



palgrave▶pivot

Framing School Violence and Bullying in Young Adult Manga

Fictional Perspectives on a Pedagogical Problem

Drew Emanuel Berkowitz

palgrave
macmillan

Framing School Violence and Bullying in Young Adult Manga

Drew Emanuel Berkowitz

Framing School Violence and Bullying in Young Adult Manga

Fictional Perspectives on a Pedagogical Problem

palgrave
macmillan

Drew Emanuel Berkowitz
Independent Scholar
Middletown, NY, USA

ISBN 978-3-030-58120-6 ISBN 978-3-030-58121-3 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-58121-3>

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2020

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use. The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Cover illustration: Pattern © Melisa Hasan

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

*This book is dedicated to the victims, victims' families, and survivors
of the 2019 Kyoto Animation Studio 1 arson attack.*

CONTENTS

1	School as a Setting in Young Adult Manga (History and Context)	1
2	Socio-cultural Investigations of Manga's Messages (and Their Relevance for Educators)	19
3	Depictions of School Violence and Bullying in Young Adult Manga	31
4	Normalization of (and Responses to) Violence and Bullying by Educators in Young Adult Manga	49
5	School Violence and Bullying in Romantic (LGBTQ-Inclusive) Young Adult Manga	73
6	How Might Violent Manga Reflect What Young Adults Expect from Teachers and Classmates?	103
	Appendix	119
	Index	123



CHAPTER 1

School as a Setting in Young Adult Manga (History and Context)

Young adult fiction often asks its readers to imagine what happens when ordinary young adults find themselves facing extraordinary circumstances. Some of these stories' teenage protagonists are suddenly and unexpectedly spirited away to far-off, extraordinary places, such as fairytale landscapes, extraterrestrial vistas, and dystopian futures. Other works depict the ways in which extraordinary problems can suddenly and unexpectedly intrude upon their protagonists' everyday lives. However, within the subset of young adult literature known as "manga", many protagonists face problems that are presented as neither sudden nor unexpected: problems with classroom violence and school bullying that have sadly become increasingly unextraordinary aspects of the lives of both the stories' young adult characters and the stories' young adult readers.

When prompted to consider how the issues of classroom violence and school bullying are depicted within young adult manga, one title that might immediately spring to a manga aficionado's mind would be *A Silent Voice* (2015), a seven-volume series of manga novels written by Japanese author Yoshitoki Ōima. At the beginning of the first volume of *A Silent Voice*, high school senior Shoya Ishida is completing final preparations to take his own life. He has cancelled his cell phone contract, quit his job, and saved up enough money to pay back what he feels he owes his mother for raising him. Now, the only thing left to do is to find and apologize to Shoko Nishimiya, a deaf girl whom he mercilessly bullied in sixth grade.

In the six years since Shoya and Shoko last saw each other, Shoya has been subjected to relentless bullying and ostracization from his school classmates. They threw the contents of his locker in the garbage, wrote “you should jump off a building” on his desk, and beat him up on the way home from school. Shoya has accepted all of his classmates’ abuse, and has come to believe that he deserves it, chiefly because of what he did to Shoko.

When Shoko Nishimiya was in sixth grade, Shoya Ishida was her bully. Shoya bullied Shoko because she was deaf, but also because he was bored and wanted attention from his classmates, who laughed whenever he made fun of her disability. Shoya and Shoko’s teacher knew about Shoya’s bullying and initially tried to get him to stop, but soon more and more students began to follow Shoya’s lead and bully Shoko themselves. Shoya and Shoko’s teacher quickly lost control of the situation.

After Shoya began stealing and destroying Shoko’s hearing aids, the school administration became involved. Their teacher—desperate to minimize and downplay his own culpability—encouraged Shoya’s friends to place the blame solely on Shoya’s shoulders, making it seem as though the teacher was only negligent about interceding in a single student’s behavior, rather than the behavior of his entire class. Soon, Shoya’s classmates would quickly begin to bully and torment their former friend and ringleader.

Shoya perceived Shoko as the source of his troubles. He would eventually confront the girl, leading to a brutal exchange of blows between the two children, Shoko’s expeditious transfer to another school, and Shoya’s quick realization that Shoko had been staying late after school every day to erase the horrible things that his classmates had been writing on his school desk. At the end of the story’s first volume, Shoya finds Shoko, intending to apologize to her, leaving a clear question in readers’ minds: *should Shoko forgive Shoya?*

For Shoko, of course, the answer to this question had never been in doubt. Not only had she always been in love with Shoya, but—due to her own lifelong problems with crippling depression—she had always felt as though she was only bullied because she did not try hard enough to communicate with her classmates and make friends. Later in the story, after Shoya’s attempts to prevent Shoko from making her own suicide attempt land him in a coma, Shoko dreams about how much better her life could have been, if only she had been able to hear. Following a volume-long exploration of what Shoko’s life is like while Shoya is in a coma, many of

A Silent Voice's young adult readers will certainly be rooting for Shoya to wake up and give Shoko her well-deserved happy ending.

Now, as far as young adult romance novel protagonists go, one would be hard-pressed to claim that Shoya constitutes the most upstanding gentleman that the genre has to offer its adolescent readers. Yet, neither is he a villainous cad, nor a cautionary tale to warn young women about what not to look for in a romantic partner. Instead, *A Silent Voice* makes careful efforts to never truly portray Shoya as either completely sympathetic or completely despicable. The story continually reminds readers of Shoya's six years of suffering at the hands of his bullies, but it just as frequently reminds readers of the glee and callousness that he exhibited while he was bullying Shoko. In this way, *A Silent Voice*'s depictions of Shoya are deeply complicated, as are its overall depictions of bullying and violence within the contexts of K-12 school environments.

By the time *A Silent Voice*'s first volume draws to a close—and Shoya and Shoko finally meet each other for the first time in six years—young adult readers may come away with a much more complicated impression of what it means to be a bully than can be found in many other novels written for their demographic. However, within the context of Japanese young adult literature, *A Silent Voice* is far from unique in the complexity with which it depicts the topics of school violence and bullying. Rather, it is just one of the many Japanese young adult graphic novels to tackle these subjects in ways that strongly resonate with the medium's adolescent readers.

A Silent Voice was written and published in Japanese and then translated and distributed for foreign markets. Like most contemporary Japanese graphic novel titles, *A Silent Voice* is commonly referred to as *manga*, a term that—much in the same way as Japanese animation is often labeled as *anime*—is used in Japan to denote all comics and graphic novels, and used outside of Japan to explicitly refer to comics and graphic novels of Japanese origin. *A Silent Voice* was originally written for the Japanese twelve- to eighteen-year-old male *shōnen* demographic. However, like many *shōnen* romance titles, it was rebranded as a general young adult romance series for foreign markets in which romance titles were not typically geared towards young adult male demographics.

A Silent Voice has been lauded with critical acclaim, both in Japan, where it won Asahi Shimbun's Tezuka Osamu "New Creator" Cultural Prize (Hodgkins 2015), and internationally, where it was named by the American Library Association on their 2017 list of Great Graphic Novels

for Teens (ALA 2017) and nominated for a 2016 Will Eisner Comic Industry Award (Bunge 2016). Its film adaptation—released in 2016 by Kyoto Animation—proved to be similarly popular. Commercially, it opened to domestic audiences at #2 (behind *Your Name*, the highest-grossing Japanese film of all time), before eventually grossing \$33 million on international release. Critically, it received both the 2016 Japanese Movie Critics Award for Best Animation Feature Film and the 2017 Japanese Academy Award for Excellent Animation.

Yet, although *A Silent Voice* was an unqualified success at virtually every metric, at the time of its publication it would have been far from the most internationally well-known young adult manga title to focus on issues of classroom bullying or violence. That particular honor would have gone to *A Silent Voice*'s fellow 2016 Will Eisner Comic Industry Award nominee, Yūsei Matsui's twenty-one-volume action comedy manga *Assassination Classroom* (2014). Like many other internationally renowned action manga titles such as *Dragon Ball*, *Naruto*, and *One Piece*, *Assassination Classroom* was first published as a serialized work within Japan's best-selling and longest-running manga anthology magazine, *Weekly Shōnen Jump*, before being collected into a blockbuster young adult graphic novel series.

Assassination Classroom is a kid-friendly comedy series with a decidedly dark premise. Its story focuses on a group of troubled students at a fictional Japanese middle school. Once star pupils, all of these students have since become disappointments to their teachers and parents. Now, they are regularly ostracized by their instructors, bullied by their peers, and repeatedly told by school administrators that they are failures. After having been physically isolated from the rest of the student body, and sent to complete the remainder of their junior high school days in a ramshackle old building at the top of a nearby mountain, the students had all but given up hope for a fulfilling school life. This all changes with the sudden arrival of a strange new teacher, a seemingly invincible extraterrestrial monster who claims to have just destroyed the Moon.

Assassination Classroom's Koro-Sensei (a pun on the Japanese words for “unkillable” and “teacher”) is a canary yellow octopus who can move at speeds in excess of Mach 20 and has very particular views on pedagogy. Koro-Sensei states that he plans to blow up the entire planet following the students' middle school graduation ceremony, but is otherwise a perfectly jovial teacher, whose mannerisms closely resemble those of Robin Williams' character from the film *Dead Poets Society*. Although initially wary, the

students quickly warm up to their strange new instructor when they realize that he deeply cares about his students, until a secret agent—posing as their physical education teacher—informs them that the government will give 10 billion yen to any student who can kill Koro-Sensei before the end of the school year.

Assassination Classroom's comedic, off-kilter tone strongly resonated with young adult audiences. Critically, *Assassination Classroom* would receive numerous accolades, including the highly coveted number one spot on the annual manga industry guidebook *This Manga Is Amazing!*'s 2014 list of "Top 20 Manga for Male Readers". Commercially, the series had 20 million graphic novels in circulation by 2016, as well as a wide range of adaptations and spinoffs, including four feature films. Much of the franchise's critical and commercial success can be attributed to its central narrative's heavy focus on "dark, difficult topics, such as bullying, suicide, and parental abuse" (Silverman 2017). Just like *A Silent Voice*—as well as a number of other young adult manga graphic novel titles discussed throughout this book—*Assassination Classroom* is a work that takes full advantage of its medium's "long-form structure and emphasis on emotion" (May 2015) in order to explore issues like classroom bullying and school violence on a deeper and more multifaceted level than is typical of non-manga graphic novel works. In spite of its colorful and comedic trappings, it is a story that "showcases the harm that a toxic school environment can have on a child" (Silverman 2018).

MANGA

In spite of their warm critical and commercial reception, young adult manga graphic novels such as *Assassination Classroom* and *A Silent Voice* are in many ways potentially challenging to read, analyze, and discuss. The principle issue with these works is content: manga is first and foremost the product of Japanese culture, and many countries' norms about what is or is not appropriate to depict within young adult literature are often incompatible with the literary conventions of Japanese media. Certainly, many countries' parents and educators would have many problems with works like *Assassination Classroom* that depict students who repeatedly attempt to kill their teachers, but even putting aside works with deliberately provocative premises, there is no denying that manga graphic novels are, on a whole, more contentiously themed than those published by many non-Japanese young adult graphic novel publishers such as Scholastic.

Some young adult readers—along with their parents, guardians, and educators—will therefore find some manga works difficult due to their frequently disturbing depictions of violence and bullying within K-12 educational contexts. In the example of *A Silent Voice*, some will find it impossible to overlook the fact that the franchise is often marketed by publishers and discussed by fans as a love story, due to the fact that the “love” in question involves a teenage girl and her former abuser. Yet, others might have difficulty not in reading or discussing the work itself, but rather in understanding the medium of literature that *A Silent Voice* represents. After all, what does it mean to say that *A Silent Voice* is a *young adult manga graphic novel*?

At their most basic level, graphic novels are a subcategory of the broad spectrum of artistic works that American graphic novel pioneer Will Eisner described as a “cross-breeding of illustration and prose” in a consistent and characteristic literary manner (Eisner 1985, p. 2). Eisner employed the umbrella term *sequential art* to delineate the ways that works such as newspaper comic strips, American graphic novels, and French *bandes dessinées* rely on certain semiotic conventions in order to communicate elements such as the passage of time to their readers. Under Eisner’s conception of sequential art, works such as comic books and graphic novels are not just art but also literature, tapping into a shared underlying vocabulary that prompts readers to interpret not simply image as text, but also text as image. Eisner’s work would heavily influence the field of media scholarship that would later come to be known by the names *comics studies*, *sequential art studies*, and *graphic narrative studies*.

In Japan, the term *manga* is used to describe a wide range of the mediums studied by these scholars: not just Japanese graphic novels, but also Japanese four-panel *yonkoma* comic strips, American superhero comic books, American newspaper comic strips, and French *bandes dessinées*. Outside of Japan, however, the term “manga” is used by both fans and scholars to denote all works of sequential art produced by Japanese comics creators. Similarly, the phrase “manga graphic novels” is colloquially employed by non-Japanese publishers to describe all Japanese works that they market and sell in graphic novel form to international readers.

Over the past few decades, Western comics creators and scholars have engaged in debate about just what, precisely, constitutes a graphic novel. Some question whether the term should only be used to denote stand-alone works that eschew serialization and focus on serious themes rather than frivolity (Baetens and Frey 2015). Others contend that the term has

become largely devoid of meaning, and has merely devolved into a cynical marketing term embraced by American comic book publishers who, in the words of *New York Times* bestselling graphic novel author Alan Moore, “stick six issues of whatever [...] they happened to be publishing lately under a glossy cover and call it *The She-Hulk Graphic Novel*” (Kavanagh 2000).

On a theoretical level, it is certainly interesting to ponder whether works like *A Silent Voice* and *Assassination Classroom* are truly “graphic novels”, or are merely packaged that way by publishers who consider “comic book” to be a less marketable nomenclature. From a practical perspective, however, the overwhelming majority of internationally released young adult manga titles have been presented to readers in the form of graphic novels and graphic novel compilation volumes. Similarly, when internationally published works make it onto the best-seller lists in non-Japanese countries such as the United States, they are typically listed as graphic novel works.

Often, these works were originally published in serialized form, typically in Japanese weekly or monthly comic anthologies. For example, *Assassination Classroom* was originally published in Shueisha’s *Weekly Shōnen Jump*, while *A Silent Voice* was originally published in Kodansha’s *Weekly Shōnen Magazine*. The term *shōnen* that appears in the names of both of these magazines refers to the intended age and gender demographics of their serialized titles’ young adult readers. Magazines that cater to the *shōnen* demographic are primarily intended for teen and preteen boys, and magazines that cater to the *shōjo* demographic are primarily intended for teen and preteen girls. Similarly, *seinen* periodicals are directly targeted towards young men over the age of eighteen, and *josei* periodicals are directly targeted towards young adult women over the age of eighteen.

For this reason, many, if not most, Japanese manga anthologies contain a wider variety of works than typically appear in other countries’ more genre-focused comics publications, such as the flagship superhero comic titles of American publishers Marvel Comics and DC Comics. After these serialized works are collected into graphic novels, they often retain the same demographic signifiers and expectations of their likely readers’ ages and genders. These works are then translated and released into foreign markets, many of whose existing comics-reading demographics do not easily match up with those found in Japan.

For example, *A Silent Voice* was licensed in the United States, France, Argentina, Mexico, Spain, Italy, Russia, Brazil, and Taiwan, many of which