

My Final Wish 最後の願い

Nakazawa Keiji

Between 2012 and 2014 we posted a number of articles on contemporary affairs without giving them volume and issue numbers or dates. Often the date can be determined from internal evidence in the article, but sometimes not. We have decided retrospectively to list all of them as Volume 10, Issue 54 with a date of 2012 with the understanding that all were published between 2012 and 2014.

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Translation by Matthew Penney

Atomic bomb survivor, manga artist, and peace activist Nakazawa Keiji, the author of the influential manga Barefoot Gen which is famous for its harrowing depiction of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and the struggle for survival in the aftermath, died after a struggle with cancer on December 19, 2012. Shortly before his death, Nakazawa finished a book entitled Watashi no Isho (My Last Will and Testament). The following is a translation of the conclusion of the work entitled "My Final Wish".

When I think back, I get the feeling that it has really been ‘outrage’ that has kept me going since my mother’s death. If you take away the outrage and the anger, there would be nothing left of me. It is as though my dead mother gave

me a mission, “Boy, you’ve got to leave behind a record of the atomic bomb.”

Happily, I had a weapon called ‘manga’. I have a deep love for manga and I have been at my happiest when drawing it. When I first started out as a manga artist, the medium was still looked down upon by the public. However, I wonder if it is the very fact that manga is not “high art”, that it is something that can be picked up and read for fun, that let me get my message across to many children over the years. It seems like fate. Like something drew me to it. Some mysterious power.

My generation is likely the first that was able to represent the atomic bomb through manga. If I had experienced the bomb at twenty, my approach would probably have been completely different. If I had been any younger, my memories would probably be fragmentary. I was six years old and what happened is seared into my mind as if captured on film. My experience of the bomb as a first grader is what gave birth to *Barefoot Gen*.

Manga felt right. I didn’t have to force an artistic approach as though I was writing atomic bomb literature. A simple means of expression just felt right. Through manga even young children can experience the bomb vicariously and learn about important issues such as war and atomic weapons. It is the pervasiveness and accessibility of manga that make it really special. I feel proud that I chose

a career as a manga artist. I feel that I accomplished something important.

Even now, the world of *Barefoot Gen* continues to expand and grow. When I went to a library in Kochi Prefecture, the librarian told me that no matter how many copies of *Barefoot Gen* they put on the shelves, they are always vanishing. Why? Because children who start reading always want to continue and tuck them away in a secret corner of the library. When I see the covers, worn and dirty and patched up with tape, I feel happy. To see that they have been read over and over again makes me feel blessed as an author.

I once received a letter of protest from a mother whose first-grader read *Barefoot Gen* and was crying, afraid to go to the toilet at night. She wanted me to stop drawing such horrifying things. I sent her a response saying, “Your child is growing up well. Please praise him. If they read *Barefoot Gen* and couldn’t go to the toilet, that means they empathized and could put themselves in that place. I think this is a wonderful thing.” *Barefoot Gen* is not something that you read while chuckling away to yourself.

I have also received a letter from an 18 year-old girl in Hokkaido who said, “*Barefoot Gen* is my bible. When I’m down, I read it and immediately feel a sense of courage. *Barefoot Gen* has really done a lot for me.”

A Japanese-Korean sixth grader from Osaka told me, “I had no idea that there were Japanese authors who looked at Koreans with such warmth.” I was overjoyed that the character “Boku-san” from *Barefoot Gen* could

have that kind of impact.

I chose the name “Gen” for my grandson. I did this because I want him to keep passing on the message of *Barefoot Gen*. “Gen” is the “Gen” of *genki* (lively and healthy) and the “Gen” of *genso* (“element” as in the elements of the periodic table). I tell my grandson, “You should become a doctor, a human being who can help the weak and those in need.” After the war, I saw far too much of my mother suffering through pain and illness and I feel strongly that doctors are incalculably valuable. I want my grandson to be a person who can help others.

I wrote *Barefoot Gen* to tell children to be strong, even if things are difficult or painful, and to live, looking ever forward with brightness and optimism. Today, as then, there are many people who are facing difficulties in their lives, who are struggling to survive. I want them to sing.

Focusing on the sadness will only push you further and further down. In sad times, in order to live and overcome, Gen sang with vitality. He opened his mouth wide and sang. I want my readers to do that too. Fight on and live thinking “I’m not going to let this beat me.”

“Wheat” is one of the key symbols in *Barefoot Gen*. Wheat begins to sprout in the cold of winter and no matter how many times you stomp it down, it spreads its roots into the earth and grows. In *Barefoot Gen*, Gen’s father says, “Grow up to be like the wheat that, no matter how many times it is trampled, fiercely sprouts and takes root.” There are many lines like this one. This is something that my father really said, time and again.

Gen, like the wheat, bore it all and grew up strong and straight. I want my readers to grow as human beings and overcome even if you are trampled down. It will be okay. Even at their lowest, humans have the power to overcome, to say “kiss my ass” to it all and come back swinging. We all have the spirit of wheat and we won’t lose.

Barefoot Gen is my will and testament. Everything that I have to say is there in those pages. I want people to keep reading *Barefoot Gen* and find something for themselves within. That is my final wish.

Barefoot Gen is available in English from publisher [Last Gasp](#). Selections from the work and other art by Nakazawa are available on Hiroshima's [Virtual Museum website](#). See [here](#) and [here](#) for essays and autobiographical writings by Nakazawa published by the *Asia-Pacific Journal*.

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