love.

Language, 2016).[18] *Sunflower Hill's* use of the frame story and its memorials mirrors the real situation the mothers found themselves in as well, juxtaposing grief and remembrance with the everyday practicalities of tending to the flowers.

3.2 A documentary aesthetic

Many of Hakata Tan's narrative and stylistic choices are influenced by his background in children's television, and particularly his background in documentary film. While Matsunari Mariko's illustrations do not aim for the photorealism we typically associate with documentary film, the combination of text and image still results in a final product that is distinctly documentary-*like.* Although *Sunflower Hill* is not a documentary, it still borrows some of its style from the documentary genre. This affectation of a documentary "aesthetic" is particularly prevalent in the text. As the pictures gradually become more less realistic in the latter half of the story, the factual tone of the written narrative stands in counterpoint to the fantastical tone of the visual one.

What is a documentary? The Scottish filmmaker and theorist John Grierson once described the genre as the "creative treatment of actuality" (quoted in Spence and Navarro 2011, 2). A documentary works with and reinterprets reality. It is this emphasis on reality – or, in Grierson's terms, actuality – that distinguishes it from fiction (Spence and Navarro 2011). In *Crafting Truth: Documentary Form and Meaning*, Louise Spence and Vinicius Navarro problematise the idea that it is possible for any given work to truly be a "creative treatment of actuality". "Actuality" is an infinite concept, and it is impossible to wholly represent it in a single documentary. Spence and Navarro write:

> Any representation is a selective view of the world. All representations of actuality must choose which aspects to include and which to leave out. Decisions are made to emphasize one element and to downplay others, to assert some truths and ignore others.
> […] [B]ecause there is no value-neutral treatment of actuality, it is important for viewers and scholars to analyze how a documentarian, to paraphrase Hayden White, translates knowing into telling (2011, 2).

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[18] A more traditional example of this kind of story would be the Arabic folk tale collection A Thousand and One Nights.

No narrative is truly value-neutral. This is true both for fictional and non-fictional narratives, but it becomes an especially salient point when dealing with narratives that make claims about their own authenticity. When we watch a documentary or read books about real events, it is easy to imagine that we are watching or reading something that is objectively true. The assumption that what we see is real (or, in the case of *Sunflower Hill*, *based on* something real,) obscures the fact that we see is there because someone *chose* not only to depict it, but also the way in which it is depicted. What is presented as *neutral* is formed both by conscious decisions and unconscious narratives. While these narratives are personal, and constructed by individuals, there is to some degree a "dominant" narrative, and "neutral" narratives can often end up reproducing and reinforcing this status quo (Spence and Navarro 2011).

When we think a story is true, it impacts *how* we read it, too. Narratives that are attached to a "true story" appear to trigger a stronger response in consumers than narratives that are clearly fictional (Park 2016). This is true of documentaries, but also of the picture books I have looked at for this study. *Mother's Lullaby* and *Sunflower Hill* both deal with the events of the Tohoku earthquake, and their official descriptions emphasise their connection to real stories from that March day in 2011. Out of the two, the narrative of *Sunflower Hill* is by far the most insistent on reminding the reader that it is based on reality. Hakata Tan achieves this through his adoption of a documentary aesthetic. While Matsunari's images have a style that is deliberately more reminiscent of children's drawings than photographs, their composition is still documentary-like in the first half of the story.

Giving a clear definition of what documentary aesthetics *are* can be challenging. This is in part because the sheer breadth of the documentary genre, but also because the aesthetics of the documentary genre are deliberately unobtrusive. Because the documentarian is attempting to give the viewer the sense that what they are watching is the representation of something real, a style that is more stylized or artistically distinctive can get in the way of the work. As John Corner puts it, "An apparent absence of style . . . constitutes at least part of the conventional grounds of trust and credibility" (Corner, quoted in Spence and Navarro 2011, 3). This is not to say that aesthetic concerns are less important in the documentary genre. The fact that aesthetic choices in documentaries are less obtrusive than those of fiction does not mean that these choices are arbitrary, or that they do not affect the viewing experience. Instead, they work to build a sense of verisimilitude. The goal is to strengthen the sense that what is happening on screen is something that is real, and to obscure the fact that what is happening on screen is ultimately still constructed. The documentary genre features a number of formal conventions that function as markers of authenticity, such as visual and aural "messiness" (shaky, handheld camera movements and imperfectly recorded sound) and people on-screen directly addressing the camera.

Because of the strong association between the documentary and authenticity, many fiction films and television shows have begun to use documentary aesthetics to play off of this association. "Documentary," Spence and Navarro write, "has become a style or an aesthetic that evokes "the real" (2011, 32). The use of a documentary style is not uncommon in stories about trauma. Ibuse Masuji's novel *Black Rain* (1965) about bombing of Hiroshima combines a subdued, unsentimental documentary style with a multivoiced narrative (Abe Auestad 2017). In children's literature, we find books like Barbara Barbieri McGrath's *The Storm: Students of Biloxi, Mississippi, Remember Hurricane Katrina* (2006), which gives visual and verbal accounts of ninety students who experienced Hurricane Katrina (Connolly 2012), and Mori Ken's *Tsunami: A Collection of Essays by Children from the Disaster Area* (*Tsunami: hisaichi no kodomotachi no sakubunshū*, 2012), which features essays from students from a number of different schools in different prefectures affected by the Tōhoku earthquake, interspersed with information about each prefecture. Though their approaches are different, these stories all adopt a documentary style. Multivoiced narratives are common in the documentary genre, but are also useful specifically when telling stories about trauma. As both Reiko Abe Auestad and Paula T. Connolly point out, multivoicedness becomes a way to deal with the incomprehensible vastness of tragedy (Abe Auestad 2017, Connolly 2012). If trauma is difficult or even impossible to articulate, a larger array of voices might perhaps make it a fraction easier to make out its outlines.

Hakata Tan and Matsunari Mariko also employ a number of different documentary tropes in *Sunflower Hill.* These include narrative structure, the use of interviewed subjects, and the text's distinction between expository text and "voice-over":

Narrative structure. While *Sunflower Hill* has a clear beginning, middle, and end, the narrative flow is constantly interrupted by the mothers' anecdotes about their children. Its pacing moves in fits and starts, but even though the anecdotes grind the narrative to a halt, they are also integral to the story. From a documentary point of view, this structure makes sense: The factual situation (mothers planting sunflowers and solving problems related to the growing process) is intercut with interviews with the participants. The mothers address an invisible interviewer, responding to questions that are not in the text. Through its use of dialogue and listing the eight mothers as co-authors, *Sunflower Hill* gives the reader the impression that this *specific* situation, and these specific conversations, really happened as it appears on the page.

Use of interview subjects. Because of their use of sound and image, documentaries are more likely than non-fiction literature (such as a history book) to give the impression that the things they depict are not constructed, but merely recorded by the filmmaker (Spence and Navarro 2011). As I have mentioned, a picture book has different format constraints than a documentary, and it is hard to imagine a situation where a reader could read a picture book and feel that the events it depicted "just happened to be recorded" by the writer and illustrator who created it. Instead, *Sunflower Hill* leans on its interview subjects, and their directly quoted dialogue, drawing on their authority as primary sources to enhance the sense that these situations and conversations happened *in this way.* It is only in the afterword that it becomes clear that the specific conversations we see in *Sunflower Hill* are based on letters, which are included in abbreviated form after Hakata's own afterword. The words are not invented by Hakata, and the mothers are still primary sources, speaking with authority both about the process of growing the sunflowers and of their own children, but the situations we see in *Sunflower Hill* are still constructed for a larger, more effective emotional and narrative impact.

Distinction between expository text and "voice-over". As I have mentioned, the narrative style of *Sunflower Hill* is largely neutral, and mostly avoids describing emotions that do not also come across through the mothers' directly quoted dialogue. It uses the more formal *-masu* verb endings. It is also largely unobtrusive and free of metaphors, allowing the reader to focus on the facts and the dialogue. As picture books target younger children, this straightforward style is not necessarily out of the norm for the genre. However, at two points in *Sunflower Hill*, the text undergoes a stylistic change. This stylistic change is characterised by three things: Firstly, these pages contain no quoted dialogue. Secondly, Hakata drops the formal verb endings in favour of the more informal dictionary form. Thirdly, both of these instances feature metaphors. In the first instance, Hakata draws a line between the Milky Way (天の川*, Amanogawa)* to Okawa elementary school (大川小学校, *Ookawa shougakkou)*. In the second, he explicitly compares the children to the sunflowers. These stylistic changes create the sense that the author is directly addressing the reader. If we view *Sunflower Hill* through a lens of documentary aesthetics, we might interpret the more formal style as an adaption of an expository voice-over, but it also serves an additional function: Because of the picture book format, Hakata's text must also take on some of the work of the camera, as Matsunari's pictures do not communicate movement in the way a documentary might. When Hakata switches to the less formal style, the text changes character, becoming less expository and more of a pure dialogue between Hakata and the reader.

Visually, *Sunflower Hill* does not resemble what we typically associate with a documentary. Rather than photorealism, Matsunari's illustrations imitate the style of children's drawings. While this is far from a *literal* interpretation of the documentary genre, it does resonate with the focus on *authenticity.* We do not see the real world as it is in the illustrations of *Sunflower Hill*, but the use of a more childlike style gives the illustrations a childlike *voice.* This childlike voice also helps create an impression of authenticity – a creative treatment of actuality.

The use of visual and textual documentary tropes underline the fact that *Sunflower Hill* is, in fact, a real story. However, once the mothers begin talking about their children, the pictures start to change, even though the text still keeps its documentary-like style. The sunflowers begin to sprout. They start out short and thin, but soon their leaves take over most of the spreads, turning pages into lush, green spaces. These pages create a strong contrast to the earlier images, and introduces a modality that counterpoints the text. As the sunflowers grow, they push reality to the side. They create a liminal space, erasing the boundaries between living and dead, between then and now. In this space, the living and the dead can coexist. Although the mothers talk about them in past tense and do not interact with them directly, the children who have been lost appear among the leaves, smiling and waving.

3.3 Liminal Space

The concept of nature as a place where gods and spirits exist is not uncommon in Japanese culture. In his analysis of religion in Japan, for example, Edmund Gilday has argued that the Japanese religious worldview is made up of three parts: The village, the mountain, and the fields. The village is the realm of humans; the mountain is the realm of the *kami.*[19] The fields are contested, inhabited by *kami* in the winter and used by humans for agriculture in the summer (Payne 2006). In mountain religion (an area where themes from both Buddhism and folk religion are linked together), some mountains (*reizan*) are considered to be dwellings for spirits of the dead (Reader 2006). In Shintoism, *kami* can inhabit sacred trees, and sacred forests (so-called *shinju no mori*) are often found by Shinto shrines (Omura 2004, Tanimoto 2012).

The tie between the spirits of the dead and nature can also be seen in more recent religious practices, like so-called natural burials (*shizen*sō), and more specifically tree burials (*jumokus*ō).[20] The term "natural funeral" can refer to any funeral that does not rely on a grave plot, and typically involves scattering ashes at sea or, in some cases, in mountain reserves (Covell 2005). A tree burial is more specific: The ashes of the deceased are buried in the ground, and a tree is planted on top of them. Tree burials were first introduced to Japan at the Chishoin Temple in the Iwate prefecture[21] in Tōhoku in 1999 (Sekiguchi 2015, Kin and Nagata 2008). In an Ignition Int. article about the phenomenon, Sekiguchi Taketo writes: "Japanese Buddhism teaches that humans become buddhas when they pass away. Through tree burial, Chishoin officials explain, 'these buddhas are reborn as flowers' (2015)".

Natural and tree burials are partially a response to Japan's changing social landscape, with an increasing ageing population, low birth rate and an increasing number of nuclear families making it harder to maintain family burial plots (Kin and Nagata 2008, Tsujimura 2014). Another factor might be weakening ties between individual temples and their member families (Covell 2005). More important for this chapter, however, is the symbolic implications of a natural or tree burial in itself: The dead are once again returned to nature (Kin and Nagata 2008). Like the planting of the sunflowers in *Sunflower Hill,* tree burials leave behind a physical, living thing that bereaved families can visit after the burial, and symbolically, the spirit of the deceased becomes part of the tree or flowers that have been planted.

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[19] While kami can be translated to mean "god" or "deity", kami in Japanese religion are considered to be spirit beings (Williams 2015).

[20] The traditional, and still more common burial practice in Japan involves the deceased's ashes being buried in a family burial plot after a Buddhist service (Tsujimura 2014, Covell 2005).

[21]: The neighbouring prefecture of Miyagi, which is the location of Sunflower Hill.

Nature as a space where spirits exist – and can be encountered – is a recurring theme in modern Japanese media, too. In *Kafka on the Shore (Umibe no Kafuka,* 2002*),* for example, Murakami Haruki makes use of the forest as a liminal space where time is meaningless and memory ceases to exist, offering shelter for both the living and the dead at the price of oblivion. Urushibara Yuki's supernatural adventure manga *Mushishi* (1999-2008) borrows heavily from Shinto and Japanese folklore. Here, too, *kami* and the spirits of the dead exist in mountains and forests, side by side with the living. Studio Ghibli, one of Japan's most prolific animation film studios, often portrays relationships between humans and nature spirits in their movies, such as *My Neighbor Totoro (Tonari no Totoro,* 1988), *Princess Mononoke (Mononoke-hime,* 1997), and *Ponyo* (*Gake no Ue no Ponyo,* 2008). The personal relationships between humans and nature spirits (whether they are at odds or in harmony) become a way for Studio Ghibli's films to deal with a broad range of issues, from individual identity to environmentalism. *Spirited Away* (*Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi*, 2001) provides a particularly interesting example: Chihiro, the protagonist, is physically uprooted as her family moves from their old home, and then *spiritually* uprooted when she loses her name (and, with it, her identity) in the spirit world. The spirit world of *Spirited Away* is also suffering from a loss of connection. It has been both literally and metaphorically polluted, and the place where Chihiro finds herself resembles human civilization more than it does the nature we find in other Studio Ghibli films. The loss of connection to nature, and, in Chihiro's case, to a physical *place*, leads to spirits and people forgetting themselves. To heal, they must find their way back to the connections that matter – to nature, but also to the beings around them.

Unlike the liminal spaces of Murakami's forest and the spirit world of *Spirited Away*, the liminal space we find in *Sunflower Hill* is made by humans. The act of planting sunflowers in the name of the children who have died becomes a way to symbolically draw their spirits into the space, reaffirming the connections between the living and the dead. It ties the souls of the children to a location they knew, and through that location, to their identity. While memory cannot keep its integrity in the forest of *Kafka on the Shore*, it is a core component both in *Sunflower Hill* and in the sunflower beds it is based on. The sowing and tending and care of the flowers reaffirms connections between the mothers and their children, but also between the children and the space itself. Like *Spirited Away*, *Sunflower Hill* posits that there is power in invoking memory, and affirms the connections between people, as well as place. The mothers' work and the book itself becomes an kind of complex interpellation, calling ghosts back from the afterlife and reaffirming their past identities while at the same time turning them into the sunflowers themselves.

In other words, in addition to being a liminal space, the sunflower beds of *Sunflower Hill* are also a memorial one, created by people who are grieving to remember the dead. It is not just made by humans; it is made by humans with a very specific purpose in mind. This is not to say that memorial spaces such as the one in the book are symbolically one-sided, however. In Margaret Gibson's analysis of private memorials in public space – like, for example, a roadside memorial for the victims of a car accident – she points out that the semiotics of these sites are not simple, existing within a larger context. As an example, she mentions a roadside memorial that not only marks a death, but also effectively functions as a locational marker, signalling that the exit sign to a nearby town is coming up (Gibson 2011). This is true for the memorial in *Sunflower Hill* as well. The sunflowers become a memorial for the children who died; they become a reminder of the events of that day; they become a marker that shows people where to safely escape to in the case of another tsunami (Nihon keizai shinbun 2012).

Having a physical memorial is perhaps especially important when locating the physical bodies of the deceased is difficult or impossible, which was the case for many bereaved in the aftermath of the Tōhoku earthquake. This was the case for the mothers featured in *Sunflower Hill,* too, and many spent months searching for their children's bodies:

> […] Day after day, the mothers searched for the children.
> They moved rubble, dug into the earth,
> and looked at the bottom of the ocean. (*Sunflower Hill*, spread 3)

The uncertainty and anxiety that comes not having a body to confirm a loss is so strong that when one of the children *is* found, the mothers talk about recovering her body with joy and relief (*Sunflower Hill,* spread 16). For the mothers, maintaining a physical memorial becomes a way to offset some of the anxiety and grief they are feeling.

According to Gibson, an inherent part of unofficial memorials is an acute awareness of how temporary they are, and the anxiety that comes with that awareness:

> Memorials are a testament to the mortality of living memory as eventually the people who knew the dead or lived the history or experience that the memorial represents, die. Memorials serve an important remembering function not because they restore living memory, but because they symbolically articulate and engage with the fragility and temporality of living memory's mortality: Memorials always exist in a fraught relation to fear of disappearance[.] (Gibson 2011, 150)

Remembering is an ongoing action. Memorials like the one in *Sunflower Hill* need to be constantly maintained, and most of the narration of the book outside of the dialogue is concerned with the work and care the mothers put into making the sunflowers grow. If the work of maintaining the flowers ends, so does the memorial. While flowerbeds are more permanent than a bouquet placed on the side of the road, they are not permanent, and neither are the memories of the children they are made to commemorate. The people who maintain the memorial will pass on. Other people may continue maintaining it afterwards, especially as it also marks an event that was also traumatic to the local community, but this is not guaranteed. As time passes, the semantic *content* of the memorial also shifts. What started out as a memorial for specific children that died from a traumatic event that the tenders of the memorial also experienced eventually becomes a marker for something awful that happened once to other people.

In a sense, turning the story into a book is a way to stave off the distance that comes with time. While *Mother's Lullaby* sets out to tell a story about dealing with death after a natural disaster in general, *Sunflower Hill* is less concerned with telling a story and more about showing the reader a situation, and, more importantly, showing the reader the children who have died. The plot, such as it is, consists primarily of solving practical problems related to growing sunflowers, and beyond the introduction that deals with the tsunami itself, it does not have a very dramatic narrative arc. It is slice of life, the documentarian documenting things that people do to deal with grief. It is also constantly broken up to talk about the children who have died, and who they used to be while they were alive. This is the primary *purpose* of the book. Like the sunflower beds, it becomes a memorial, an attempt to stave off the loss of memory. In the afterword, Hakata Tan alludes to this, invoking ideas of indigenous spirituality:

> Native Americans believe that "if not even a single person in this world remembers

> me, I will disappear". Through thinking of people and being thought of by people, people are able to live. The mothers [that the book is based on] think about their children all the time, everywhere they go. The children live on with their mothers. (*Sunflower Hill,* afterword)

The book functions as a way to remember the children both independent of and in tandem with the actual memorial. On its own, it allows people both within the local community of Ishinomaki and people with no particular connection to it to learn about both the Tōhoku earthquake and the children of the eight mothers. A book does not require ongoing tending to keep existing, unlike the sunflowers. In combination with the sunflower beds, it can help provide context, both now and later, when the people who knew the children have passed away. This may slow down the shift in the sunflower memorial's semantic content, too, and potentially keep the sunflowers "alive" and tended to for longer than they may have, had the book not been published.

3.4 3.11 memorials and nature

In the aftermath of the Tōhoku earthquake, inhabitants of the Tōhoku region made a number of different efforts to deal with the enormity of the disaster. According to Millie Creighton,

> Much of this involved what has been called, "memory work" [sic] the extended process of working through loss, rupture, or grief, which rather than being time wasting, inefficient, or obsessive is considered important to allow individuals to work through trauma and loss to reconstruct lives and move beyond trauma. The human need to enact rites, ceremonies, or events that commemorate, memorialize, and mourn those they have known who have died has specifically been called "mourning work" (2014, 101)

This memory and mourning work has taken several forms. From her field work in the area, Creighton herself lists activities as diverse as setting up memorials and coming together to talk about their experiences and losses in story-telling and knitting groups. There were larger initiatives, too, such as *The Yorokobi Project*[22], in which people came together to restore and return photographs and photo albums that had been recovered in the aftermath. Several cities also set up centres that featured information about 3.11 and commemorated the dead, such as Sendai's *Wasuren*[23] Center and Yuriage's *Kiroku*[24] Center (Creighton 2014). In addition to being memory or mourning work, these projects and activities also foster *community* in some way. This may help heal or mitigate some of the collective trauma caused by the disaster by restoring and fostering trust and community between local survivors, but also between inhabitants and the local government.

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[22] *Yorokobu* means "to rejoice". *Yorokobi* is the noun form.

It is perhaps not surprising that some of this memory and mourning work, as well as recovery work by local and governmental organizations, focuses on or features nature. As the tsunami caused massive deforestation along the coastline of Eastern Tōhoku, Japanese authorities, religious institutions, and non-governmental organizations have arranged several local tree-planting events (*shokujusai*), on top of other reforestation projects (Rots 2019). *Sunflower Hill* is not the only picture book that is based on memory work that retells the true story of mothers planting things in memory of their lost children, either. *Dogwood Lane* (*Hanamizuki no Michi,* 2013) by Asanuma Mikiko and Kuroi Ken tells the story of an initiative to plant flowering dogwood trees along an escape route in the town of Rikuzentakata.

3.4.1 Sunflowers

Sunflowers are part of the post-3.11 landscape, too. Because they are hyperaccumulators, they are able to absorb high concentrations of toxic material, such as lead or radioactive elements. In the aftermath of the Tōhoku earthquake, fields of sunflowers have been planted in Fukushima in an attempt to leech radiation from the ground (Beauchemin 2016).[25][26] In addition to, and perhaps partially *because* of the sunflower's ability to thrive in toxic environments, the flower has also come to be a symbol of both resilience and remembrance. Sunflowers bloom in the beds by Okawa elementary school; in the same city,

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[23] "We won't forget."

[24] Record.

[25] Similar initiatives were also undertaken after the bombing of Hiroshima and the nuclear accident at Chernobyl (Beauchemin 2016).

[26] It is still not clear how effective the sunflowers will be at filtering out the radiation from the soil, in part because of local variations in soil composition (Gellerman 2011).

Ishinomaki, an increasing number of sunflowers have been planted under a billboard that proclaims “Do your best! Ishinomaki” (*Ganbar*ō*! Ishinomaki*). The billboard, put up by a local citizen, Kurosawa Ken’ichi, has become a place where people come to pray. These sunflowers have become known as “gutsy sunflowers” (*gokonj*ō *himawari*), and their seeds are transported and grown across the length of Japan. Several people planted these (and other) sunflowers in the aftermath of the Tōhoku earthquake (Kuwabara 2017). The sunflowers brighten a landscape that, at least in the first year after the disaster, was marked by destruction and debris.

In *Sunflower Hill*, the children metaphorically *become* sunflowers. On the page where the flowers begin to bloom, Hakata Tan writes:

> […] Many smiles bloomed under the deep blue sky of midsummer.
> The bright flowers that faced Okawa elementary school bloomed.
> (*Sunflower Hill,* spread 15)

This metaphor is repeatedly reinforced throughout the course of the book. It becomes especially poignant as the mothers have spent the entirety of the book talking about their children while at the same time helping the sunflowers grow. The metaphor is also reinforced by the use of the verb “*sodateru*”. In Japanese*, sodateru* is used in the sense of raising a child (“*ko wo sodateru*”), but it is also used for growing flowers (“*hana wo sodateru*”). After the deaths of their children, the mothers “raise” the flowers, pouring the love and grief for their children into the work. The metaphor is made more explicit on *Sunflower Hill*’s final page:

> One by one, the small seeds became a thousand seeds.
> Those seeds, one by one, seemed like the memory of the children, one by one.
> Let’s meet again next summer.
> We are always, always together. (*Sunflower Hill,* spread 16)

The illustration shows a child surrounded by blooming sunflowers, holding a floating, glowing yellow light in their hands. The use of the yellow ties the child to the flowers; they are not just *among* the plants, but *part of them*, the yellow light of their soul shining at the same frequency as their petals. In the text, Hakata draws a line between the seeds and the children, and further reinforces the image by using similar wording and repetition (“Those seeds, one by one"[27] and "the children, one by one"[28]*)*.

This final page is also marked with a change in perspective, as the text takes on the perspective of the children themselves in the final two sentences:

> Let's meet again next summer.
> We are always, always together. (*Sunflower Hill,* spread 16)

The change in perspective also comes with a change in both tense and verb, from the past tense of the more polite -*masu* form to the more casual short form to address the reader (and, by implication, the mothers) directly. Ending the text in this way gives reassurance to younger readers, making it clear that although the children are dead, they are not *truly* gone. When taken together with the rest of the page, it also helps strengthen the sense that the children and the sunflowers are one; when the sunflowers bloom again "next summer", the mothers will meet their children again.

3.4.2 Stars and festival

Like *Mother's Lullaby*, *Sunflower Hill* also uses the metaphor of the children as stars. Slightly past the mid-point of the story, Hakata invokes the image of the Milky Way:

> Tomorrow is Tanabata.
> In the sky is the beautiful Milky Way.
> The lights from the homes and the town are all dark,
> and because it is pitch dark,
> the stars are beautifully visible.
> If you draw another line in 大川小学校[29]
> it turns into 天の川小学校.[30]
> Everyone is watching.
> With the teachers, too.
> They are laughing. (*Sunflower Hill,* spread 12)

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[27] "Sono hitotsubu hitotsubu."
[28] "Hitori hitori no kodomotachi."
[29] *Ōkawa shōgakkō,* Okawa elementary school.
[30] *Amanogawa shōgakkō*, Milky way elementary school.

In this metaphor, the stars above mirror the sunflowers below. With the stroke of a pen, the school *becomes* the Milky Way. While *Mother's Lullaby* invites associations to Tanabata and the legend of Orihime and Kengyū through a combination of its themes and its use of stars, *Sunflower Hill* explicitly mentions the festival. Bringing it up helps to cement the timeline of *Sunflower Hill,* grounding it further in a specific time and place. It also gives the metaphor of Okawa elementary school as the Milky Way an extra layer of poignancy: Like Orihime and Kengyū, the mothers and children stand on opposite sides of the Milky Way, unable to reach each other.

3.5 Women's work

Sunflower Hill is based on a true story, and uses documentary tropes to give the reader the impression that what they are reading *is,* to some extent, a true story, even as the sunflower beds become a liminal space and children being to appear among the flowers. This partial verisimilitude obscures the fact that, even excluding the less realistic details of the illustrations, the story is still a constructed, pared down version of what actually happened. This is particularly clear when looking at what characters get to speak: While the main focus of *Sunflower Hill* is on the children that passed away, all the living characters we see are mothers.

Although they have real life counterparts, the women we meet in *Sunflower Hill* do not get an individual identity outside of their relationship to their children. Their dialogue is rarely directly attributed to a specific person through dialogue tags, though it is clear that each mother talks about her own child. On the rare occasion that a specific mother is referenced in the text, they are not referred to by name, but as the mother of one of the children:

> At the start of June, one of the mothers said:
> "Let's plant sunflowers in the flowerbeds on top of the hill!"
> It was the mother of Ai-chan. Ai-chan had been found on exactly the forty-ninth day after the tsunami.[31]
> She was cheerful, and the biggest crier. (*Sunflower Hill,* spread 4)

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[31] In Japanese Buddhism, the forty-ninth day after death marks the point where the soul of the dead is reborn (Sougi Jiten, n.d.) Until this point, the deceased are in a limbo stage where they are considered to not be entirely dead (Hood 2012).

Ai-chan's mother is the instigator of the plan, and the only one in the group who is described as an individual. After this page, the mothers mostly act as one uniform group outside of the dialogue. The lack of individual names and actions strips them of their individuality and turns them into an unified group whose most important characteristic is that they are mothers. Even in the afterword, where each mother has written a short "letter" about their children, each mother is simply credited as "[Child]'s mother". They are not even credited as individuals on the cover page, where they are lumped together as "[t]he eight mothers who grew the sunflowers".

Reducing the women to their role as mothers is partially a practical solution to the limitations of the picture book genre. As in *Mother's Lullably*, using kinship terms rather than given names makes it easier for younger children to relate to the story (Nikolajeva and Scott 2001). Turning the group of mothers into what is functionally one entity also leaves more space for Hakata and Matsunari to spend on giving character the children. Because the book is a memorial in itself, they are its – and the mothers' – central focus. The emphasis on the *children's* personalities, rather than the adults, also shows the reader exactly what has been lost, and why that loss was so devastating.

In addition, presenting the mothers as a fairly uniform group serves to highlight the importance of *motherhood* in itself, rather than the women as individuals. Their grief is important *because* they are mothers; who they are as people is less important. Like *Mother's Lullaby, Sunflower Hill* is centred on on the relationship between mother and child, privileging it above other relationships. The documentary style of *Sunflower Hill*'s text serves to further reinforce this norm, as it obscures the fact that the narrative, as well as the mothers' characterisations, are constructed.

The privileging of the mother-and-child relationship becomes especially glaring when compared to the absence of men in the iconotext. Throughout *Sunflower Hill*, the fathers of the children are only mentioned once:

> It's summer.
> The fathers brought a big water tank [to the mothers].

> With this, [the flowers] got plenty of water every day, even when [the mothers] didn't come by. (*Sunflower Hill*, spread 6)

While the fathers help out with this specific, practical task, they are not part of the group. Despite having lost the same children, their loss is not treated as equally worth depicting. In *Sunflower Hill,* grief is the domain of women, and the mourning work is primarily *women's* work. While the reader cannot know to what extent the fathers were or were not part of the planting of the sunflowers in reality, the fathers of *Sunflower Hill* have very little part in it.

In addition to the privileging of the relationship between mother and child, *Sunflower Hill* also presents the reader with an idealised image of mourning, and with it, an idealised image of the mourning mother. Because of Japan's long history of tying discourses of motherhood and womanhood in itself together (Dalton 2013), the loss of a child is not just difficult because it is the loss of a child; it also puts the mothers of *Sunflower Hill* in a situation where their identity becomes tied to the loss, and by extension, to the act of mourning. These combined discourses, along with the existential change in identity, creates a narrative around mourning mothers that is especially poignant.

Although Hakata and Matsunari present a story that deals with grief, they are also concerned with recovery, and along with the heartache, there is a thread of optimism running through the iconotext. This comes through in the smiling faces of the children, as well as the story's hopeful ending note. This optimism is reflected in the way the bereaved are depicted, too. Though there is pain in the story of the mothers, their grief is never ugly or inconvenient. While Ai-chan's mother is described as a crybaby, we never see any of the mothers cry in Matsunari's pictures. Instead, the sense of community that springs up around the sunflower memorial, as well as the work of tending the sunflowers in itself, helps them meet obstacles head on without breaking down. The mourning presented by *Sunflower Hill* is the mourning of mothers, but it is also the mourning of a group of women who are powering through their grief through productive work.

3.5.1 Community

In addition to being a space for mourning and remembrance, the sunflower beds are also a social space. Growing the sunflowers gives the mothers a place to sort through their grief and trauma. It brings them closer to the other mothers through the work and problem solving they do together, but also through their shared tragedy:

> In August,
> they found Koharu-chan, a sixth grader.
> [...]
> It wasn't just Koharu-chan's mother [who was happy.]
> Everyone cried with joy.
> [The mothers who have found their children] know how much pain
> the mothers who had not found their children are hurting.
> That's why everyone is searching [for the children].
> (*Sunflower Hill*, spread 13)

The work creates community, and the community creates support, both emotionally and physically. The process helps the mothers deal with their individual grief, but also helps them regain a sense of togetherness. If collective trauma involves "a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality (Erikson, quoted in Saul 2014, 3)", Hakata, Matsunari, and the eight mothers present one way to help mitigate and heal that damage.

3.5.2 Gambaru

The concept of "gambaru" has been a recurring theme in the recovery effort after the Tōhoku earthquake (Creighton 2014). The word can be roughly translated as "to persevere" or "hang in there". In her fieldwork in Ishinomaki, Creighton found that locals used the concept of *gambaru*, and the hard work of carrying on with living their lives as close to normal as possible, as a way to cope with the aftermath of the disaster:

> [T]hose in Ishinomaki were doing the difficult work of going through usual activities and duties rather than giving in to the immense sense of suffering that surrounded the circumstances the area was in. This could mean interacting with the volunteer stations that had been set up in Ishinomaki, or just going through the tasks of one's usual job. At the Ishinomaki Information Center banners sent from elsewhere in the country, urging people to *gambaru, gambatte,* or *gambarō* (all forms

> of the verb for persevere or “hang in there”) decorated the center, along with folded paper cranes sent by those in other communities. (2014, 104)

This work of “carrying on” - what Creighton calls “the heroism of “doing normal” (2014, 104)” - is central to the community building and memory work of the women in *Sunflower Hill,* too. The work becomes a way to wring something beautiful and useful out of tragedy, and the women meet all the problems they encounter on the way with a can-do attitude. There is no space in *Sunflower Hill* for the kind of grief that ties you to your bed. Instead, grieving (and processing grief) is tied to social, practical, and *productive* work, persevering through the pain.

3.6 An absence of blame

While concepts of community and perseverance are key in *Sunflower Hill*, there is no space for blame. The mothers and the narrative stay clear of any question of guilt. Within the fiction of the book, the children died because of the tsunami, and there was no way to prevent it. This stands in stark contrast with the real life circumstances of the deaths of the pupils at Okawa elementary school.

The earthquake occurred at 14.46, sixteen minutes after the end of classes that day. While the pupils that were still inside the school were quickly evacuated from the building, further evacuation efforts were slow and stymied by confusion. Okawa elementary school’s evacuation plan came from a manual known as The Education Plan. It was based on a national template and then adapted to suit the circumstances of each individual school. When the teachers consulted the manual, however, it became apparent that the school’s evacuation plan had been left generic by the deputy headmaster, who had been responsible for adjusting it. Some of the pupils and teachers wanted to climb up on a nearby hill (where, in the future, the eight mothers would plant sunflowers). After a long wait, however, it was decided that they would go in the opposite direction instead, on a route that lead them toward the Kitakami river. About forty-five minutes after the quake, the tsunami hit, and the adults and children were too far away from the hill to escape it (Lloyd Parry 2017).

In the aftermath, the eight mothers planted sunflowers on the hill above Okawa elementary school as a memorial and a way to mark the top of the hill as an evacuation spot.

Three years later, and two years after the release of *Sunflower Hill*, a group of twenty-nine parents joined a class-action lawsuit seeking damages from the school district for the death of their children (Nagano 2014). In 2016, the Sendai district court ordered that the parents should be paid a total of 1.43 billion yen, a ruling which was upheld in 2018 by the Sendai high court. In 2019, Japan's Supreme Court rejected the school district's appeal (The Straits Times 2019). While the lawsuit began long after *Sunflower Hill* was first printed, the contrast between the real life disaster and the way it and its aftermath is portrayed in the book is striking.

Responsibility and the acknowledgement of guilt is often a part of trauma narratives. According to American sociologist Kai Erikson, a common component of collective trauma is the *denial* of responsibility by people who are responsible for an accident. Those who are culpable do not express regret or apologise, and the betrayal of social trust creates a sense that communal trust and social decency are no longer present (quoted in Saul 2014). According to C. Jeffrey Alexander, the attribution of responsibility and blame is a key component of successful narratives of cultural trauma (quoted in DiNitto 2017). Both of these types of trauma are highly relevant in the case of Okawa elementary school, both in the immediate and later aftermath.

Sunflower Hill steers clear of discussions of responsibility and blame entirely. This avoidance reinforces the idea of natural disasters as being somehow impossible to foresee and mitigate, echoing the post-3.11 rhetoric of *sōteigai* ("unimaginable", "beyond expectations") that was bandied about by government spokespeople and, in the case of Fukushima, TEPCO[32] officials. As a concept, *sōteigai* obscures the importance of the human element in the outcomes of natural disasters (Creighton 2015). The lack of blame in *Sunflower Hill* creates a sense that no-one were responsible, or that the mothers are above such sentiments as anger or reproach. Whether the creators' intention or not, this feeds into the idea of the mothers as better, purer mourners, as they are beyond such concerns, beholden to a "purer" grief.

It is difficult for a picture book to cover the range and complexity of grief and trauma. The narrative of *Sunflower Hill* is primarily a memorial book. Involving blame for local institutions would muddy the waters. The lack of confrontation and reproach within the iconotext is not a failure of the book if read on its own terms, or that the narrative solution it presents does not have value. Hakata, Matsunari, and the mothers suggest a different way to deal with grief that focuses on the personal rather than the structural. Healing is found through local community and mourning work, rather than legal or political action. This also lines up with a history of normative discourses of woman- and motherhood, where women are discursively tied to the personal, private sphere (Dalton 2013)

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[32] TEPCO, or the Tokyo Electric Power Company, is the company that ran the Fukushima 1 power plant.

3.7 Conclusion: Memorials and the model mourner

Sunflower Hill creates a sense of authenticity through its use of documentarian narrative tropes, particularly in the text. This contrasts the gradual introduction of liminal space in Matsunari's pictures. While the women go about their tasks and talk about their children in "interviews" in the text, their children start to appear among the sprouting sunflowers. These appearances evoke the sense of spirits returning to walk among people in nature. The planting of the sunflowers creates a memorial space, effectively tying the memory of the children to a physical space. Through the process, the children metaphorically become the sunflowers. The festival of Tanabata is also invoked to underline the sense of longing to see ones loved ones.

Sunflower Hill presents the reader with a model of grieving. Rather than the infantilised characters Kenneth Kidd finds in American children's literature about trauma and 3.11 (2005), the mothers of *Sunflower Hill* are above all *respectable* in their grief. Their grief is apolitical, community-focused, and productive. The narrative privileges the relationship between mother and child, and the mothers' grief is a running thread throughout it.

Despite the evoking of authenticity through the use of documentary tropes, *Sunflower Hill* avoids the real world concerns of responsibility and guilt. Instead, the focus of the story lies in presenting a memorial of the lost children, giving the readers snapshots of their personalities and depicting them smiling and happy among the sunflowers. It raises a question of whom the story is for, and why. Human error and devastating breaks in trust are difficult to fit into a story that is so invested in spirits that return smiling, and perhaps even more difficult to package as kid friendly. Hakata, Matsunari, and the mothers' take on the story is an easier sell. While the core of the story is upsetting, the consistent thread of optimism in the iconotext sweetens the proverbial pill, and the story itself echoes "safe", relatively conservative social norms of woman- and motherhood. No boats are rocked, lending more focus to the children and the grief of their passing. Still, while reading *Sunflower Hill*, it is difficult to avoid the sense that above all, the book is written for the mothers themselves. The book is a record of their children as the mothers remember them, and gives them a space in which their grief can be heard.

4 Conclusion

Mother's Lullaby and *Sunflower Hill* approach the problem of how to tell a difficult story for children in very different ways. In *Mother's Lullaby*, the topic is made easier to handle through distance. Konno and Imoto remove the "true story" of a family that lost their mother from the physical context of the Tōhoku earthquake. This distance to the original event is increased by turning the characters into animals. Anthropomorphisation is a common feature in children's literature, but also provides an emotional buffer for younger readers. Additionally, the animal characters encourage sentimental identification, which opens up for a larger potential audience. The cute animals and lack of specific details creates a story that can reach a wide audience, and that can be used in relation to future natural disasters.

Sunflower Hill, on the other hand, is strongly grounded in place. The story adopts a documentary aesthetic, particularly in the text, to tell a "true story" about mothers grieving for their children. The specificity is the point; the book becomes a way for the eight mothers, along with Hakata and Matsunari, to share snapshots of their children to the world. The iconotext of *Sunflower Hill* is a memorial, and a plea for the reader to remember these children, too, and realise what has been lost. Hakata and Matsunari create distance from the disaster itself by limiting how much the reader sees of it, confining it to two pages of a distant, snow-covered landscape. Further distancing from the emotional fallout of the tragedy comes through the gradual introduction of liminal space into the sunflower beds, where the dead children appear, smiling happily and playing. *Sunflower Hill* is as much a memorial as it is a book, sharing the story of the lost children and the mothers' grief to whoever will listen.

While the books take approaches that are very different artistically and narratively, they both touch on similar themes beyond the Tōhoku earthquake. One of these is religion. Both *Mother's Lullaby* and *Sunflower Hill* play on associations to Buddhist religious traditions. In both narratives, the dead are returned to the living through nature – through birdsong in *Mother's Lullaby*, and through the sunflowers in *Sunflower Hill.* In both cases, religion has a reassuring function. The dead are not truly gone in these spaces; they are still watching out for you. The dead are not eternally lost to the living; like Orihime and Kengyū, there are circumstances in which they can be temporarily reunited, even if they have to take on a different form to do so. The metaphorical return of loved ones allows the creators to give their stories a happier ending, where the trauma of loss can be mitigated, if not entirely healed. It allows the authors and illustrators to wrap the story up neatly, sidestepping the wordless, unresolved nature of trauma with a softer ending.

The severity of the topic, combined with the young age of the intended target demographic, makes for stories that are challenging to the reader from the start. Because the topic is harder to deal with, creators may be less inclined toward challenging the reader in other ways, creating books that are "safer" and more likely to not challenge the status quo. While it is difficult to draw conclusions one way or another based on two books, with no basis for comparison outside of this particular subgenre, it is at least clear that neither *Mother's Lullaby* nor *Sunflower Hill* are attempting to challenge social conventions.

This is particularly clear in the way both books deal with gender. Despite their differences, they still present similar images of mother- and womanhood, and centre their narratives on the relationship between mother and child. In *Mother's Lullaby*, the death of Mother Bear leads to the total breakdown of the family. Because she is a mother, she is the emotional regulator and caregiver. When she dies, no-one can fill the same function, and the youngest child of the family will not be soothed. In *Sunflower Hill*, the mothers are the survivors. As their identity – and their womanhood – is tied to *being mothers*, the loss of their children also becomes a loss of part of their identity. Their role as women becomes defined by grief. The underlying narratives around motherhood, especially the stereotype of the mother as a self-sacrificing nurturer, lends emotional resonance and poignancy to both *Mother's Lullaby* and *Sunflower Hill*, and reinforce more conservative ideas about what motherhood is in the process. Fathers, meanwhile, are almost entirely absent in both books; they can provide physical help, but there is no space for them in the mourning process. The fact that both books are "based on a true story" obscures the fact that these gender relations are at least partially constructed.

In addition to privileging the relationship between mother and child, *Sunflower Hill* emphasises the importance of community in the grieving process. The mothers are able to carry on in part because they have each other. Through the work of growing the sunflowers, they also create a social space where they can share their grief and articulate their trauma. This combination of memory and mourning work and *social* work helps mitigate some of the pain of grief. This, along with "doing normal", is also an essential part of the "respectable mourning” that the book presents. In *Sunflower Hill*, grief is community-focused, productive, apolitical, and highly gendered.

While *Sunflower Hill* features mourning, restoration, and healing through community, the mourning in *Mother's Lullaby* is confined to the family. However, the healing in *Mother's Lullaby* comes not just through the metaphorical restoration of the family, but also through the redemption of the *manekkodori.* With the *manekkodori*, Konno and Imoto introduce an element of blame into the narrative. While the storm is what killed Mother Bear, the *manekkodori* is still partially responsible for her death, as its previous actions keep people from believing it when it matters. Following its realisation that it is culpable, the bird returns Mother Bear's lullaby to the bear family. Its narrative resonates with aspects of trauma theory, where culpable actors accepting blame and responsibility becomes an opening for trauma (on a personal, communal, or cultural level) to heal. It also echoes real life discourse about personal responsibility and guilt in the wake of the Tōhoku earthquake. In real life, discourse around self-blame and responsibility partially obscured systemic failures. In *Mother's Lullaby*, Konno and Imoto sidestep the problem of systemic culpability entirely. As there is no overarching system in the forest, the blame can be reduced to the individual level. The *manekkodori* is culpable, but it is easier to redeem a single person than it is to redeem a larger system.

In contrast, *Sunflower Hill* stays clear of any question of guilt or blame, despite human error and negligence being a significant part of the situation at Okawa elementary school. Presumably, it is easier to include a narrative of responsibility and blame in a story that is more distant from a real place and real people. Involving questions of responsibility and human errors would also make it difficult for Hakata, Matsunari, and the eight mothers to maintain the thread of relative optimism that runs through the book. In *Sunflower Hill*, grief and trauma are most visible at the edges and in the empty spaces of the narrative. Involving blame would get in the way of the book's function as a *memorial*, and tie the story of Okawa to the people who failed its pupils, rather than the children themselves.

Mother's Lullaby and *Sunflower Hill* give the reader two different approaches to healing trauma. In *Mother's Lullaby,* trauma is mitigated when a party that has (unwittingly) harmed people takes responsibility for the harm they have done, and works to mitigate it. In *Sunflower Hill,* the answer is restorative work and emotional processing in and with a community of people in the same situation. The two solutions map onto different strategies for dealing with trauma on an individual, communal, or collective level.

In the real world, these ways of mitigating trauma and grief are not in opposition with each other, but combining the two in one picture book narrative is challenging. A book can only be so many things, and trauma is infinitely complex; it should not be a goal for every book about trauma and grief to cover every base. Rather, problems occur when one type of trauma narrative becomes dominating to the exclusion of others, as Kenneth Kidd found in his examination of post-9.11 literature in the United States. Still, while the way *Mother's Lullaby* and *Sunflower Hill* approach trauma and grief make for interesting contrasts, the exclusion of fathers from narratives about grief and trauma warrants further examination.

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