

A vibrant, high-angle photograph of a traditional Japanese garden. In the foreground, a wooden bridge with a white railing spans across a calm, green pond. The garden is filled with meticulously maintained, rounded green bushes and large, spreading trees. In the background, a traditional Japanese building with a red-tiled roof is partially visible, surrounded by dense greenery. The overall scene is peaceful and scenic, with a rich palette of greens and a touch of red from the building's roof.

# The Price of Three Stories

Rare Folktales from Japan

Hiroko Fujita &  
Fran Stallings

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## PREFACE

All the stories in this book come from the memory and telling of Hiroko Fujita.

She grew up in Miharu, a small farm town in the mountains of *Fukushima* Prefecture, Japan, hearing old folktales from village elders and classmates. When she became a teacher, she remembered the old stories and shared them with her students. Japanese adults also loved her stories, and asked her to print them in books. Now you can read them, too.

She wasn't born in that mountain town, but in Tokyo. She had just started first grade when her father decided the city was too dangerous for his family. It was 1941: Japan had entered the Second World War. He chose Miharu village although they had no friends or relatives there, but because he loved its beautiful name which means "Three Springtimes." Indeed, sometimes Miharu's plum, peach, and cherry trees all bloom at once! He hoped it would be a safe and beautiful home for his family until the war was over.

Their three-room cottage was crowded with Hiroko, her three older brothers, mother, and grandmother. Father had to keep running the family business in Tokyo and could only visit once a month. Sometimes an aunt and her family, or an uncle and his family, stayed with them, too. And after a while there was a new baby sister. When Hiroko wasn't at the village school, she played outdoors to escape that crowded house. That's how she met her "Uncle in the Field," an old farmer named Kuni Takeda, who

didn't mind when little Hiroko came out to sit with him every time he took a rest break. And he was delighted that she loved stories. He had stories to tell.

Mr. Takeda was at least in his fifties in 1941. He had learned these stories when he was a boy, before 1900. If his teller was likewise fifty or sixty years old, that person would have learned the stories around 1853, the year when Japan rejoined the outside world after centuries of self-imposed isolation. So we think these stories are old indeed. She heard—and remembers—hundreds of them.

Returning to Tokyo in time for high school, she then attended Japan Women's University, training in early childhood education. She continued teaching after she married Dr. Toshi Fujita, had three children, and moved to Fukushima City where she met an elder lady from the same mountains. Mrs. Toshiko Endo knew hundreds of the same stories—and more. She shared over four hundred tales with Mrs. Fujita, two hundred of which they were able to print in a Japanese book.

### 昔

I met Hiroko Fujita in 1993 when I was visiting my brother in Japan. She and I began working together in 1995, touring American schools, libraries, and festivals: a total of twelve national tours, including twenty-two states. In 1997 she began bringing me to Japan for reciprocal tours. The National Storytelling Network in 2003 presented us its International StoryBridge ORACLE Award for our work on both sides of the Pacific Ocean.

Traveling together, we traded lots of tales. When she told stories in America, I introduced her stories in English then she told in Japanese. When I told stories in Japan, she introduced my stories in Japanese and I told in English. In order to introduce each other at these performances and workshops, we learned a lot

of each other's repertory. But we also traded stories just for fun, or to illustrate a point, or when we saw something that triggered a memory. These tales didn't always fit our performances, but they were good stories and I wanted fellow Americans to hear them some day.

昔

There are already English translations of a dozen or so favorite Japanese folktales such as Momotaro (Peach Boy), Little One Inch, The Old Man Who Made Trees Bloom, etc. I didn't want this book to duplicate what is already available. Here you'll find stories that have rarely or never appeared in English before. If you love folktales, or Japanese traditional culture, I think you will really like these.

Hiroko Fujita's friends helped me to translate her seven story collections and her collection of tales from Mrs. Endo. These translations languished in my computer for years. When I told her that I felt like "a dog in the manger," guilty for not sharing the stories, I had to explain that phrase.

Her response was immediate: "Feed those animals!"

Here are some of our audiences' favorite tales, and others besides. We love these stories and hope that you will enjoy reading them.

—Fran Stallings  
Bartlesville, Oklahoma  
January 2015

ABOUT THE STORIES: Sometimes, before a story begins, we give a little background information that we think will be helpful. At the end of some stories, Mrs. Fujita adds an interesting COMMENT, or I add a NOTE with more information. We also often have a TIP FROM FRAN for storytellers.

To help you say the Japanese words and sound effects, we show stressed syllables with capital letters. For more information, go to the GLOSSARY & PRONUNCIATION GUIDE at the end of the book.

昔

DESIGN NOTE: The symbol chosen to denote breaks in the text is a symbol that means “old time or long time ago (mu-ka-shi).”

Kanji was the first writing script in Japan. It was imported from China around the middle of the 6th century AD. The Japanese term “kanji” means “Chinese characters”. Kanji are ideographs meaning that the whole character conveys a meaning rather than just a sound (as in the case of hiragana and katakana letters). Kanji were originally drawn as pictures from nature but gradually transformed to more generalized representations.  
(<http://redfinchjapanese.com>)

## STORIES HEARD AND TOLD

*By Hiroko Fujita*

I am not a “storyteller” but a professional early childhood educator. I tell stories together with children’s songs, hand-made toys, plays with fingers, plays with words, and so on as part of early childhood education. I want to transmit these things to children. I want to give them the experience of listening to stories as a really pleasant but, at the same time, very significant, experience.

I do not collect stories from books, but I tell stories I heard in my childhood, especially stories I heard from neighboring farmers cultivating their fields. Therefore, the origin of my stories is limited to Fukushima Prefecture, and I tell them orally in the Fukushima dialect. The enjoyable and memorable time in my childhood is the very source and starting point of my storytelling. What motivates my storytelling is my desire to give children the same kind of pleasure that I had during my childhood, because I am convinced that the content of the stories and the enjoyable experience of hearing them told in a loving voice is very important for the growth of children.

The stories I tell are mostly stories I heard when I was seven to twelve years old. My family lived in the small town of *Miharu* in Fukushima Prefecture. Mr. Kuni Takeda, a farmer who worked the farmland next to my house told these stories to me when he rested during his work in the field. When we saw a snake in the field, he started to tell stories like “Two Rival Snakes.” When a frog with

warts on its back came out of the ground, the farmer used to say, “This frog has just come out of the *juubako* (lunch box) of the old woman in that house,” pointing to a house nearby. He also told me the story of “*Botamochi* Turning Into Frogs.” Therefore, I believed for a long time that the old woman living in the house was a greedy woman, though I later found out that she was actually warm-hearted and generous.

My paternal grandmother used to tell stories of people bewitched by foxes. My mother’s mother used to tell legends of great Samurai warriors, but warriors were not my interest, and I don’t remember their stories. However, I remember children’s songs that she taught me. My father taught me names of flowers and birds, and in such occasions he used to tell me stories about the origins of those names.

After my marriage, I moved to Fukushima City. There I heard a lot of old stories from elderly people, especially Endo Toshiko-san. Love stories are among those I heard in Fukushima City after I grew up. Now I can tell about four hundred stories.

I hope you will tell the stories in my books using your own words and your own heart.

## VILLAGERS

In Japanese folktales, the main characters are often *Jisama* (old man, Grandpa) and *Basama* (old woman, Grandma). But at what age were they called *Jisama* and *Basama*?

In the old days, when a girl turned thirteen years old she visited the shrine and then had a party to make her debut. When she had menarche, her family brought red-bean rice to their neighbors. They often got married in their teens. And if a woman's daughters also got married in their teens, she could easily have grandchildren before she was forty. And that means that she could be *Basama* before she was forty.

But even if they didn't have a grandchild, men and women were still usually called *Jisama* and *Basama* before they were forty. Country life required hard outdoor work. They did not have modern medicines. Probably they looked old before their time.

These days, people live up to one hundred. Now people in their forties are still children with runny noses.

## Contest of Silence

**INSIGHT:** *Manju cakes*, the size and shape of small eggs, are made of sweet bean jam wrapped in pastry.

Once upon a time, there were Jisama and Basama. They were living happily together.

One day, a neighbor brought them some manju cakes. There were one, two, three, four, five, six, seven.

“Wow! I love manju.” Basama said and ate one, *amu, amu, amu, amu.* (sound of chewing)

Jisama took one and ate it, *amu, amu, amu, amu.*

“Wow, it’s a good manju,” said Jisama.

Basama took another and ate it, *amu, amu, amu, amu.*

“Yes, nice manju, really,” said Basama.

Jisama took another and ate it, *amu, amu, amu, amu.*

Again, Basama took another. “This filling is so sweet and good. It’s so delicious.” Saying so, Basama went *amu, amu, amu, amu.*

Jisama took another and ate it, *amu, amu, amu, amu.*

Basama wanted another, and was going to reach for it. Then she stopped. “Oh, there is only one left. Jisama, please take it.”

But Jisama said, “No, you want it. You can have it.”

“No, no, you want it too. Jisama, please.”

“No, go ahead, Basama.”

“No, no, you can have it, please.”

“You eat it.”

Then Basama said, “Jisama, let’s play a game of silence and decide which of us will eat it.”

Jisama agreed. “Once we start the game, we can’t speak. Agreed? Are you ready?”

Jisama and Basama sat staring at the manju without a word.

Soon it got dark, but they remained silent.

A thief came by. “Oh, this house is dark. Nobody is at home. Is the door locked?”

He tried the door. It was open.

“Oh, how careless they are! A thief might come in. Hello? A thief is coming.”

The thief came into the dark house,

*NUki ashi, SAshi ashi, shiNObi ashi.* (sound  
of tip-toe walking)

*NUki ashi, SAshi ashi, shiNObi ashi.*

Then, he saw somebody. “Yow, they are at home! I’ve got to run.”

But he looked into Jisama’s face. Jisama was silent.

“Why? He doesn’t say anything. Oh, here’s Basama! Does she say anything?”

But Basama didn’t utter a word.

“Strange. They say nothing. Maybe they are sleeping with their eyes open.”

The thief spread out his carrying cloth.

“Here’s something, maybe Basama’s extra kimono. I will take it. This may be Jisama’s kimono. And this is his jacket. I will take this futon, too.”

He took everything, from Basama's extra petticoat to their futons. Still, Jisama and Basama remained silent.

As the thief was about to leave with the big bundle on his back, he saw the manju between Jisama and Basama. "Before I go, why not taste that good looking manju?"

He looked Jisama in the face. Jisama didn't say anything. "Well, he's all right."

He saw Basama. She didn't say anything, either. "Well, she's all right too. So—," he reached for the cake.

Basama yelled "You can't take it!"

Surprised, the thief fell flat on his back, dropping the stolen goods. He fled the house.

And Jisama threw the manju into his mouth and ate it up, amu, amu, amu, amu.

*Oshimai* ("It is closed," a traditional story ending in Fukushima dialect.)