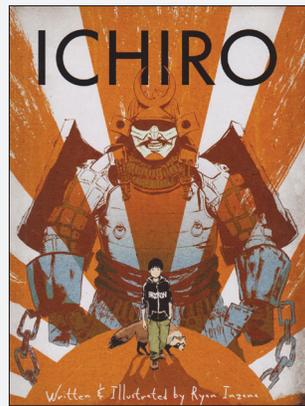


## First Opinion: A Supernatural Coming-of-Age Tale Offers a Mature Take on a Difficult Subject

Inzana, Ryan. *Ichiro*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012.

Dustin Bissell



Ryan Inzana's graphic novel *Ichiro* is an intelligent and visually dynamic tale that combines real and magical elements to weigh in on the emotional costs of war.

The story follows Ichiro, a sullen Japanese American boy who lives in Brooklyn with his mother following his father's death in the Iraq War. When his mother is offered a teaching job in her native Japan, Ichiro reluctantly accompanies her and becomes acquainted with his grandfather. Together they tour Tokyo and Hiroshima, speaking at length about Japan's history at war and the importance of sharing that history with younger generations. The events of the day stir contemplation in Ichiro, but his greatest insights come after he stumbles through a tanuki's burrow and into the mythical Japanese underworld, where gods and monsters do battle following the destruction of the bridge between heaven and earth.

One of Inzana's greatest successes with *Ichiro* is his meaningful treatment of the visual medium. *Ichiro* opens with a colorful rendition of the Japanese folktale *Bunbuku Chagama* in which a traveling monk discovers a tanuki disguised as a teapot and leaves great fortune in his wake. The author's illustrations during the sequence are beautiful and vibrant, an homage to the ukiyo-e paintings from Japan's Edo period. He returns to this style throughout *Ichiro* to accent the tales of Shinto myth that young Ichiro's mother and grandfather share with him.

The colorful tribute to folkloric tradition captures the reader's imagination, but it is only one of a number of visual styles featured in the graphic novel. The story's second and most prominent style follows on the heels of the whimsical prologue whereupon a sequence of im-

ages portrays the evolution of a Japanese home over several generations. As the architecture and scenery of antiquity solidify into the concrete reality of the present, the colors evaporate from the page. The bold transition leaves readers with little question that they have left the realm of story and memory; now, blacks, whites, and occasional strokes of crimson describe a modern world marked by its conflicts and division.

In spite of the author's thematic emphasis on the forces that polarize, he resists differentiating the visual styles between American and Japanese settings. This is perhaps to signify the heritage that both settings share in Ichiro himself, as well as the countries' common legacies of tragedy in wartime. One subtle but important visual distinction does occur between spoken Japanese and English, as the former is distinguished from the latter by yellow speech bubbles. The addition brings into focus a subtle dimension of Ichiro's family dynamic and helps to further emphasize Ichiro's status as a confluence of separate worlds.

Though Ichiro travels thousands of miles to experience Japan, his true journey occurs in his sudden departure to the magical world of Yomi. Some of the colors that defined the orations of myth and legend return, but here they are washed out and segregated. The brilliant blues have vanished completely, and what is left are faded swashes of pea green and rust meant to characterize the putridity and decay that have overrun the underworld. In one sense the amalgamation of earlier visual styles indicates a marriage of the real and the legendary. However, when Hachiman, the god of war, speaks of the conflict that has divided the magical world, the lack of color takes on a more sinister meaning as a symbol of the war itself.

*Ichiro*, with its fantastical elements and child protagonist, is a surprisingly mature story that doesn't gloss over difficult truths. The scenes from Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park are commendable in their accuracy, which includes the gruesome wax portrayals of Hiroshima and Nagasaki's *hibakusha*. They disturb Ichiro in the story and may have the same effect on young readers. Additionally, there are several scenes where Ichiro encounters bullying and another where children are shown smoking stolen cigarettes. Though some may find such elements to be off-putting, their presence in the graphic novel is minimal, and in both instances the deviant behavior is condemned contextually.

What makes *Ichiro* most memorable is the level of grace and maturity through which it handles its difficult subject matter. The story does little to glorify war, but neither does it overwhelm the reader with a forced anti-war moral. Its conclusion will inevitably leave some questions unanswered, yet the lack of complete finality is appropriate in that Ichiro himself is far from finalized by the story's end. Instead of stamping an overnight transformation upon his protagonist, Inzana leaves him, and the reader, with the gift of a new perspective and a Japanese sunrise.

### **About the Author**

**Dustin Bissell** is a graduate teaching assistant at Central Michigan University, where he teaches English composition. He is currently the managing editor for the graduate student journal *Temenos* and is preparing a digital humanities project highlighting the life and works of Pulitzer-prize-winning poet Theodore Roethke.