



MOMOTARO, THE PEACH BOY

SUMMARY OF STORY:

An elderly, childless woman finds a huge, luscious peach floating down the river. When she brings it home to eat with her husband, the peach splits open and at its center is a beautiful baby boy. The old couple is overjoyed and name their child, *Momotaro* which means *Peach Boy*. (*Momo* - peach, *taro* - first son)

Although Momotaro grows quickly to amazing strength, he likes to spend most of his time just eating and sleeping. One day while Momotaro is sleeping, the village is attacked by a band of wicked ogres who destroy the crops and carry off all the young women and children.

Momotaro's parents wake him with this terrible news and implore him to do what he can to rescue the captive villagers. Momotaro is persuaded by his parents to take action.

With the help of a dog, a monkey, a pheasant, his parent's special millet dumplings and his own bravery and strength, Momotaro succeeds in conquering the ogres.

THEMES:

- * Responsibility to use your abilities to help others.
- * Recognizing that different individuals may have different skills.
- * The importance of each individual contributing his or her skills to a joint, co-operative venture.

READING SKILLS DEVELOPMENT:

Children always have impromptu responses, start by discussing them. In addition, the following questions will help develop the children's vocabulary, sequencing skills and comprehension of the story.

1. What words describe Momotaro before the attack of the ogres?
2. What do the old man and woman do after the village is attacked?
3. What was Momotaro's first reaction to the news of the ogre's attack? Why do you think he changed his mind?
4. What does Momotaro choose to take with him when he goes to rescue the villagers?
5. Does Momotaro's choice turn out to be useful?
6. What contributions do the pheasant, the monkey and the dog make to the defeat of the ogres?
7. What contribution does Momotaro make?
8. Do you think Momotaro would have succeeded if he had been alone? Why or why not?

CULTURAL BACKGROUND:



Peach or Momo - (moh-moh): The fruit was believed to have the power to ward away evil. The Chinese peach tapers sharply to a point at the bottom (hinting at how this belief may have arisen), and it is the Chinese variety of peach which always appears in illustrations of the Momotaro tale. Momotaro's birth from a peach reflects the folk belief that divine spirits dwell in the fruit. The peach is associated with springtime and immortality and is considered an emblem of happiness in marriage.



Ogres or Oni - (oh-nee): - In Japanese folktales, ogres are often portrayed as demons or monsters who have a devilish temper and a frightening appearance and hurt people. Although their appearance is basically human, they are always pictured as being gigantic, wearing a tiger skin loincloth, having horns on their head and often red or blue skin. At times they are shown with fangs, three fingers and three eyes. Some Japanese ethnologists believe that before Buddhism entered the country, the *oni* were deities who represented the wild forces of nature. In many Japanese festivals, ogres play a benevolent role, frightening or removing evil influences from human beings. They also appear in legends as giants who helped to create the natural landscape (moving rocks, creating lakes, etc.) Thunder and lightning deities also resemble ogres in appearance.



Headband or Hachimaki - (hah-chee-mah-kee): thin strip of cloth tied around the crown of the head. In this kamishibai story, Momotaro puts one on as he prepares to go off to battle the ogres. Originally *hachimaki* were worn while performing religious acts and are still part of the festival participant's accouterment, especially those who carry the mikoshi or portable shrine. Warriors, believing that the *hachimaki* strengthened their spirit, wore them on the battlefield. In modern times, students studying for entrance exams, men doing heavy physical labor and even protest demonstrators don these strips of cloth to show their determination to achieve a certain purpose.

Dog or Inu: - (ee-noo): There are many types of dogs indigenous to Japan, and like the dog who became Momotaro's helper, they usually have small, pricked, upright ears. Dogs are known to be loyal to their masters and in folktales reward those who are kind to them. A white dog is considered especially lucky.

Monkey or Saru - (sah-roo): The monkey that is native to Japan is short-tailed and a type of macaque. It can be found in the wild almost all over the Japanese archipelago (except in Hokkaido and Okinawa). When food is scarce in the mountains, they are known to ravage crops and fruit trees and even enter houses looking for food. In folktales, the monkey is most often depicted as a clever, trickster-like character who inevitably ends as the fool.

Pheasant or Kiji - (kee-jee): The pheasant illustrated in this kamishibai is unique to Japan and has been designated the national bird.

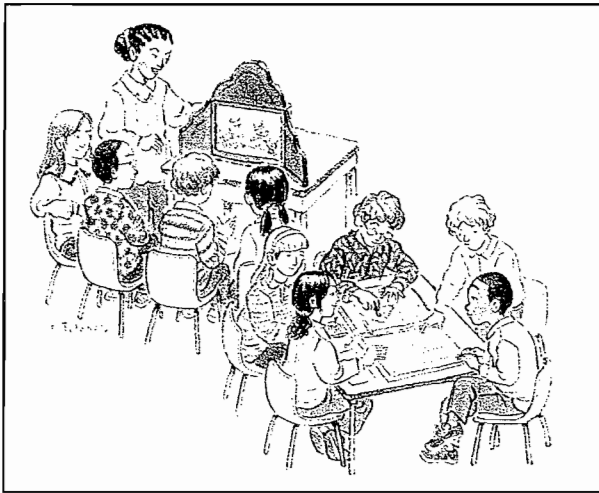
STORYTELLING NOTES AND RESOURCES:

Japanese folktales often begin with the phrase, *Mukashi, mukashi...* (moo-kah-she). This is freely translated as, *Once upon a time, long, long ago*. They often end with the word, *Oshimai* (oh-she-my) or, *The End*.

*Teachers of older children might be interested to learn that because of Momotaro's popularity and symbolism, the Momotaro image was worked into the World War II propaganda effort by the Japanese military. For a fuller account of this see John Dower's award winning book, *War Without Mercy*. (Pantheon Books, 1993)

CHILDREN-CREATED KAMISHIBAI

1. *Kamishibai* stories can be made individually, in pairs (one illustrator, one writer), in small groups or as a class project.
2. The sources for student-created *Kamishibai* are unlimited: original ideas, topics related to the curriculum, the retelling of an existing story or some item of current events.



3. *Kamishibai* stories do not have to be a specific length.
4. Some children prefer to start by drawing illustrations; others by creating the script, either way works.
5. When composing the script for a *kamishibai* story, remember the characters use dialogue. The children can either write or dictate the story and dialogue.
6. Have the children divide the script into sections and make sketches for each one. Some children prefer working on and completing the illustrations before the script; either way works.
7. Check to see that the sketches correlate with the text. Reread and edit the text. Work on the final illustrations.
8. Arrange the illustrated cards in order and write the number for each card in sequence in the lower left hand corner.
9. Tape the script for illustrated card #1 to the back of the last illustrated card. Tape the script for illustrated card #2 to the back of card #1 and so forth.
10. Now your children have their own *Kamishibai* story. Children gain proficiency and fluency when they perform the stories they have created.

A Brief History of *Kamishibai*



Kamishibai (kah-mee-shee-bye) or “paper-theater” evolved from a form of vibrant street storytelling that was extraordinarily popular throughout urban Japan from the 1920’s to the 1950’s. Before there were television and movies for children in Japan, special storytellers, called “*Kamishibai Men*” would bring stories to children on a bicycle.

Each *Kamishibai* man was also a candy seller. Riding a bicycle equipped with a large box attached on the back, he would enter a neighborhood and loudly strike together two wooden clappers called *hyoshigi* (hyoh-shee-ghee). The sound was a signal for children to run from their homes and gather around for an exciting story and candy snacks.

There were drawers in the big wooden box on the back of the bicycle filled with sweets. The children who bought some got to stand nearest to the wooden stage attached to the top of the box, and those who didn’t had to stand in the back. The *Kamishibai* man would insert the story cards into the stage and then, in a dramatic manner, deliver episodes of two or three *kamishibai* stories. These were suspenseful serials, and the *Kamishibai* man always concluded at a cliffhanger, leaving the children impatient for his next visit.

The introduction of television in 1953 led to the gradual disappearance of *Kamishibai* men from Japan’s streets. The artists who had made their living writing and illustrating *Kamishibai* turned to more remunerative ventures such as the creation of *manga* (Comic books) and later *anime*. (Animated cartoons)

In recent years, however, *kamishibai* stories have enjoyed a renaissance in Japanese schools, libraries and cultural centers.

The renowned author, illustrator and Caldecott Medalist, Allen Say grew up in Japan during *Kamishibai*’s spirited heyday. His recent highly acclaimed book, *Kamishibai Man*, recreates through exquisitely detailed watercolors and simple text, the excitement and pleasure that *kamishibai* stories convey.