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Barefoot Gen and Hiroshima: Comic Strip Narratives of Trauma

Abstract: Considering comic strip representations of trauma, this chapter focuses on Keiji Nakazawa’s depiction of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in Barefoot Gen. With other sequential comic strip narratives, Barefoot Gen is examined through the lens of literary criticism’s trauma theory. This chapter shows how effectively comic strip narratives can represent trauma. The aftermath of Hiroshima was studied by Robert Jay Lifton, a key figure behind the inclusion of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the controversial Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). This chapter questions trauma theory’s acceptance of the diagnosis of PTSD from the DSM. It also seeks to highlight the importance of the sequential comic art form as a subject worthy of inter-disciplinary academic study beyond Art Spiegelman’s Maus.

Keiji Nakazawa was six years old when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Sheltered by a concrete wall, he was just over a kilometre from the epicentre. His father, brother and sister were killed but his heavily pregnant mother survived and gave birth later in the same day. The details of the ‘living hell’ in which Nakazawa suddenly found himself were ‘etched’ in his mind ‘as if it happened yesterday’ (Nakazawa, 2004a). Although he was only a child, Nakazawa’s work can be seen as a primary historical source. This chapter will also examine two other texts. *Onward Towards Our Noble Deaths* is a fictionalised account of Shigeru Misuki’s service in the Japanese Imperial Army fighting in what is now Papua New Guinea. Based on the recollections of several children and collapsed into one fictitious child’s perspective, Ulli Lust’s ‘School Essays of Berlin Kids About the Year 1945’ is a graphic narrative depiction of the last days of the war in Berlin based on essays written by Berlin school children after the war, but, like *Maus* it cannot be thought of a primary source.

Although debate surrounds their similarities and differences, parallels have been drawn between the Holocaust and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the U.S. in 1945 (Bosworth, 1993, Selden, 2007, Thelle, 2012). The difference is that, aside from a minority of Holocaust deniers, the Holocaust is regarded as a war crime, although interpretations of the Allied bombing campaigns remain the subject of contention. In particular, narratives of atomic bombing of Japan are frequently constructed as positive events that hastened the end of the war (Thelle, 2012: 358). Partly to justify the use of atomic weapons, similarities have been drawn between the destructive capabilities of the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the conventional high explosives and incendiaries used by the Allies on European cities and by the U.S. Air Force on other Japanese cities. Arguably, the firestorms created by the conventional bombing of German and Japanese cities by the allies were as deadly and damaging to urban areas. Estimates vary, but the Allied raids on Dresden in 1945 using conventional high explosive and incendiaries killed 40,000 people (Friedrich, 2006: 310), and in a single conventional raid on Tokyo around 100,000 people were killed (Selden, 2007).

The Hiroshima bomb should perhaps need no introduction; at a quarter past eight on the morning of 6 July 1945 ‘Little Boy’, the bomb dropped by the Enola Gay, detonated 2000 feet above the city of Hiroshima. Between 70,000 and 80,000 were killed by the blast and firestorm, tens