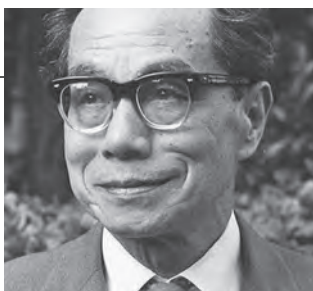
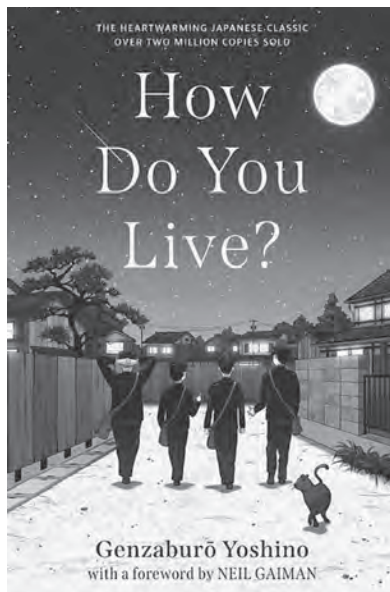


# Teaching *How Do You Live?* in Middle School Classrooms

by Nancy Neff and Ronald S. Green

**Editor’s Introduction:** *How Do You Live?*, written by Genzaburō Yoshino and translated by Bruno Navasky, is a 2021 Book of Note recognized by the Freeman Book Awards for Young Adult/Middle School Literature. This first-ever English-language translation of a 1937 Japanese classic has been a longtime classic source of inspiration for young readers. Many adults have found the book to also be inspiring. Because of the book’s significance, I asked Nancy Neff, an exceptional middle school teacher and East Asian religion specialist Ron Green, to each write essay reviews of *How Do You Live?* Two important questions middle school teachers should consider introducing to students appear on page thirteen of this article.



Genzaburō Yoshino.

## How Do You Live?

BY GENZABURŌ YOSHINO

TRANSLATED BY BRUNO NAVASKY

2021, CHAPEL HILL, NC: ALGONQUIN YOUNG READERS

288 PAGES, ISBN: 978-1616209773, HARDCOVER

2021 Freeman Book Awards Young  
Adult/Middle School Literature Book of Note



Reviewed by Nancy Neff

**I**n 1937, Genzaburō Yoshino wrote a charming coming of age story in his young adult novel *How Do You Live?* The reader learns much about life in Tokyo and its neighborhoods in pre-World War II Japan. However, it is so much more than a simple tale of a teenage boy, his friends, and their adventures; this work encompasses science, philosophy, history, geography, physics, economics, and more. It is a moving, engrossing narrative that is at times deceptively straightforward but also complicated and intricate. Although written for young adults, this book engages readers of all ages and makes them examine their perceptions of friendship, loyalty, and responsibility. By the end of the story, readers question their place in society, their contributions to the world, their sense of self, and how they live.

The main character of the book is Junichi Honda, known as Copper in the novel, a fifteen-year-old boy growing up in Tokyo. His father, a successful banker, is dead, but he has a close relationship with his rather indulgent mother and his wise uncle, her brother. Copper is starting high school; he is described as an excellent student, always near the top of his class academically; however, he is never the lead boy at school because he likes to have fun, play jokes, and isn’t always serious about his studies. He is self-conscious about his small stature, but he is a gifted baseball player who follows the Japanese Baseball League closely. His best friends are Kitami and Mizutani; Kitami is brave and outspoken while Mizutani is quieter but just as determined as his more outgoing companions.

Copper, Kitami, and Mizutani are content with their position within the school environment; they are confident and comfortable. One student does not share their charmed existence: Uragawa. Uragawa struggles with his school work and even has trouble staying awake in class. He is consistently the butt of jokes; some of his classmates call him “Fried Tofu” because that is what he brings for lunch every day; unfortunately, he even smells like that dish. All three of the other boys slowly begin to take up for Uragawa, but Kitami becomes a fierce champion against bullies, taking on much larger students to defend this outcast boy. Copper admires his friend for this compassion and is proud of Kitami. Although he supports Uragawa, Kitami’s sense of honor refuses to let him tattle on the ones who torment the boy; he chooses to defend Uragawa physically and accepts the consequences of fighting. Copper is proud of him for this and wishes to emulate Kitami.

**“People working in great hardship and those of us living in relative happiness are completely cut off from each other in our daily lives, but actually we are bound together by an unbreakable net. So if we don’t care about those people and we live thinking only of our own happiness, that is wrong, is it not?”**

—Genzaburō Yoshino, *How Do You Live?*

When Urugawa misses several days of school, Copper ventures into the unfamiliar, poor, filthy neighborhood where his friend lives. Here, Copper discovers a new world: poverty, child labor, and illness; he finds that Copper has been absent because he is working at his family’s store, cooking fried tofu, because his father is out of town trying to get a business loan and one of the workers is sick. Urugawa is worried about exams, but Copper tutors him and, when he returns to school, Urugawa makes his best grades to date. Copper begins to understand how others live, that they do not have his advantages, and he becomes even more protective of his friend. Kitami, Copper, Urugawa, and Mizutani are now fast friends.

One day the boys visit Mizutani’s palatial home and meet his older sister, Katsuko. She is a junior in high school and an ardent admirer of Napoleon. She encourages the boys to stand up for what they believe and fight for those beliefs and for each other. Some older boys in the school belong to a judo club, and they are intimidating younger students, especially ones they feel are not showing respect to their elders, i.e., older scholars. Katsuko’s influence leads the four friends to take a vow: if one of them is mistreated

by the club members, the other three will defend him, stay with him, and suffer the same fate. Some time later, a snowball fight gets out of hand, Kitami is assaulted, and while Mizutani and Urugawa stand firm and try to help him, Copper freezes and is unable to assist his friends. He stands by and watches the three get beaten by the older boys.

Copper is so ashamed; he becomes ill and does not go back to school for several weeks. He wants to apologize to his friends, but he is afraid of rejection and horrified by his cowardice. He finally summons the courage to write to Kitami and asks for understanding, not forgiveness. Kitami shares his letter, the three friends come to Copper’s house, and their friendship is restored. The bullies are punished, and the boys have learned about themselves and their world.

As mentioned previously, this story of four friends is deceptively simple; so much more goes on in this book. Yoshino employs an unusual narrative method in his work. The action alternates between a third person narrative and a first. Copper and his uncle share ideas, thoughts, and observations in a notebook which they pass to each other. This begins when Copper makes a startlingly astute, mature observation about humans and how they are all part of the cosmos; watching the rain fall onto Tokyo, Copper starts considering his place in the city, the country, the world, and the universe. His uncle

## The Publication History of *How Do You Live?*



Manga version by Shoichi Haga.

In 2018, a manga adaptation of *How Do You Live?* was the best-selling book in Japan. Copies of the original work by Genzaburō Yoshino also sold in the top ten that year—a testament to the enduring nature of the story and its importance in Japanese literature over eighty years after its original publication. But the story nearly didn’t survive World War II and almost never existed in the first place. In 1930, thirty-year old Genzaburō Yoshino enrolled at Tokyo Imperial University originally to study economics but graduated with a philosophy and literature degree. He later found work at the University of Tokyo library where he became interested in politics and socialism. At the time, the government had created a special branch of the police, called the Tokkō, to uphold the Public Security Preservation Law, meant to squash any anti-authoritarian, perniciously Western ideas expressed in art, writing, speech, or performance. In 1931, Yoshino was imprisoned for his involvement in socialist thinking for eighteen months. Following his release, he was invited to work with Japanese novelist and playwright Yūzō Yamamoto at Iwanami Shoten Publishers, where he was tasked with writing the last entry in a series of books that can be loosely translated to “The Japan Young People’s Library” (Nihon Shosan Bunko). The book was originally supposed to be an ethics textbook; the idealistic Yoshino wanted to teach future generations of Japanese children the importance of humanities and of thinking for yourself. Knowing that these kinds of ideas

were anathema to the Tokkō, Yamamoto suggested he make it a novel instead since it was likelier to fly under the radar as a children’s work. The idea worked for a time but eventually by 1942, Japanese censors took the book out of circulation. The book was republished after the war in 1945 but was “washed clean” for children. All mentions of imperialism and criticism of capitalism and unpatriotic behavior were cut from the book, as were references to the problems of class. The original version was later restored and is the version used by translator Bruno Navasky for the first ever English translation.

In an interview with Penguin Books, Navasky discussed the book’s importance:

*For me . . . the strong thread informing this book was an experience of an oppressive, dictatorial, even fascistic government. Yoshino and Yamamoto were both intellectuals with progressive, political inclinations, who were imprisoned for what they thought and said . . . The particular 1930s Japanese context led Yoshino to put emphasis on individual thinking in a way that I think we take for granted in the West during the modern era—and it never hurts to have that re-examined, either.*

Source: Penguin Books Editorial Board, “How a Once-Banned Japanese Children’s Book Became a Classic – and the Next Studio Ghibli Film,” *Penguin Books UK*, April 14, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/343y756u>.

is proud of his academic and philosophical progress and encourages his nephew to continue his intellectual growth. He urges Copper to persist in his curiosity of purpose. Uncle uses his notebook to teach and inspire Copper; he constantly asks Copper difficult questions about what kind of person he wants to grow up to be, what kind of life is worthy and admirable, and what is true goodness and happiness. The notebook becomes increasingly important to Copper as he struggles to achieve his goals of becoming a useful, responsible, contributing young man. He communicates his insights and ponders questions about himself and life in general in the text; by reading his uncle's words and answering his queries, Copper learns about philosophy, history, astronomy, economics, and more.

To fully understand the novel, one must consider the time of its publication. In 1937, Japan's military invaded China, and flexed its imperial muscles. Much like the judo club aggressors in the high school, Japan was impatient to demonstrate its military might. Economic and political inequities existed in the country, mirroring the situation in Copper and his friends' class. Standing up for what is right and facing possible defeat and humiliation, Yoshino seems to assert, is admirable and even noble. The bullies do not win in this tale; all elders are not commendable or praiseworthy. The reader can speculate how the author may have felt about what was happening in his own country as he wrote the book.

As a middle school history instructor, I thoroughly enjoyed the text, and I am convinced my students would both appreciate and learn from the book. It would be a tremendous introduction to Japanese culture; the characters are relatable, the situations are believable, and the story flows well. Today's middle school scholars might have some small difficulty understanding certain subtleties contained in Uncle's notebook and the discussions between Uncle and Copper, but that is a very minor hurdle. This is an historically and artistically significant work, and it is a book that would be a pleasure to teach. It is a gift that it has finally been translated from Japanese after all these years! It certainly asks one to consider "How Do You Live?" ♦

## Should Freedom of Thought be Discouraged? How Did Japan Become Wealthy?

Japanese government officials took *How Do you Live?* out of circulation because of the author's socialist beliefs and re-published a "washed clean" version after WWII, severely limiting the free exchange of ideas.

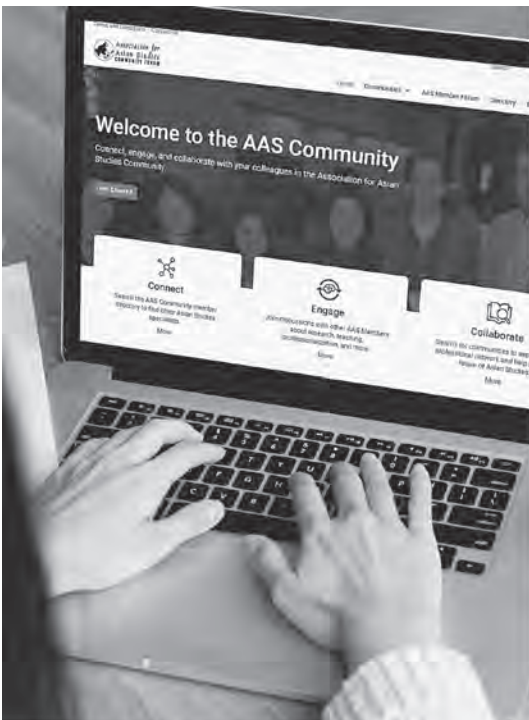
Middle schoolers can learn limiting the marketplace of ideas is dangerous. It is especially important that teachers have students understand in exploring the second question that, with the exception of an early Meiji Period failed experiment, Japanese leaders have never seriously considered implementing a socialist economy.

Teachers should ensure that middle school students learn an accurate definition of a socialist economy: the nationalization of numerous private companies and widespread repression of private entrepreneurial economic freedom. Through embracing pragmatic economic policies, the Japanese can now boast of having one of the three largest economies on Earth.

Zhiqun Zhu's AAS Key Issues in Asian Studies volume *Understanding East Asia's Economic "Miracles"* is an excellent resource for teachers who want to learn the attributes and defects of Japan's so-called state-assisted "capitalism."

Zhiqun Zhu, *Understanding East Asia's Economic "Miracles"* (AAS/Columbia University Press, 2017): <https://tinyurl.com/yp5f98vd/>.

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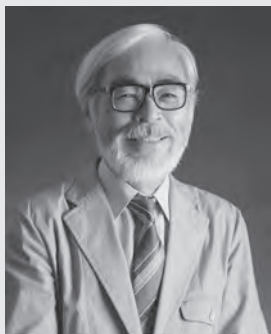
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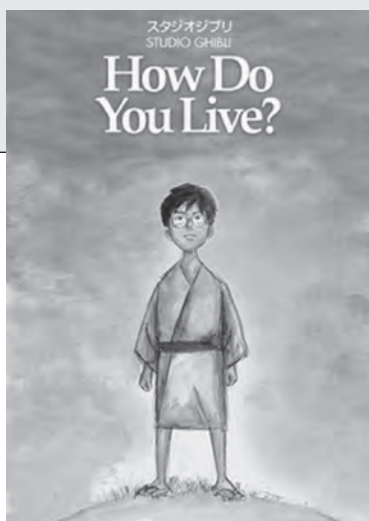




## Hayao Miyazaki's How Do You Live?



The next project from acclaimed Japanese filmmaker and animator Hayao Miyazaki, and his production company Studio Ghibli is an adaptation of *How Do You Live?* Miyazaki has come out of retirement to make this one last film of his favorite childhood novel. While those interested in the novel should be aware of the upcoming animated film, a target release date is currently not set but projected in the next few years. The film may not be a direct adaptation of the source material either, but rather the story of a boy who reads and is influenced by the novel. Studio Ghibli's productions are known for their unique, hand-drawn style which take a great deal of time to produce. In production since 2016, the film was projected for release in 2021 or 2022 but Studio Ghibli executive Suzuki Toshio indicated in an interview for the May 2020 issue of *Entertainment Weekly* that only thirty-six minutes of the film had been completed with Miyazaki estimating in a separate interview that one minute of animation takes about one month to produce.



## How Do You Live?

Reviewed by Ronald S. Green

Genzaburō Yoshino (1899–1981) wrote this notable work as a children's novel after it began as an essay on ethics by another author. The story follows Junichi Honda, a fifteen-year-old, second-year junior high school student in pre-World War II Japan. Young Honda's uncle gives the boy the nickname Copper (Koperu) after Copernicus, since science is one of the boy's interests. Significantly, the book was first published in 1937, the year Japan launched a full-scale invasion of China, beginning the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). The story is a narrative about Copper's school life and a commentary in the form of his uncle's notebook with advice to him. The uncle says that he wants to give this advice because it is what Copper's father, who has passed away, would have wanted. The storyline and the advice in the notebook is set in the context of Copper's dealings with bullies, prejudices about those of lower social classes, and mob opposition to individual thinking. This clearly reflects the end of the short-lived Taishō Democracy (1912–1926) and the state of Japanese militarism. His uncle writes to Copper that he should have the courage to confront social injustices and to make up his own mind about what is really important without being swayed by the opinions of others. I felt that the predominance of this kind of advice throughout the book walked a thin line between heartwarming and preachy. His uncle tells Copper, as the author tells the reader, that we should all decide how we should live, accept the mistakes we will make in the process, and have the courage to correct them. Along the way, we should be like Copernicus and not think of ourselves as the center of the universe. Part of the author's advocacy about how one should live is based in socialism, a dangerous stance in 1937, while another part is steeped in the acceptance of science and reason. Yoshino continued to develop his theory of peace and remained an activist for democracy after the war.

While this advice can be seen as relating to Japan in the 1930s, it is similar to other world literature of the early part of the twentieth century including Rudyard Kipling's poem "If—" which is paternal advice to the poet's son, beginning with the famous line repeated in *Apocalypse Now*, "If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you," like Copper's plight. *How Do You Live?* is also quite similar to *The Flying Classroom* (German: *Das fliegende Klassenzimmer*) written by Erich Kästner a few years earlier in 1933 as a novel for children set in Nazi Germany. Although different advice, it also reminded me of Natsume Sōseki's famous *Kokoro* first published in 1914 also by Iwanami Shoten. The narrator's father is ill and receives a long written statement from "Sensei." The absent father motif might reflect the larger loss of adult guidance in society. Genzaburō Yoshino became the managing director of Iwanami Shoten as well as a professor at Meiji University in Tokyo. He majored in philosophy at Tokyo Imperial University. Some of the books Yoshino published at Iwanami Shoten were censored by the government for their anti-war and liberal content. In 2003, seventy years after its publication, *How Do You Live?* was ranked fifth in a readers' poll of favorite books in the Iwanami library.

In the contemporary US, there have been several similar books of advice by parents and the song "Humble and Kind" written by Lori McKenna, and based upon her written account of the principles she wanted her youngest children to follow, won the 2017 Grammy for best country song. Interesting to note and perhaps why the book has now been published in English, Hayao Miyazaki is currently working on an animated version of *How Do you Live?* It is not surprising that Miyazaki would choose this story because, like his other award-winning films, it is told from the perspective of young people and focuses on identity, particularly deciding who one wants to be in face of society stealing that privilege and assigning a false one, such as we see in his film *Spirited Away*. This is also a central theme in the immensely popular *Demon Slayer* animated series. It is obvious that this still strikes a chord deep in the hearts of people in Japan and around the world. ♦

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