

Hiroshima: The Autobiography of Barefoot Gen 広島は だしのゲン自伝

Richard Minear, Nakazawa Keiji

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Nakazawa Keiji

Translated and Edited by Richard H.
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The Asia-Pacific Journal is honored to offer a preview of *Hiroshima: The Autobiography of Barefoot Gen* by Nakazawa Keiji, including Richard Minear's introduction and a chapter of the book, with Nakazawa's manga illustrations.

Translator's Introduction

Richard H. Minear

Many in the English-speaking world need no introduction to *Barefoot Gen*.¹ They have read the manga, available in ten volumes in fine translation, or they have seen the animated movie, available on YouTube and elsewhere. *Barefoot Gen* is already international. It started in Japan, as a manga serial, in 1973. Then a relatively unknown manga artist, Nakazawa Keiji completed the serial in 1985. By then it had grown into a ten-volume book. *Barefoot Gen*'s Japanese readers number in the many tens of millions. And there have been film versions: a three-part live-action film (1976-1980), a two-part anime (1983 and 1986), and a two-day television drama (2007). There is a book of readers' responses, *Letters to Barefoot Gen*. On GoogleJapan, "Hadashi no Gen" returns more than two million hits.

What has its impact been outside of Japan? In the late 1970s there was a first, partial English

translation of the manga. It has now appeared in a second, complete translation (*Last Gasp*, 2004-2009). Volume I has an introduction by Art Spiegelman, creator of *Maus*. Spiegelman begins: "Gen haunts me. The first time I read it was in the late 1970s, shortly after I'd begun working on *Maus*. . . . Gen effectively bears witness to one of the central horrors of our time. Give yourself over to . . . this extraordinary book." R. Crumb has called the series "Some of the best comics ever done." Wikipedia has articles on *Barefoot Gen* and Keiji Nakazawa and on the films, the anime, and the television drama. On YouTube, the anime sequence of the dropping of the bomb—in English—has racked up more than one hundred thousand views, and the rest of the anime is also available. There are translations into Dutch, Esperanto, German, Finnish, French, and Norwegian, with others in the works.

The *Autobiography of Barefoot Gen* may well come as a surprise to those in the English-language world who don't read manga or watch anime. I hope it will lead them to seek out both versions. Even those who already know *Barefoot Gen* may wish to relive that story in a different genre. After all, manga has its conventions, and they differ from the conventions of prose autobiography. In his introduction to the ten-volume English translation of the manga, Spiegelman mentions the "overt symbolism" as seen in the "relentlessly appearing sun," the "casual violence" as seen in Gen's father's treatment of his children, and the "cloyingly cute" depictions. Under the latter category Spiegelman discusses the "Disney-like

oversized Caucasian eyes and generally neotenic faces.” Neotenic? Webster’s *Encyclopedic Dictionary* (1989) defines neoteny as “the retention of larval characters beyond the normal period; the occurrence of adult characteristics in larvae.” Spiegelman has the latter definition in mind: consider our cover and its faces of Gen, age six, and Tomoko, a few months old.

Apart from the illustrations he drew specifically for the autobiography, those conventions do not apply to Nakazawa’s autobiography. Beyond the conventions Spiegelman mentions, I would comment that even though he writes of the extreme hunger that most Japanese experienced in 1945, he depicts all of his characters as remarkably well-fed. Such is also the case with the almost Rubenesque figures in the *Hiroshima* screens of Iri and Toshi Maruki.² Nakazawa had no formal training in art, but perhaps conventions of the art world trumped memory.

The autobiography has appeared in two editions. It appeared first in 1987, with the title *The Void That Is “Hiroshima”—Account of the Nakazawa Clan*. Nakazawa revised that version and reissued it in 1995 in the version that I have translated.³ It poses few problems of translation, but I should mention one issue: the names of family members. Throughout the autobiography, Nakazawa refers to his older brothers as “Oldest brother” and “Next oldest brother.” I have identified them always by given names, Kōji and Akira. He uses given names consistently for his older sister, Eiko, and baby sister, Tomoko. He refers to his younger brother throughout as Susumu. (The manga calls him Shinji. Susumu and Shin are alternate readings of the same character.)⁴

Nakazawa’s *Autobiography of Barefoot Gen* makes compelling reading. Mark Selden has written that it is “in certain ways the most riveting book we have on the bomb.” Suitable—if that’s the right word—for readers

of all ages, this may be the single most accessible account of the *Hiroshima* experience. Needless to say, it is Nakazawa’s account, and it is colored by his biases. These include an intense aversion to the wartime Japanese government and its policies, domestic and foreign, and an understandable hatred of the American military that dropped the atomic bomb on *Hiroshima*.

This translation preserves the character and quality of the original. To reach the broadest possible English-language audience, I have left few Japanese terms beyond manga and anime untranslated. I have even translated the term *hibakusha* as “bomb victim” or “bomb victims.” I have deleted specific place names where it was possible to do so without altering the narrative. I provide maps of Nakazawa’s *Hiroshima*, a limited number of footnotes, and five excerpts from *Barefoot Gen*. But these additions are not essential to a thoughtful reading of the book. As an appendix I include an excerpt from an interview with Nakazawa that took place in August 2007.

This book is a translation of Nakazawa Keiji’s prose autobiography. It also includes, between the prose chapters, four-page excerpts from Nakazawa’s graphic novel *Barefoot Gen*. The complete *Barefoot Gen* fills ten volumes, a total of some twenty-five hundred pages. These excerpts are intended to give readers who have not read it a taste of the manga.

Graphic novels are works of art with their own conventions and perspectives. They are not “creative nonfiction,” an oxymoron I encountered for the first time in a discussion of a recent fraudulent book on *Hiroshima*.⁵ They are fictional even if based on actual events. Like Spiegelman’s *Maus*, *Barefoot Gen* is an artistic representation of reality. Compare *Barefoot Gen* and this autobiography, and numerous contrasts emerge. Nakazawa himself has pointed to one important one:

What differs about the death of my father from *Barefoot Gen* is that I myself wasn't at the scene. Mom told me about it, in gruesome detail. It was in my head, so in the manga I decided to have Gen be there and try to save his father. Mom always had nightmares about it. She said it was unbearable—she could still hear my brother's cries. Saying "I'll die with you," she locked my brother in her arms, but no matter how she pulled, she couldn't free him. Meanwhile, my brother said, "It's hot!" and Dad too said, "Do something!" My older sister Eiko, perhaps because she was pinned between beams, said not a thing. At the time, Mom said, she herself was already crazed. She was crying, "I'll die with you." Fortunately, a neighbor passing by said to her, "Please stop; it's no use. No need for you to die with them." And, taking her by the hand, he got her to flee the spot. When she turned back, the flames were fierce, and she could hear clearly my brother's cries, "Mother, it's hot!" It was unbearable. Mom told me this scene, bitterest of the bitter. A cruel way to kill.⁶

Gen's presence at a crucial moment when Nakazawa Keiji was absent is not the only difference. To sustain the twenty-five hundred pages of Barefoot Gen, Nakazawa invented subplots. One example is the character Kondō Ryūta, who appears nowhere in the autobiography. Astonishingly, the recent fraudulent book treats Ryūta as a real person, including him, for example, in his appendix "The People": "A five-year-old Hiroshima orphan, unofficially adopted into the family of Keiji 'Gen' Nakazawa. He lived in the same

neighborhood as Dr. Hachiya." It's as if a historian of the European holocaust were to treat one of the characters in Art Spiegelman's Maus as a real person.⁷

Barefoot Gen is art. This book is autobiography. Even if, as a genre, autobiography is notorious for a bias in favor of the author, sheer fabrication is beyond the pale. RM



The Day of the Flash and Boom

August 6, 1945, Monday. B-29s had flown over Hiroshima twice the night before, and air raid sirens had sounded constantly. I awoke unhappy that I hadn't gotten enough sleep. The weather the morning of August 6 swept that unhappiness away. The sky was cloudless and absolutely clear, bright sunlight pierced our eyes, and houses and trees stood out as if

painted in primary colors. My eyes felt as if they'd been washed clean, and my unhappiness over lack of sleep vanished, too.

Suddenly, at about 7:20, soon after the whole family, gathered about the round table, had finished breakfast, the sirens sounded. I was surprised. Strange: I didn't remember sirens sounding that early in the morning. Dad muttered, "Mr. Enemy is coming really early. Unusual." Urged on by Mom, who said we'd be in danger if bombs fell, we made our preparations and headed for the neighborhood air raid trench. Mom's due date was approaching, and clutching her swollen belly, she huffed and puffed as she ran. In the trench, I said, "At worst, it's another observation plane. No need to worry," and played with Susumu. Sure enough, the megaphone voice came, "All clear!" and we returned home, kidding ourselves for getting all flustered over the alert—"An observation plane, after all."

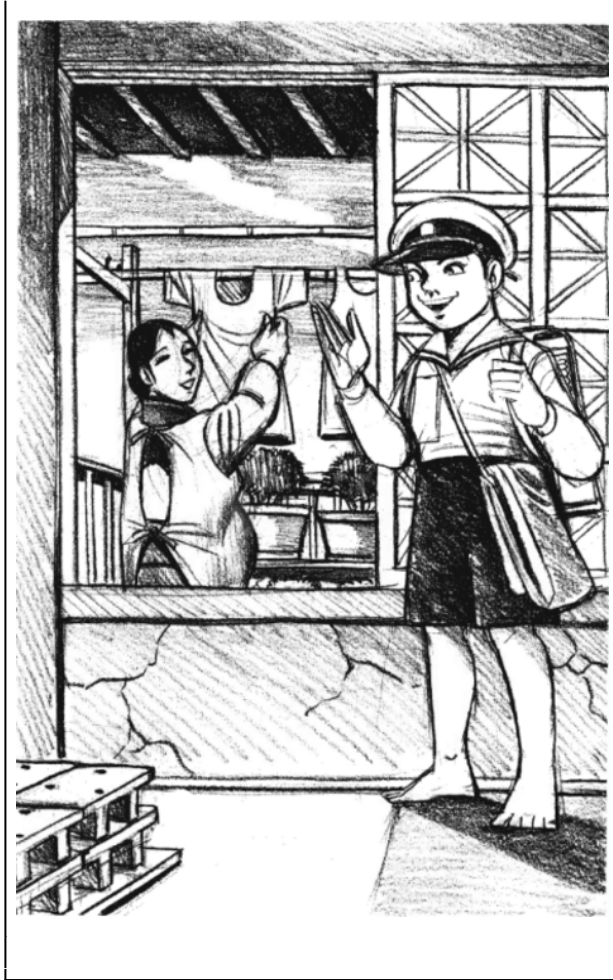
Looking up into the clear blue sky, I could still see the contrail of the B-29, a white strip; in the distance it had already fanned out. Dad said to Mom, burdened by her big belly, "Today will be hot." The B-29 that flew in that morning was a reconnaissance plane to check the weather conditions over Hiroshima and to photograph the target before the bombing. Had the atomic bomb been dropped then, many would have survived because they'd run to the trenches.

The "all clear" came, and reassured, the four hundred thousand residents of Hiroshima all began the day's activities. City trolleys went busily on their rounds, car after car disgorging its passengers; a continual flow of people headed for businesses and factories. People began their activities. Children headed to school. Housewives cleared away breakfast things and set about cleaning or doing the wash. Soldiers started drilling. Mobilized for labor service, women and students collected the detritus from collapsed houses and carted the stuff off.

At that time the elementary school we were going to had no summer vacation; we had to go to school to study to become strong "little patriots." With my air raid hood hanging off one shoulder and my satchel on my back, I went out onto the clothes-drying porch off the second floor and said to Mom, who was hanging laundry out to dry, "I'm off." In her apron, wiping off sweat, Mom went on hanging out the clothes.

On the drying porch, flowers and plants in pots were lined up, models for Dad to paint. A strange thing had happened with these potted plants. There was fruit on the loquat. The whole family stared: "Fruit on a *potted* tree?" Dad told us, sharply, "When it's ripe, I'm going to paint it, so hands off!" With a sinister premonition, Mom worried, "Something must be out of kilter meteorologically." I'm not a fatalist, but Mom's sinister premonition turned out to be accurate.





With one eye on the loquat, I went downstairs. Eiko was sitting in the nine-by-twelve-foot room leading to the entryway. On the round table she'd lined up textbook and notes and was sharpening a pencil. I called to Eiko, "C'mon." For once Eiko said, "I have to look something up; you go on ahead." Beside the entryway was a nine-by-nine-foot room, and Dad, clad in kimono, was setting to work. I said to Dad, "I'm off," and he nodded and straightened his kimono. In the entryway my younger brother Susumu (age four) was plumped down, holding a model warship, pretending that it was making headway through waves. He was singing in a loud voice, "Tater, tater, white potato, sweet potato."⁸ Seeing me, Susumu urged, "Hurry home after school. We'll go to the river and sail this ship."

I never dreamed that this would be the last

time I saw Dad, Eiko, and Susumu. With Susumu's song at my back, I joined the neighborhood kids, and we went to Kanzaki Elementary School, less than half a mile from our house. Kanzaki Elementary School faced the trolley street linking Eba and Yokogawa. It was surrounded by a concrete wall. The gate on the trolley street was the back gate. In the center of the schoolyard towered a huge willow tree, spreading its branches wide. Behind it was the two-story wooden school building, L-shaped. Those of us in the lower grades would enter the school singing, led by students in the upper grades:

We owe it to the soldiers

That today, too, we can go to school

Shoulder to shoulder with our classmates.

Thank you, you soldiers

Who fought for country, for country.

Singing at the top of our lungs this totally militaristic anthem, we'd advance up the trolley street and go through the gate.

A person's fate—life or death—truly is a matter of sheerest chance. Had I entered the gate that day as I always did, I would have been wiped off the face of the earth. Standing in the broad schoolyard with absolutely no cover, I would have been bathed—my whole body—in the rays the atomic bomb radiated, more than 9,000 degrees Fahrenheit, hot enough to melt iron. Burned pitch-black, I would have died.

That day, a moment before entering the gate, I was stopped by a classmate's mother. She asked me, "The air raid alert sounded a bit ago. Are today's classes at the school or at the temple?" At that time, those in the lower

grades alternated between the school and a local temple as place of instruction because of the danger that we wouldn't be able to flee if bombs fell. The concrete wall on either side of the gate was a foot thick. Moving close to it, I replied to her, "We won't know till we ask Teacher," and I happened to look up.

In the sky, the vapor trail of a B-29 stretched along the mountains of the Chūgoku range, seemingly headed for the center of Hiroshima. The sun reflected off the nose of the plane's glittering duralumin body. Pointing at the B-29 approaching steadily, I called, "Ma'am, it's a B. . . ." She too looked up and said, "You're right: a B-29. Strange that the air raid alert hasn't sounded," and the two of us looked up at the approaching B-29.

Had the sirens sounded at this point, as they had earlier that morning with the reconnaissance plane, many people would have fled to air raid trenches and survived. I think it was truly a clever psychological tactic on the part of the U.S. military. To make the residents short of sleep from having the air raid alarm go off twice the previous night and to foster the mind-set "Hiroshima is safe": that's what enabled the *Enola Gay*, carrying the atomic bomb, to fly over majestically on the attack. That way, even if a B-29 flew over, we'd think, "It's only a reconnaissance plane," and let our guard down.

"Why didn't the air raid alert sound?" That thought has stayed in my heart forever, a gap in the Hiroshima story. After the war, I checked the documents and found that NHK Hiroshima began to broadcast an air raid alert at 8:15. It was at 8:15 that the bomb was dropped and exploded. If only the alert had sounded earlier!

The *Enola Gay* cut its engines, penetrated quietly to the heart of Hiroshima, and dropped the atomic bomb, raising the curtain on hell. Even today, if I close my eyes, the colors of the atomic bomb the moment it exploded come floating right up. A pale light like the flash of a

flashbulb camera, white at the center, engulfed me, a great ball of light with yellow and red mixed at its outer edges. Once that violent flash burned itself onto my retinas, all memory stopped.

Pictures of Hell

How long was it? When consciousness returned and I opened my eyes, it was pitch dark. I was confused: "Huh? A moment ago it was broad daylight, and suddenly it's night?" When I rolled over and tried to stand, pain shot through my right cheek. "What happened?" I focused and looked about and saw that a six-inch nail sticking out of a board had pierced me. Raising my head had torn my cheek. Blood was flowing. The weird atmosphere frightened me. I realized I was sweating.

I tried to stand up, but my body didn't move. Turning my head, I saw that bricks, stones, tree branches, scraps of lumber lay on top of me. The concrete wall, too, had fallen over and was covering me.

Frantically I pushed at the stones and wood on top of me and scrambled my way out. Instinctively, I looked about for the satchel that had been on my back and the air raid hood that had been hanging from my shoulder. But I didn't find them—perhaps they'd been sent flying, torn off in the blast? Turning to look at the trolley street, I gasped.

Until just a moment ago, the mother of my classmate had been standing right in front of me and, like me, looking up at the B-29. Her entire body had been burned pitch-black. Her hair was in tatters. The workpants and jacket she'd been wearing, charred and looking like seaweed, hung about her neck and waist. And she'd been blown across to the other sidewalk and was lying on her back. Her white eyes, wide open in her blackened and sooty face, glared across at me.

Confused, not knowing what had happened, I

stood in the middle of the trolley street. This familiar street had been transformed shockingly; I stood in amazement. The trolley wires had been cut from the poles lining either side of the street and were coiled like spiderwebs on the pavement; thick telephone line sagged from telephone poles like a great snake sleeping on a tree branch. It sagged into the distance. The rows of two-story houses on each side had been crushed, and the lower stories had collapsed utterly like popped paper balloons, flat. Atop them, the second stories lay piled, undulating off into the distance. Drop India ink into water, and it thins and spreads. Smoke just like pale ink covered the sky and wafted all about. The sky was like an ink painting; boards and sheets of metal danced helter-skelter into the sky, quite like birds. Every now and then, out of the collapsed rows of houses a dragon's tongue of bright red flames crawled, disappeared, moved. Aghast, I burned that scene onto my retinas.

I learned that when people are thrust suddenly into extremity, they are without emotion. They act only by instinct. Returning instinctively to the nest, my feet moved on their own in the direction of home. There's an expression, "Spinning your wheels," and that's precisely the way it was. I felt I was running and running, yet getting nowhere. Up ahead, the pale-ink smoke drifted, as if bubbling up. When people materialized out of it, I was shocked and raced up to them, wanting to know what on earth had happened to them.

First I met five or six women. Hiroshima's summers are very hot, so they'd probably been wearing only simple chemises as they tidied their kitchens or cleaned house. One after another, the women I saw had chemises on. As I got near them, I was amazed. They had countless slivers of glass sticking in their flesh: in the front of some of the women, on the right sides of others, on the left or on the backs of still others.

People who'd been in rooms with windows to their right had been pierced only on the right sides of their bodies as the bomb blast pulverized the windowpanes. They were like pincushions, with blood flowing. People who'd been in rooms with windows straight ahead of them had their fronts covered with glass splinters. The glass splinters had pierced even their eyeballs, so they couldn't open their eyes. They felt their way along, like blind people. How they'd been standing in relation to the windows determined where on their bodies the glass splinters stuck, and one person differed from the next.

I noticed one woman. Her hair was dusty and swirling in disarray, the shoulder strap of her chemise was cut and her breasts exposed, and her breasts were blue, as if tattooed. As I was able to understand later, the glass splinters looked blue, and she had so many piercing her, mainly her breasts, and countless splinters buried in her that the glass splinters seemed like a tattoo dying her breasts blue.

The women pierced by glass splinters were bleeding. They walked silently. Countless pieces of glass were embedded in their bodies, so that each time they took a step, the glass splinters jingle-jangled. Aghast, I watched these women go by, then raced for home.



On the sidewalk on the left side of the trolley street, naked people burned so black that I couldn't tell male from female sat with both legs outstretched, eyes wide and fixed on a point in the sky, cowering, as if simpleminded. Pumps for firefighting had been installed earlier at set intervals along the sidewalk on the right side of the trolley street. Uninjured people hurried to those pumps, twisted the cocks, and scooped up water. People clustered suddenly about the pumps. The women with innumerable glass splinters in them took the pump's water with both hands and poured it all over themselves. Washing their blackened bodies covered with blood and dust, they exposed the glass fragments that stuck into their bodies and silently pulled them out.

On the opposite pavement, too, were people with not a stitch on, dazed and burned so black I couldn't tell male from female. Seeing water

flowing from the pumps, they crawled sluggishly along the ground and approached the pumps, each of them sticking their hands into the flow of water, scooping up water and lifting it trancelike to their mouths. Around the pump women gathered, absorbed in washing off the blood and picking out glass splinters, and people burned black were drinking water blindly. The same scene occurred at each pump. They were acting simply on instinct. The glass was sticking into them, and it hurt, so they pulled it out. They'd been burned all over by the rays, and they were thirsty, so they drank. Neither words nor poses showed conscious intent.

In scenes of carnage—fire or calamity—in movies or plays, voices cry, "Ouch!" "Horrible!" "Help!" People suffer and writhe. But those scenes are unreal. When people are thrown suddenly into the carnage of an extreme situation, they utter not a single emotion-laden word but act silently on instinct. Just as if watching a silent movie, I, too, looked on at the quiet scene, not saying a word. From time to time gasoline drums exploded, the sound carrying in all directions.

Coming to myself, I took the street leading to our house. But at the beginning of the lane to our home, fires were spreading along the row of structures on either side. Flames crept along the ground. The two fires stretched forward from either side, as if joining hands, and in an instant the road became a sea of fire. The roadway functioned as a chimney, and a hot wind gusted through. The road ahead became a wall of fire, and flames completely blocked the way.

Sensing instinctively that I'd burn to death if I went farther, I reversed course, as if in a daze. I followed the trolley street, and suddenly, for the first time, like an electric current running through my body, wild terror ruled. Loneliness—my family's abandoned me!—and terror—I'm all alone!— seized my mind. I ran

back and forth on the trolley street, searching desperately, crying “Daddy!” “Mommy!”

The trolley street from Funairi Naka-chō as far as Saiwai-chō was a human exhibition, inhuman forms utterly transformed. Naked bodies moving sluggishly, burned by rays and trailing blackened bits of clothing like seaweed. Moving forward, glass splinters from the explosion sticking into all parts of their bodies, spurting blood. People whose eyeballs hung down their cheeks and trembled; they’d been blown out by the sudden pressure of the blast. People whose bellies had been ripped open, trailing a yard of intestines, crawling along on all fours. Shrikes impale fish and frogs on dead tree branches, storing them to eat later; people, too, had been sent flying and hung from branches, impaled. I ran among these horrific humans, threading my way, crying out, searching for family.

Black smoke eddied violently, covering the area. Flames danced crazily, wildly. The trolley street, too, became dangerous. The terror I felt then sank into my heart; I will have it with me as long as I live.

Black Rain

Luckily, a neighbor found me as I was running about and crying. She too wore a chemise, and bits of glass pierced her entire body. She was dousing herself with pump water to wash off the blood. Her white chemise was dyed bright red. It was as if it had been red to begin with.

“Aren’t you Nakazawa Kei?” she asked. “Your mother’s on this road at the Funairi Kawaguchi-chō trolley stop. Quick, go!” In a trance, I headed for the Funairi Kawaguchi-chō trolley stop. The crowd fleeing in the same direction proceeded, naked bodies blackened, each holding both hands chest-high, leaning forward, just like the specters depicted in paintings.

In this sluggish procession, I noticed a strange thing. The parts of a person wearing white clothing—white shirt, white pants—were

completely uninjured. White shirt, white pants alone caught my eye, bright, as if dancing in space, flickering. When the instant rays, hotter than 9,000 degrees, shone on people on the ground below, their white clothing acted as a mirror, reflecting the rays. By contrast, people wearing black were consumed instantly, clothing and body, by the radiant light. During the war, clothing stood out and was easy for enemy planes to spot was outlawed, so most people wore dark clothes. Hence the number of those suffering from burns over their entire body increased several times over.

Struck by 9,000 degree rays, your skin immediately developed countless blisters, one connected with the next; scattered over your whole body, they grew to eight inches in diameter. When you walked, the fluid inside the large blisters sloshed with the vibration, and finally the fragile blisters burst, the liquid poured out, and the skin peeled off.

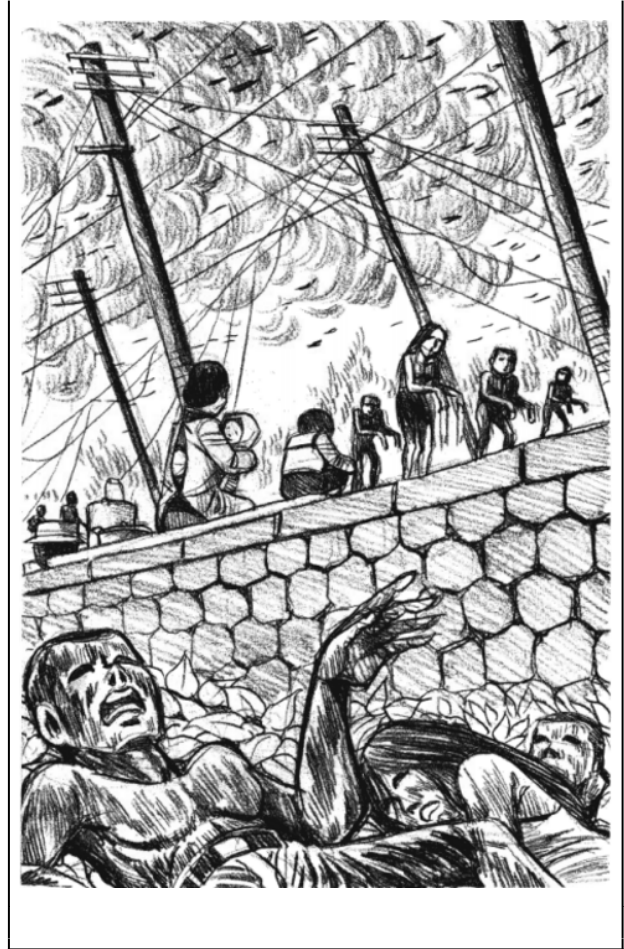
I wouldn’t have thought human skin would peel so easily. The skin of the chest peeled off, from the shoulders down; the backs of the hands peeled; the skin of the arms peeled off, down to the five fingernails, and dangled. From the fingertips of both hands, yard-long skin hung and trembled. The skin of the back peeled from both shoulders, stopped at the waist, and hung like a droopy loincloth. The skin of the legs peeled to the anklebone and dragged, a yard long, on the ground. People couldn’t help looking like apparitions. If they walked with arms down, the skin hanging off their fingertips dragged painfully on the ground, so they raised their arms and held them at shoulder level, which was less painful. Even if they wanted to run, the skin of their legs was dragging along on the ground, impeding their steps. Shuffling one step at a time, they proceeded, a procession of ghosts.

In this procession of ghosts, I made my way to the Funairi Kawaguchi-chō trolley stop. On both sides of the trolley street in Kawaguchi-

chō were sweet potato and vegetable fields. The farmhouses scattered in the fields were leaning from the blast. Wide-eyed, I looked about the trolley street. There, on the sidewalk on the left, sat Mom. She had spread a blanket on the sidewalk, set some pots beside it, and was sitting in her apron, face sooty, a vacant expression on her face. I stood in front of her. We looked each other in the face, silent, exhausted, and I sank to the ground beside her. I was overcome with joy and relief that I had finally found family. Soon I noticed that Mom was holding carefully to her chest something wrapped in a dirty blanket. I peeked inside the blanket and saw a baby, newborn, face red and wrinkled. It was a mystery: "Huh? Suddenly a baby. . . ." I looked again at Mom's tummy, and it had shrunk.

The shock had sent Mom into labor, and in the carnage of atomic hell she had given birth on the pavement to a baby girl. As she writhed in pain on the pavement, several passersby had gathered and helped with the birth.

Exhausted, I squatted on the pavement. Perhaps because of the effect of the radiation, I was nauseous. I vomited a yellow fluid, and I felt bad; I hadn't the energy to sit up. Trying to hold back the urge to vomit, dazed, I watched the scene unfolding before me. From the direction of town, the procession of ghosts continued one after the other, passing before me. Right before my eyes, skin trembled from arms now completely skinless, drooping twenty inches from fingers. I watched in amazement, "Skin really does come right off!"



Each person shuffled, dragging a yard of skin from each leg, so from way back in the direction of town, dust swirled into the air. When the procession of ghosts reached the trolley street, they climbed down into the potato and vegetable fields on either side, collapsed atop the plants, and fell asleep. Burned by the rays and blistering, their entire bodies were hot and painful, and the cool of plants against their skin felt good. Instead of blankets, they lay on plants. As I watched, the vegetable fields turned into row upon row of people whose skin had melted.

The sky suddenly turned quite dark, and when I looked up, a stormy black cloud had covered the sky. Large raindrops spattered against the asphalt and created a pattern of spots. Large drops of rain struck my head and my clothes. The surface of the drops was oily and glittering; it was "black rain." Black spots clung here and

there to Mom's clothing and mine. When I wiped the drops from my face with my hand, they were slippery. I didn't like how they felt. Somehow or other a rumor spread: "Those damned Yanks! This time they're dropping heavy oil from the sky to make Hiroshima burn easier!" The black cloud moved rapidly to the west, the black rain stopped, and the sky cleared. I never dreamed that this black rain contained radioactivity that forever after destroyed your cells.

We were lucky. Had we fled to the northwestern part of Hiroshima, we would have been soaked in radioactivity, quickly contracted leukemia, and died. Black rain continued to fall, concentrated in northwestern Hiroshima. Where we were, it rained a bit and then stopped, and we avoided being drenched in a lot of radioactivity. While I watched the pavement, patterned with large black raindrops and gleaming eerily, I was overtaken by drowsiness and, before I knew it, dropped off to sleep.

When, feeling as if I was choking, I opened my eyes, night had fallen. With no electricity and virtually no lights, it should have been pitch-dark, but all Hiroshima, leading city of the Chūgoku region, was going up in flames, a waterfall flowing upward instead of downward. By the light of the fires, you could see clearly. The heat reflected from the flames blazing brightly had made me gasp for air and wakened me. I turned my eyes to the right, and on the shore of the lower reaches of the Honkawa, thick tree trunks had been piled high in a long row. The hot wind quickly dried the wood, and the fire spread to them, one after the other. The tree trunks made loud sounds, split apart, and flew up into the air. The heat reflected from the flames was hot; we moved right up next to the field's stone wall and shielded ourselves from the heat. The stones were cool and felt good. I looked up at the night sky, dyed red, scorching; smoke eddied in columns, and the flames reflected off the smoke. It was as if a

double red curtain covered us. Watching that night sky, I fell asleep again.

Twice, three times, I was awakened by a sound as if dozens of insects had flown into my ears, flapping their wings. Already confused, I kept thinking, "What a racket! What is it?" As time passed, the sound became louder, and I couldn't sleep. When I listened carefully, it turned out to be a one-word chorus: "Water!" "Water!" From the fields on either side resounded the agonized chorus. I looked at Mom, and she too had been awakened by the chorus crying, "Water!" Mom said, "Those poor people—let's get them some water. Go scoop some up." At her urging, I picked up a metal helmet that was rolling about on the pavement and pumped it full of water.

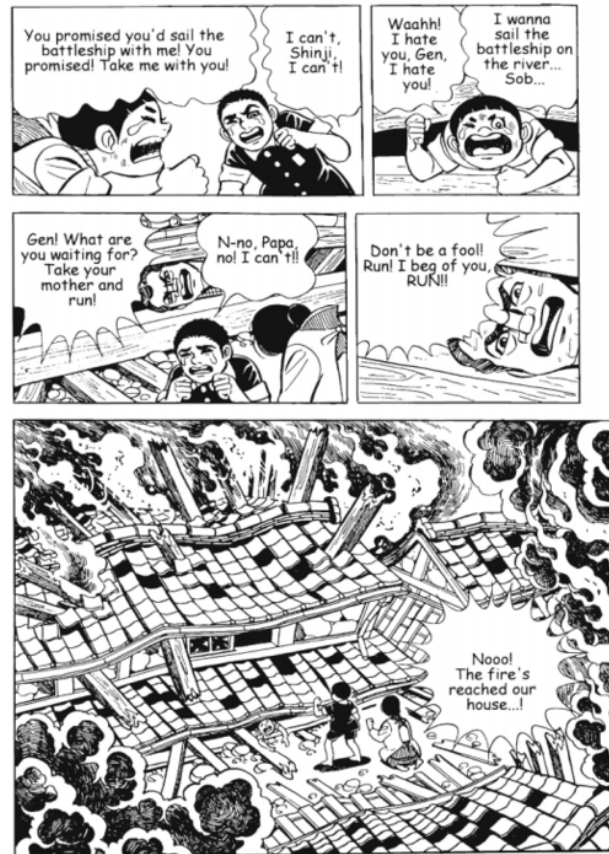
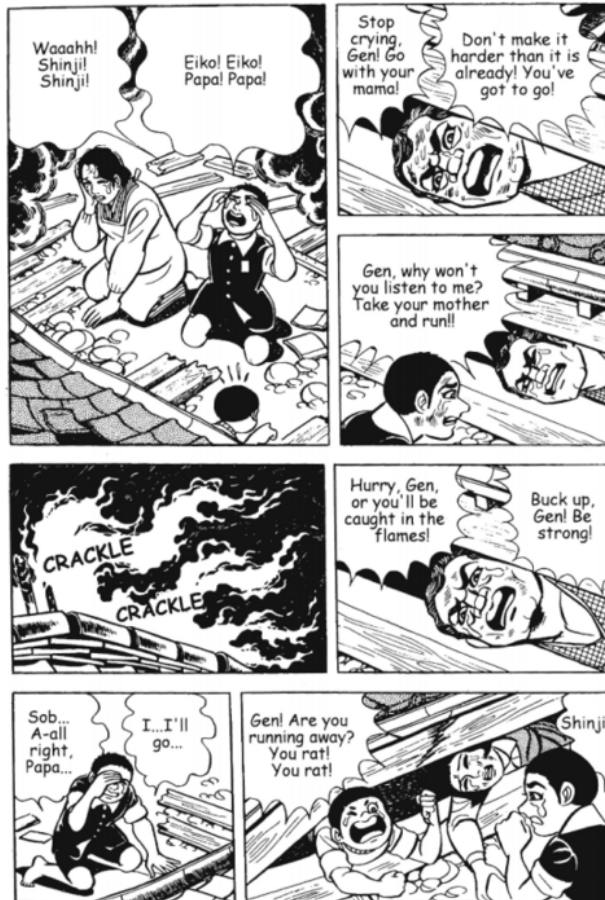
Mom found the cup we needed, scooped water from the helmet I was holding, and offered it to a person groaning, "Water! Water!" With a start, as if he'd caught the scent of water, he bent his head over the cup, and emptied it in one gulp. Then, three or four seconds later, he collapsed, his head striking the ground. Alarmed, Mom shook him and cried, "What's wrong?" but he was already dead. We offered the cup of water to others groaning "Water! Water!" and each and every one buried his or her face in the cup and drank it off in one gulp. And then, three or four seconds later, they all died, their heads hitting the ground. When we gave them water, they died, one after the other. Amazed at this strange phenomenon, Mom and I stood stock-still in the field.

Editor's note: Toward the end of volume I of Barefoot Gen, Nakazawa depicts the events of August 6. Gen and his mother try to rescue Shinji and Gen's father from the ruins of their home. We know from the autobiography that Nakazawa himself was not present, that he learned about these events only after the fact, from his mother. But in Barefoot Gen, Gen is the focus throughout, and here he tries heroically first to rally neighbors and then to

lift the roof beams himself.

The treatment of bomb damage begins fourteen pages earlier and includes a striking variety of forms: one panel fills the entire left half of a page (the explosion itself), one panel stretches across the top half of two pages (a scene of collapsed houses on either side of a highway down the middle of which run trolley tracks), and one panel fills a full page (a burning horse).





One can purchase the book *Hiroshima: The Autobiography of Barefoot Gen* [here](#).

Richard H. Minear is Professor of History emeritus, University of Massachusetts Amherst. His books include translations: [Hiroshima: Three Witnesses](#), Kurihara Sadako's *Black Eggs*, and *The Autobiography of 'Barefoot Gen.'* His best-selling [Dr. Seuss Goes to War: The World War II Editorial Cartoons of Theodor Seuss Geisel](#) contains an introduction by Art Spiegelman.

Richard H. Minear is the author of *Victors' Justice: The Tokyo War Crimes Trial (1971)* and *Dr. Seuss Goes to War (1999)* and the editor of *Through Japanese Eyes (4th edition 2007)*. He is translator of *Requiem for Battleship Yamato (1985)*, *Hiroshima: Three Witnesses (1990)*, *Black Eggs (1994)*, the autobiographies of

Ienaga Saburo (2001), Nakazawa Keiji (2010), and Oishi Matashichi (2011 forthcoming), and writings of Takeyama Michio (2007) and Nambara Shigeru (2010 forthcoming). He has written and translated a number of essays for Japan Focus and is a Japan Focus associate.

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Notes

¹ *Gen* is pronounced with a hard *g* and a short *e*, as in *again*, where the second syllable is pronounced to rhyme with *then*. *Hadashi* means barefoot. Hence, "Gen of the Bare Feet." In the final chapter of this autobiography, Nakazawa explains the origin of the name: "I called the protagonist 'Gen' in the sense of the basic composition of humanity so that he'd be someone who wouldn't let war and atomic bomb happen again." (*Gen* is the first half of the compound *Genso*, meaning chemical element.)

² *The Hiroshima Murals: The Art of Iri Maruki and Toshi Maruki*, ed. John W. Dower and John Junkerman (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1985).

³ "*Hiroshima*" *no kūhaku—Nakazawa-ke shimatsuki* (Tokyo: Nihon tosho sentā, 1987); '*Hadashi Gen*' *no jiden* (Tokyo: Misuzu, 1995).

⁴ Nakazawa refers to his mother throughout as Mother/Mom, but on August 6 his father cries out to "Kimiyo." The *manga* gives her name as

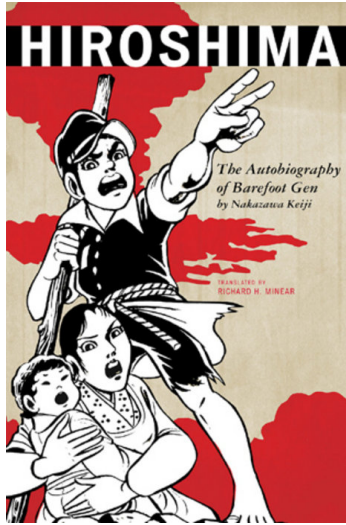
Kimie. In the *manga*, she calls her husband "Daikichi."

⁵ Charles Pellegrino, *The Last Train from Hiroshima: The Survivors Look Back* (New York: Henry Holt, 2010). A *New York Times* account of the brouhaha that has greeted Pellegrino's book quoted Jeffrey Porter of the University of Iowa, "There's a hazy line between 'truth' and invention in creative non-fiction, but good writers don't have to make things up." Motoko Rich, "Pondering Good Faith in Publishing," *New York Times*, March 9, 2010, p. C6. For an extended discussion of the issues involved in this hoax, see my "Misunderstanding Hiroshima," Japanfocus.org.

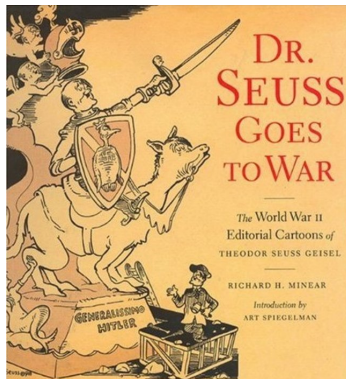
⁶ "*Barefoot Gen, Japan, and I: The Hiroshima Legacy: An Interview with Nakazawa Keiji*," tr. Richard H. Minear, *International Journal of Comic Art* 10, no. 2 (fall 2008): 311-12. An excerpt from this interview is an appendix to this book.

⁷ Pellegrino, *The Last Train from Hiroshima*, 325. Without footnotes, without a list of interviewees and the dates of the interviews, Pellegrino's assertions are impossible to evaluate and hence virtually worthless. At best, those survivor accounts are sixty-year-old memories of the event, and intervening events and experiences have played a major, if undocumented, role.

⁸ This ditty was a take-off on the "Battleship March," which had the syllable *mo* twice in its opening line. *Imo* is the Japanese word for potato.



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