

KAMISHIBAI FOR EVERYONE!

by

Donna Tamaki

The protagonist of Allen Say's latest book, *Kamishibai Man* (Houghton Mifflin Co., 2005), reminisces about the days he worked as a street storyteller in Japan. He was forced to retire when television spirited his audience away, but the former storyteller discovers that the "children" who used to come to see him perform *kamishibai*—colorfully illustrated storytelling panels—still have powerful memories of his visits. *Kamishibai*, literally paper theater in Japanese, does have a spellbinding effect on its audience, and of course, Say's experience of watching *kamishibai* performances on the street when he was growing up in Japan inspired him to write this moving tale.

I was introduced to *kamishibai* in the 1970s by a friend from graduate school, Margaret Eisenstadt, who had discovered modern, classroom versions when she was teaching on a U.S. Air Force base in Hokkaido. She and her elementary school students were also captivated by *kamishibai*, and she asked me to join her in introducing it to American school teachers in 1992. This was the start of *Kamishibai for Kids*, which still consists of just the two of us but now produces English translations of *kamishibai* stories originally published in Japan and distributes them in North America.

What happened to *kamishibai* after it disappeared from the streets of Japan and where is it now? How does *kamishibai* differ from picture books and what is the secret behind its magic? I hope this article will help to answer these questions and stimulate the readers to find out more about this Japanese treasure.

Those of you who grew up or have children who grew up in Japan are probably familiar with *kamishibai*. Although it was originally performed on the street, today *kamishibai* is a permanent fixture in Japanese nursery schools, kindergartens and libraries. Modern, published versions, called *kyouiku* (educational) *kamishibai*, consist of sets of twelve to sixteen sturdy, 15" x 11" (38.5 cm. X 26.5 cm.) cards, with attractive illustrations on one side and the text, usually in dialogue form, on the other. The stories may be modern or traditional or pedagogical in approach and, in Japan, are usually aimed toward a young audience. They are often inserted into a wooden stage when performed but may be used without one.

The 1920s to the early 1950s were the golden years of *kamishibai* as a street-performance art in Japan. Riding a bicycle equipped with a box of drawers filled with candy and a small stage on top for showing the story cards, the *kamishibai* man, who was really a candy seller, would enter a neighborhood and signal that he had arrived by loudly striking a pair of *hyoushigi*, or wooden clappers. Children quickly gathered around him to buy sweets but also for the extras (*omake*), the stories!

Then, in the dramatic, stylized manner of a *benshi*—narrator of silent films—the *kamishibai* man would begin to perform his improvised script, sliding the hand-drawn cards one by one out of the stage and returning them to the back of the pack. He usually told one story for the younger audience. For the older children, there were melodramatic, historical or modern adventure tales that were told in serial fashion and stopped at a "cliff-hanger," leaving everyone impatient for his next visit.

With the introduction of television to Japan in 1953, the kamishibai man, like the protagonist of Say's book, disappeared from Japan's streets. But kamishibai's potential as a powerful educational tool had already been tapped by groups as diverse as Christian Sunday school teachers and public officials, who created patriotic kamishibai tales for juvenile and adult audiences during the war. Eventually the popular story cards made their way into nursery schools and libraries, in printed editions with more educational subjects.

The greatest difference between kamishibai and picture books is that kamishibai is formatted to be enjoyed by a group, not an individual. While a picture book can be read alone, there must be at least two people to make kamishibai work! Kamishibai is also meant to be performed. The story is written in simple, dialogue form, and the storyteller's voice, the audience's imagination and the pictures fill in the details. Stage directions are included, and even novice storytellers are surprised to find how quickly the audience gets involved in the story.

As the cards are changed at a fairly quick tempo, the audience has to digest quickly what it sees. Ideally the drawings are uncluttered, use bold, primary colors and large figures often outlined in black. Because the cards are slid from the audience's right to their left, the action on the cards always moves in this direction, creating a strong sense of movement and continuity between the pictures. Some kamishibai theorists say that it is the sense of anticipation that keeps the audience so focused on the story. Perhaps it is this and other unique characteristics of kamishibai—the dramatic narration, the bold illustrations—plus the presence of a live storyteller and the audience's sense of community that make it such a magical storytelling technique.

Kamishibai for Kids has been actively promoting the use of kamishibai in U.S. schools and libraries, and educators at the pre-school, elementary, junior and even senior high school levels have had great success with them, not only to teach multicultural education but also language arts, music, art, drama and so on. The stories invite discussion and motivate the students to read and perform and eventually write and illustrate their own.

Kamishibai is enjoying a renaissance in Japan and in addition to the U.S., has also been introduced by various individuals and organizations to places such as Vietnam, Laos, China and Europe. And now with the popularity of Say's book *Kamishibai Man*, kamishibai has become known to a larger segment of the English-speaking population. Kamishibai is Japan's special gift to the children of the world, and we hope educators, writers, illustrators and publishers can work co-operatively to make kamishibai a universal fixture in the world of children's literature.

Donna Tamaki lived in Kyoto for over 30 years, working as a teacher of English and as a translator. As cofounders of Kamishibai for Kids (www.kamishibai.com), she and Margaret Eisenstadt have been working actively to make English-language kamishibai stories available to U.S. educators. Donna and her husband moved to Maine in 2006.

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