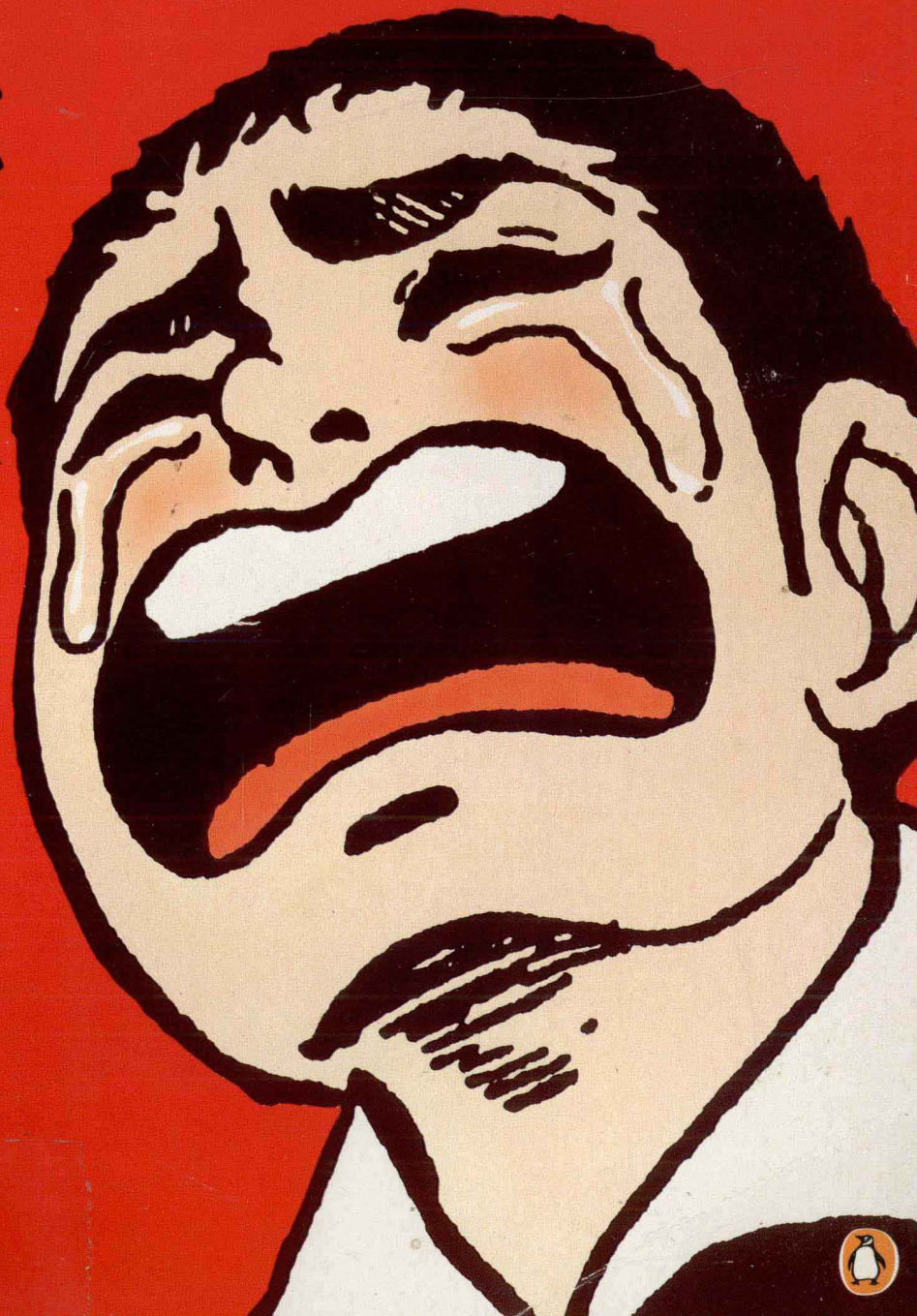


BAREFOOT GEN

A CARTOON STORY OF HIROSHIMA
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY ART SPIEGELMAN

KEIJI
NAKAZAWA



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Translated by Project Gen



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About *Barefoot Gen*_____

BAREFOOT GEN (*Hadashi no Gen* in the original Japanese) is an autobiographical story. Author Keiji Nakazawa was seven years old when the atomic bomb was dropped on his city. “Gen” (pronounced with a hard g) is a Japanese name meaning “roots” or “source”, as the author explains:

I named my main character Gen in the hope that he would become a root or source of strength for a new generation of mankind—one that can tread the charred soil of Hiroshima barefoot, feel the earth beneath its feet, and have the strength to say “no” to nuclear weapons . . . I myself would like to live with Gen’s strength—that is my ideal, and I will continue pursuing it through my work.

Hadashi no Gen was first serialized in 1972–3 in *Shukan Shonen Jampu*, the largest weekly comic magazine in Japan, with a circulation of over two million. It is a graphic and moving account of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and its aftermath, and it drew wide acclaim not only from young readers but from parents, teachers and critics as well. *Barefoot Gen* has been made into a full-length, animated feature film, which will eventually be released in North America.

Gen’s story is of people dealing with inhuman situations, both in the last days of World War II and after a nuclear attack (covered in subsequent volumes). We hope *Barefoot Gen* will serve as one more reminder of the suffering war brings to innocent people, and as a unique documentation of an especially horrible source of suffering, the atomic bomb. Though this Japanese comic book differs from English language comics in many ways, we believe that *Barefoot Gen*’s honest portrayal of emotions and experiences speaks to children and adults everywhere.

Barefoot Gen: Comics After the Bomb

An introduction by Art Spiegelman

GEN HAUNTS ME. The first time I read it was in the late 1970s, shortly after I'd begun working on *Maus*, my own extended comic-book chronicle of the twentieth century's other central cataclysm. I had the flu at the time and read it while high on fever. *Gen* burned its way into my heated brain with all the intensity of a fever-dream. I've found myself remembering images and events from the *Gen* books with a clarity that made them seem like memories from my own life rather than Nakazawa's. I will never forget the people dragging their own melted skin as they walk through the ruins of Hiroshima, the panic-stricken horse on fire galloping through the city, the maggots crawling out of the sores of a young girl's ruined face. *Gen* deals with the trauma of the atom bomb without flinching. There are no irradiated Godzillas or super-mutants, only tragic realities. I've just reread the books recently and I'm glad to discover that the vividness of *Barefoot Gen* emanates from the work itself and not simply from my fever. Or, more accurately, it emanates from something intrinsic to the comics medium itself and from the events Nakazawa lived through and depicted.

Comics are a highly charged medium, delivering densely concentrated information in relatively few words and simplified code-images. It seems to me that this is a model of how the brain formulates thoughts and remembers. We think in cartoons. Comics have often demonstrated how well suited they are to telling action adventure stories or jokes, but the small scale of the images and the directness of a medium that has something in common with handwriting allow comics a kind of intimacy that also make them surprisingly well suited to autobiography.

It's odd that, until the development of underground comics in the late 1960s, overtly autobiographical comics have not comprised an important "genre". Rarer still are works that overtly grapple with the intersection between personal history and world history. Perhaps it was necessary to have a concept of comics as suitable adult fare for the medium to move toward autobiography. Or so I thought until I became more aware of Keiji Nakazawa's career. In 1972 Nakazawa, then 33, wrote and drew a directly autobiographical account of surviving the atomic blast at Hiroshima . . . for a Japanese children's comic weekly. It was called, with chilling directness, "I Saw It". A year later he began his *Gen* series, a slightly fictionalized narrative also based on having seen "It", an adventure story of a boy caught in hell, a "Disasters of War" with speech balloons.

In Japan there is no stigma attached to reading comics; they're consumed in truly astonishing numbers (some comics weeklies have been known to sell over 3 million copies of a single issue) by all classes and ages. There are comics devoted to economic theory, mah jongg, and male homosexual love stories designed for pre-pubescent girls, as well as more familiar tales of Samurai, robots and mutants. However, I should confess to a very limited knowledge of Japanese comics. They form a vast, unexplored universe only tangentially connected to my own. Sometimes that seems true of everything about Japan, and *Gen* may be an ideal starting-point for getting the twain to meet.

The modern comic book is a specifically Western form (making it all the more appropriate as a medium for reporting on the horrors brought to the East by the atom bomb), but Japanese comics have stylistic quirks and idioms that are quite different from ours, and these must be learned and accepted as part of the process of reading *Gen*. The stories are often quite long (the entire *Gen* saga reportedly runs to close on 2,000 pages), usually with rather few words on a page, allowing an entire 200-page book to be read during a short commuter ride. Overt symbolism is characteristic of Japanese comics; for Nakazawa it takes the

form of a relentlessly reappearing sun that glares implacably through the pages. It is the marker of time passing, the giver of life, the flag of Japan, the reminder of a bomb with the heat of a thousand suns, and a metronome that gives rhythm to Gen's story.

The degree of casual violence in Japanese comics is typically far greater than in our homegrown products. Gen's pacifist father freely wallops his kids with a frequency and force that we might easily perceive as criminal child abuse rather than the sign of affection that is intended. The sequence of Gen brawling with the chairman's son and literally biting his fingers off is (forgive me, I can't resist) especially hard to swallow. Yet these casual small-scale brutalities pale to naturalistic proportions when compared to the enormity of dropping a nuclear weapon on a civilian population.

The physiognomy of the characters often leans to the cloyingly cute, with special emphasis on Disney-like oversized Caucasian eyes and generally neotenic faces. Nakazawa is hardly the worst offender, though his cartoon style derives from that tradition. His draftsmanship is somewhat graceless, even homely, and without much nuance, but it gets the job done. It is clear and efficient, and it performs the essential magic trick of all good narrative art: the characters come to living, breathing life. The drawing's greatest virtue is its straightforward, blunt sincerity. Its conviction and honesty allow you to believe in the unbelievable and impossible things that did, indeed, happen in Hiroshima. It is the inexorable art of the witness.

Although the strangeness of the unfamiliar idioms and conventions of Japanese comics language may set up a hurdle for the Western reader first confronted with this book, it also offers one of its central pleasures. Nakazawa is an exceptionally skillful storyteller who knows how to keep his reader's attention in order to tell the Grim Things That Must Be Told. He effortlessly communicates a wealth of information about day-to-day life in wartime Japan and the anatomy of survival without slowing down

the trajectory of his narrative. There is a paradox inherent in talking about such pleasures in the context of a work that illuminates the reality of mass death, yet the exposure to another culture's frame of reference, the sympathetic identification one develops with the protagonists and the very nature of narrative itself are all intrinsically pleasureable. Arguably, by locating the causes of the bombings exclusively in the evils of Japanese militaristic nationalism rather than in the *Realpolitik* of Western racism and cold-war power-jockeying, Nakazawa may make the work a little *too* pleasurable for American and British readers.

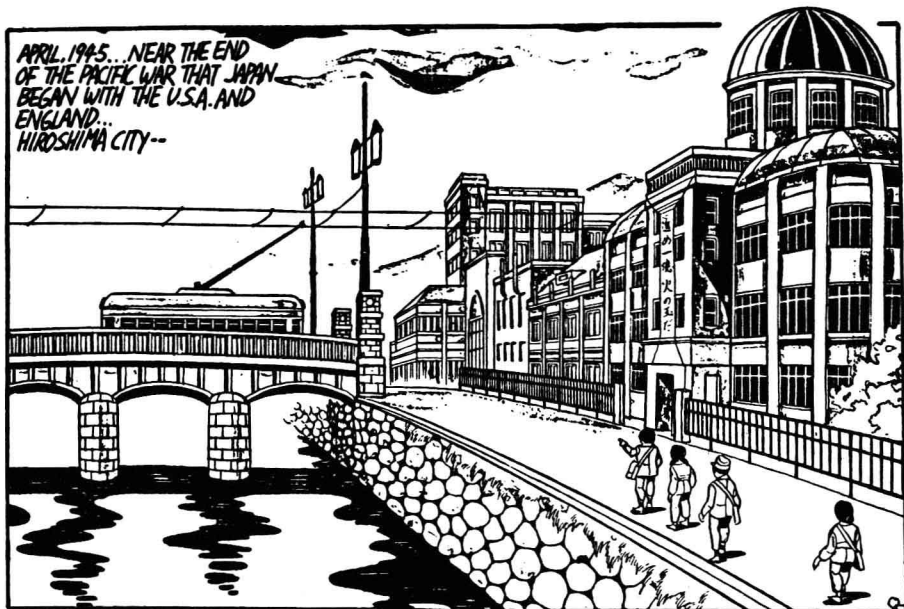
Ultimately *Gen* is a very optimistic work. Nakazawa believes that his story can have a cautionary effect, that mankind can be improved to the point of acting in its own genuine self-interest. Indeed, *Gen* is a plucky little hero, embodying such virtues as loyalty, bravery, and industriousness. Nakazawa's faith in the possibility for Goodness may mark the work in some cynical eyes as true Literature for Children, but the underlying fact is that the artist is reporting on his own survival—not simply on the *events* that he lived through, but on the philosophical/psychological basis for that survival. His work is humanistic and humane, demonstrating and stressing the necessity for empathy among humans if we're to survive into another century.

What is Project Gen?_____

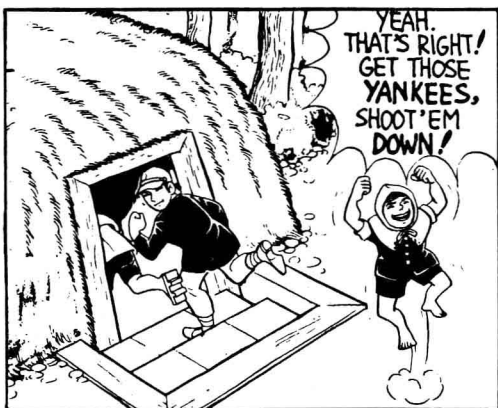
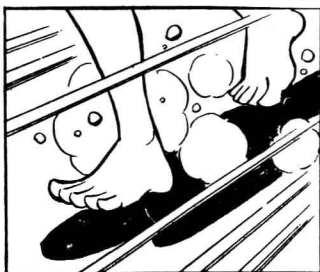
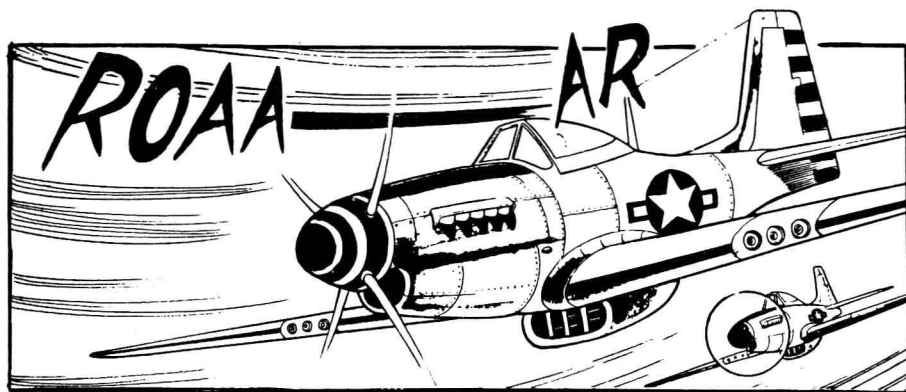
PROJECT GEN was formed in 1976 by a group of young people, both Japanese and non-Japanese, living in Tokyo. We shared a desire to translate Mr. Nakazawa's work into other languages so that people outside Japan might hear Gen's message. An all-volunteer group subsisting on donations, we have managed thus far to have at least one volume of the *Barefoot Gen* series translated into French, German, Esperanto, Indonesian, Norwegian and Swedish. With the help of our many friends and readers, we hope to keep up the work of conveying Gen's message to the world—a message of human triumph in the face of unprecedented destruction and an urgent warning for our times as the threat of nuclear war increases.

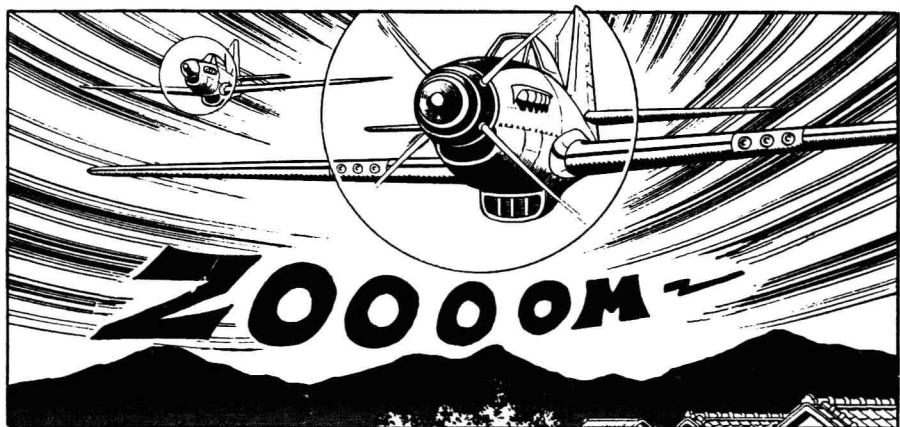
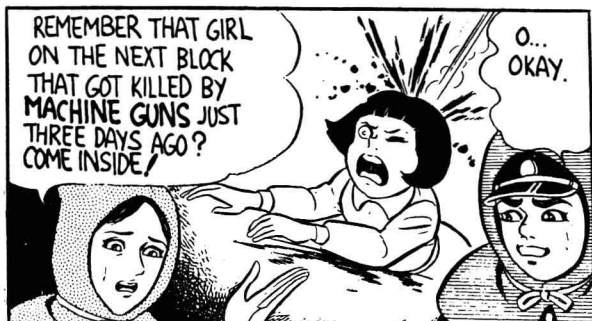
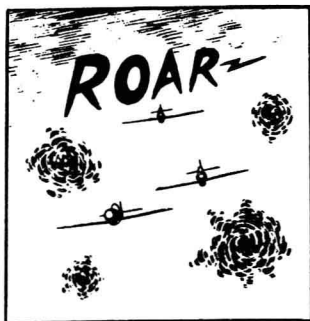
BAREFOOT GEN

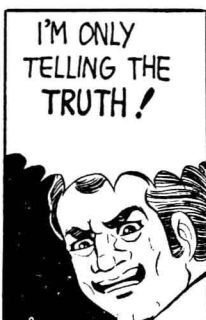
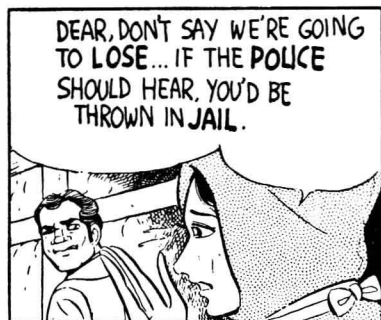
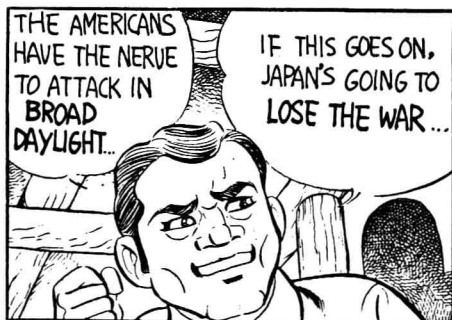
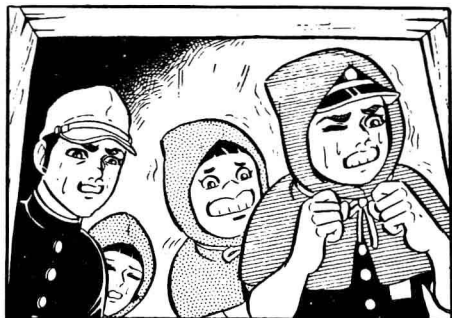
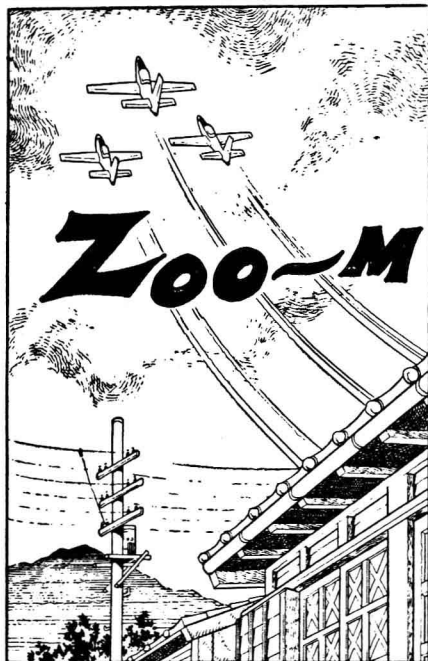
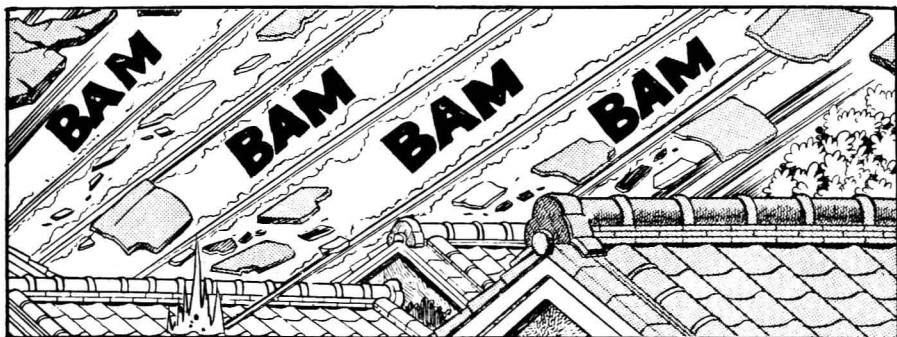


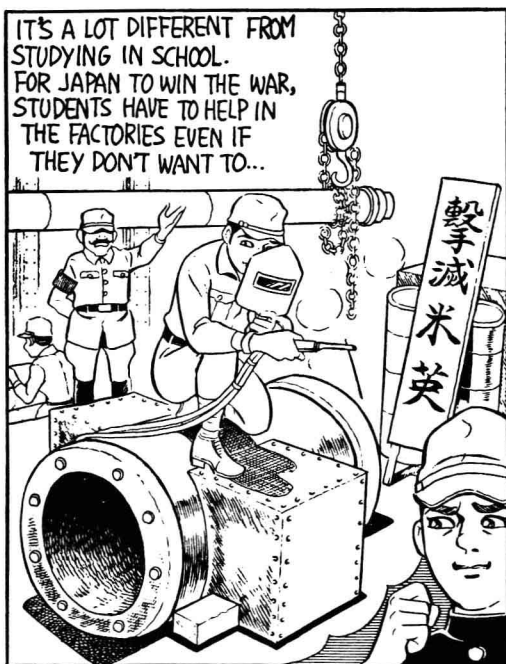












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