

Thank you for joining us again on The Lerner Podcast. Today I'd like to welcome Caren Stelson, author of *A Bowl Full of Peace* available today from Lerner Publishing Group.

Thank you very much for having me. I'm looking forward to talking with you.

Likewise! In 2016, you wrote *Sachiko: A Nagasaki Bomb Survivor's Story* for middle and high school readers. In 2020, just in time for the anniversary of the bombing, you've written *A Bowl Full of Peace*, a picture book of that same story. Can you give us a brief overview of both books?

Sure, absolutely. Both books are about Sachiko Yasui. She survived as a six year old, the atomic bombing of the city of Nagasaki on August 9, 1945. I will say it is the 75th anniversary this August. Both books are about Sachiko's survival, but they are also about her healing and her pathway to peace. And her moment when she really decides to step out 50 years later to tell her story and accept a higher calling, a higher purpose to become a peacemaker.

What brought you to writing Sachiko's story?

Well, I'm going to try to make this a short answer. But this, this goes back about 20 years ago, when I really started studying World War Two. Not as a student but as an adult. I began looking at my father's World War Two experience as a young captain in the infantry fighting through Germany. And I really began seeing war and the experience of war through an individual's life. What was that experience as, as an on an individual? My father had passed away by then. But I started asking a lot of questions and primarily, you know, after war, who gets to peace? Who doesn't? And why? In 2001, 2002, I spent a year in England and I began interviewing people who at that point were in their 70s about their childhood experiences growing up in wartime England.

I began focusing on children's experiences in wartime and still wondering who gets to peace and who doesn't, and why? I actually met Sachiko in 2000. And in 2005, I had returned from England and I was still processing. Sachiko was invited to the Twin Cities to Minneapolis, where I live, by the St. Paul-Nagasaki Sister City committee. St. Paul, the capital of Minnesota, and Nagasaki are long time sister cities, the first pair of sister cities that had that relationship. In 1955, St. Paul was the first American city paired with an Asian city. Sachiko was there in Minneapolis and she was telling her story. And I was just in silence listening to the experience of someone who survived the atomic bomb and thinking I have never met anyone who survived the atomic bomb during at the end of World War Two. As a child, Sachiko was a half a mile from ground zero and a miracle pretty much that she survived. I began to see her story as my ultimate story of war and peace and survival and how a human being can heal and make their way to peace and help perhaps heal us all. Five years later, in 2010, I reached out to Sachiko and she agreed to work with me and I flew to Nagasaki, and we began our work together.

In the picture book, *A Bowl Full of Peace*, it primarily covers the story of grandmother's bowl. How did you come to know that story from her?

That story, and that bowl, popped up right away, during my first interview with Sachiko in Nagasaki. I did go to Nagasaki five times to meet with Sachiko right from the beginning. She told me about that bowl and how it was the only object that their family found that survived the atomic bomb, in their household, and in everyone's fingerprints of their family was on this bowl. When her father pulls it out of the rubble, it doesn't have a crack or a chip. It survived whole. And as Sachiko shared with me her family later on used this bowl, not just as a serving bowl for food but it becomes a spiritual bowl where every August 9 they put ice chips in that bowl and spend the whole day in commemoration, praying for peace and remembering all the people they had lost in Nagasaki on that August 9, 1945.

I remember when Sachiko first talked to me about that bowl and I asked if I could see it and she paused and she looked at me and she said, You know, I have never shown this bowl to anyone outside my household. Then she paused again and looked at me and said, I'll bring it tomorrow. And so she brought it the next day to the interview and we just looked and looked at it. It was a spiritual moment when she brought that bowl and we just sat and stared at it and realized what that bowl had been through and what that bowl means when we talked about picture book for her story. I knew I was going to focus in on grandmother's bowl. It was a bowl that her grandmother had given to her mother as a wedding present and it was handed down from generation to generation.

When Sachiko knew we were going to start on a picture book about her story, she gave me grandmother's bowl as a gift and it was the most special special gift I have ever received. I didn't know quite how to respond. I told Sachiko I could not be the owner of grandmother's bowl, but I would be the guardian of this bowl. And when it was time for this bowl to travel back to Nagasaki, I would make sure that it reached its home.

That is an amazing story. When you said that she gave you the bowl - I was on mute to avoid background noise - I gasped.

I did too.

What have you learned from the experience of talking with Sachiko and sharing her story?

I have learned so much from Sachiko and so much from writing this story that you and I could talk all day about it, but I was thinking about some of the most important things I have learned. One is, if a story comes to you and you cannot shake it, if you can't shake a story, pay attention to it. Because that story and that person who may be telling you that story is telling you something is so important that it can change your life. And Sachiko's story certainly has changed my life. I knew, right when I heard Sachiko's story, I had this gut feeling that not only did I need Sachiko's story, but we all needed Sachiko's story in the United States. It's a very complicated history around the atomic bombing we all need to know. But we all needed to know Sachiko's story in my mind, for her courage, her resilience, and her hope to navigate to watch how she navigated her time, so we could navigate our own time in our own lives through difficult times. So this story and the way it was received, made me feel that I was right. *Sachiko*, the YA book, has received many awards. And my sense is that her story was a gift to all of us.

Another important thing I've taken away, the last word Sachiko shares with us in the ya version, she leaves us with two questions, and something to ponder: what is peace? What kind of person should I be? Keep pursuing answers to these questions. And those words have stayed with me ever since she shared them with me and ever since they appeared in that book. Truly they have guided me every day about what actions I take, and actually what I plan to do with the rest of my life.

How have readers connected with the story both in the young adult book and so far with the picture book, which is just out?

I have been so surprised by the reaction to the YA, which has been out since 2016. That's *Sachiko*, a more complete Sachiko story. I thought I was writing this story for middle school, high school audiences. But I discovered I have readers from 10 years old to 100 years old. I've been in elementary classrooms all the way up to university lecture halls. I've been invited to book groups where adults are reading this, the ya version of *Sachiko*. I have been struck by their sincere connection with Sachiko and her story. I've received many emails thanking me for writing Sachiko's story, particularly from the Japanese-American community. I think there are just so few stories here in the United States that recognize what happened to the atomic bomb survivors. I think Sachiko's story has helped us open our eyes. I'm hoping that *A Bowl Full of Peace*, the picture book, will be well received by kids reading it, parents, teachers. It's just coming out. So I'm not I'm not quite sure how things are going to unfold, but I can say that *Horn Book*, *Kirkus* and *Booklist* have given out starred reviews for *A Bowl Full of Peace* and that bodes well so I look forward to sharing it with all who are interested reading and learning about Sachiko.

What was your initial reaction to the illustrations in *A Bowl Full of Peace*?

I love Kusaka's illustrations. When we first reached out to Akira Kusaka, who lives in Japan, he lives in Osaka, I knew we were offering a very challenging assignment to him to try to capture the difficult story of Sachiko and make it accessible to children. I know as a writer how to how difficult and challenging that was and and I knew for sure to create those images would be again challenging and I'm so glad Akira Kusaka agreed to do this story. What I love about those illustrations, I love his choice of colors. Often pastel but also where it's dramatic, he creates a dramatic scene in imagery. He uses circles to help us feel secure. He's gently drawn Sachiko's family to bring home the strength of such a close family. It's really amazing and and all the illustrations look almost like watercolor, but they are digitally generated. So for Kusaka-San his canvas is the blank computer screen. And I found that pretty, pretty amazing. I'm so glad he agreed to do this story for a picture book. Writers and authors and illustrators need to hold hands to create a picture book with all the emotions we can bring to it and I'm so thankful he was able to do that.

And for our listeners on the show notes page on the Lerner Books blog, we will have several spreads of the picture book for you to see these beautiful illustrations. Has there been an interest in Sachiko's story in Japan?

You know, there has been. Of course, Sachiko traveled all over Japan. As a peacemaker, her focus was telling her story to children in schools. So before I showed up, people knew Sachiko, particularly in Nagasaki and all over Japan too, and knew her story when *Sachiko* the ya book appeared. Several Japanese teachers reached out to me - I know *Sachiko* has not been translated into Japanese. Although I think I believe it's been translated into Spanish and perhaps other languages. So I was wondering how Japanese teachers would use *Sachiko* the ya version. And they told me that even though *Sachiko* has not been translated into Japanese, the way it was written, the way I wrote it was so accessible to their students who were learning English, that they that their students actually prefer to read it in English. And then teachers would develop their curriculum to explore the story, of course, they would do that in Japanese. And I thought that was a very interesting response from the kids that, that Japanese readers would want the English version, not the Japanese version. And I think that's wise because I am an American writer writing in English. And the nuance of writing in English and reading it in English would probably give them information as well, that they may not have gotten if it were translated into Japanese. I do want to say that I have gotten such great support from the people in Japan. And I think it was, I think they were very, very happy that an American had taken such time in consideration to write a survivor's story. As I said, many people in Japan know survivor stories, but not many people here in the United States. And I think it really, they were very supportive of me working with Sachiko to share her story.

It's important to share all stories with young readers, including difficult stories like this. What would you tell parents or teachers concerned that the topic is too heavy for a picture book?

Well, Rachel, I have been thinking about this question, even before you asked this question, I had this on my mind writing *Sachiko*. Writing a picture book about war and nuclear war for young children is certainly a challenge. But we know children want the truth. They want the truth about difficult subjects and difficult events. And our job as teachers and parents and writers is to find ways to help children understand the world at a child's developmental level, at their emotional level. And so I'm hoping *A Bowl Full of Peace* does just that.

But I've been thinking a lot about some other things too. Of course, when I was writing *A Bowl Full of Peace*, I had no idea it would be released in the midst of a worldwide pandemic. So here we are, all of us worldwide faced with a world wide trauma and disaster. And there are real parallels between a world war and a worldwide pandemic. Our children's lives have been, just as ours have, but our children's lives have been disrupted during COVID-19. All children have experienced dislocation and loss. Whether it's loss of playmates and their school routine, or more drastic, who knows, loss of family members, perhaps loss of their homes, loss of access to enough food because of their parents' job loss. We have no idea right now how great the cost of this pandemic has been for children.

So in some ways to know that terrible things have happened in the world, tragic things have happened in the world, and people have survived them. I think children will find comfort, even though Sachiko story is traumatic, that she was able to survive. I want to say this, in *A Bowl Full of Peace*, Sachiko's family plays a huge role in finding the whole family's way through a treacherous, treacherous, painful time. More than ever, I've come to see *A Bowl Full of Peace* as a story about the strength of the family, the love and security parents provide for their children, which is essential during all times, but especially during times like we're experiencing. The importance of routine as they all sit around the table, the

ritual that children need, in the ritual of grandmother's bowl. Our children now need that family routine, need rituals to help us help them navigate this upside down time that we have and to help them strengthen their own capacity for resilience and compassion to meet the challenges they face every day.

So I hope readers young and old will understand *A Bowl Full of Peace*'s underlying message that people can truly survive extraordinary difficult times. And they can come out of that experience stronger and clear about what is important in life, that such a difficult time can actually help people find their higher calling in life to help others, as they process the traumatic experience that they have lived through and in some way that is truly a gift.

I have another hope for *A Bowl Full of Peace*. I hope that after reading *A Bowl Full of Peace*, teachers and parents and children will be inspired to find their own special bowls in their homes or in their classrooms and make that bowl a bowl full of peace. You know, I'm wondering what they would put in their bowl. Maybe they would put kindness, empathy, compassion, courage, peace in that bowl and think about what those words really mean if we crack them open. You know, what does kindness look like in action? How can our own actions help change our world to make it a little better? I hope *A Bowl Full of Peace* will inspire all of us to pause and think about the small steps each day that we can all take in the name of peace.

That is such a lovely mental image of children and homes and classrooms around the world creating their own bowls full of peace.

I hope it happens.

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