OLENTANGY SCHOOLS LITERATURE SELECTION REVIEW FORM

LOCATION

Building(s): OSMS

Classes/Grade Level(s): 6th Grade

ABOUT THE BOOK

Selection Title/Author: While I was Away by Waka T. Brown

Genre: Memoir

Lexile Reading Level: Grades 3-7 (Lexile unavailable)

Total number of pages: 320

Book Summary

When twelve-year-old Waka's parents suspect she can't understand the basic Japanese they speak to her, they make a drastic decision to send her to Tokyo to live for several months with her strict grandmother. Forced to say goodbye to her friends and what would have been her summer vacation, Waka is plucked from her straight-A-student life in rural Kansas and flown across the globe, where she faces the culture shock of a lifetime.

In Japan, Waka struggles with reading and writing in *kanji*, doesn't quite mesh with her complicated and distant Obaasama, and gets made fun of by the students in her Japanese public-school classes. Even though this is the country her parents came from, Waka has never felt more like an outsider.

If she's always been the "smart Japanese girl" in America but is now the "dumb foreigner" in Japan, where is home...and who will Waka be when she finds it?

Potentially Objectionable Content (list all categories and at least one example, referenced with a page or chapter number)

Implicit and explicit sexual content and sexual innuendo

- The main character's friend writes her a letter and references meeting a cute boy- Ch 17
- The main character accidentally walks in on the boys' changing room after swim class and the boys call her a pervert and peeper; then the whole grade starts talking about it and she is ostracized- Ch 20
- A classmate mentions that she has a crush on another classmate- Ch 23

Violence

- Main character's grandmother tells her a story of how her father burned her with a cattle iron for wetting the bed- Ch 20

Book Reviews (1-2 link(s)) *Note: teacher is not responsible for broken links*

From Kirkus Reviews:

An emotional, contemplative tale of risking and growing. In 1984, a 12-year-old Kansas girl spends five months in Japan with the intimidating grandmother she barely knows.

At school, Waka is used to being regarded as a brain—as well as the short kid. At home, her



Japanese immigrant parents worry that in striving so hard to be American, she is losing touch with her heritage. The solution? Sending her to Japan to live with Obaasama and attend a local public school despite her strenuous protests. In her new Japanese school, Waka's language struggles and cultural faux pas make her stand out—and not in a good way. On the other hand, she is considered tall and a jock. Breaking into established social circles presents another puzzle. But everything pales in comparison to learning to get along with her taciturn grandmother, whose traumatic history and emotional complexity come to light as their relationship deepens. Waka finds inner strength she didn't know she had, cultivates greater self-awareness, and comes to truly love many aspects of Japan. The author shares her story in a conversational and accessible tone. Many facets of life in the 1980s will be as surprising as the U.S.–Japan cultural differences that readers unfamiliar with Japan discover alongside young Waka. International travel aside, the journey of coming to see oneself and others through more mature eyes is a universally familiar element of the middle school years, adding additional appeal. An emotional, contemplative tale of risking and growing. (author's note) (Memoir. 10-14)

ABOUT THE CLASS

Rationale for the Literature Selection (in addition to standards):
This book is being used in 6th grade ELA as part of a cross-content ELA and social studies project on the 5 themes of geography, culture, and modern countries in the Eastern Hemisphere. Students will read the novel, and then research the country featured in the novel in preparation for sharing what they've learned with the class. They will research the elements of the country's culture and then they will evaluate the presentation of that culture in the novel they read.

This book has been selected because of its setting and genre. First, it is set in a modern day country in the Eastern Hemisphere, and second, it is a realistic fiction novel that allows students to learn about a culture by reading a story set in that culture. In addition to the culture of the country, students will be asked to describe the 5 themes of geography in relation to that specific country, and to evaluate whether the book's author accurately and fully portrayed the culture.

The Ohio Department of Education ELA Standards (list priority standards *only and* abbreviations of the main ideas of the priority standards) Link to Ohio's ELA Standards

- RL.6.1 Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- RL.6.2 Analyze literary text development. B. Incorporate a theme and story details into an objective summary of the text.
- RL.6.3 Describe how a particular story's or drama's plot unfolds in a series of episodes as well as how the characters respond or change as the plot moves toward a resolution.

ALTERNATIVE TEXTS

What alternative texts would allow students to meet the same objectives?

1. Middle School: Escape to Australia by James Patterson
2. Rickshaw Girl by Mitali Perkins

SIGNATURES (embedded jpegs of authentic signatures are fine OR download/print form and obtain traditional signatures)

Teacher: [signature] Date: 9/3/25

Department Chair: Valerie Bojorquez Date: 9.2.25

Building Principal: [signature] Date: 9.11.25

District Curriculum Administrator: Elaine Ford Date: 9/26/25