



**Classroom Guide for
COOL MELONS-TURN TO
FROGS!**

The Life and Poems of Issa

written by **Matthew Gollub**

illustrated by **Kazuko G. Stone**

Reading Level

Interest Level: Grades 1–6

Guided Reading Level: P

Reading Level: Grade 3

(Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula)

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 4.7/5

Lexile Measure®: AD800

Scholastic Reading Counts™: 4.6

Themes

Haiku Poetry, Nature, Biography, Japan

Synopsis

The title of the book, COOL MELONS - TURN TO FROGS!, comes from a haiku by the Japanese poet, Issa. Told in prose interspersed with 33 of Issa's most delightful poems, the book is both a biography of the famed poet and an introduction to haiku. The poems also appear in Japanese along the outside edges of the pages.

Kobayashi Yataro, who became known as Issa, was born in 1763 on a farm in the village of Kashiwabara in central Japan. Even as a very young boy, Issa was attracted to the birds, insects, and other small creatures that shared his world. Issa's mother died when he was three, and he was raised by his grandmother until his father remarried, when Issa was about seven. Issa and his stepmother didn't get along. Noticing the boy's unhappiness, Issa's schoolmaster encouraged him to write haiku. "With haiku," the schoolmaster said, "you can show what you are feeling inside." Issa and his stepmother quarreled so much that his father reluctantly sent his son away when he was 14. Issa traveled first to Tokyo, and even in this big city, he noticed little things that others were too busy to see. Eventually he asked a master poet for training, and soon Issa was teaching others. But what Issa really wanted to do was continue writing poetry and see more of the world. So he set out to travel around the country in the tradition of haiku poets.

During his lifetime Issa composed more than 20,000 haiku. He died in 1827 at the age of 64. He is still considered to be Japan's premier haiku poet.

Background

Japanese poets have written haiku for centuries. Traditional haiku describe a single moment in nature that the poet observes or discovers. They consist of sensory details—things the poet can see, hear, taste, smell, or touch. Traditional haiku also usually convey a sense of season in a subtle way, not by naming the season, but by using a word or phrase that suggests the season indirectly. Additional background information about the history and poetic structure of haiku can be found on the last page of the book.

The author and artist selected the specific poems in this book because they shed light on significant events in Issa's life. Interspersing these poems with the prose sections describing those events enables readers to experience the subtle meaning and power of these seemingly simple poems.

The artist visited Issa's village and read more than 2500 of his haiku as part of her research for the book. The author, who is fluent in Japanese, translated the poems in the book by adhering closely to the charm and simplicity of Issa's words. An Author's Note at the back of the book provides additional information about Issa and the significance of some of the poems.

Awards & Reviews

ALA Notable Children's Book

CBC/NCSS Notable Children's Trade Book in the Field of Social Studies

Children's Books Mean Business, Children's Book Council

Children's Book of Distinction, Poetry Finalist, RIVERBANK REVIEW

"Choices," Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC)

Children's Book of the Year, Bank Street College Children's Book Committee

Editor's Choice, SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

Children's and Young Adult honorable mention for illustration, Asian Pacific American Award for Literature (APAAL)

Fanfare, *The Horn Book*

Finalist, Bay Area Book Reviewers Association Award

Notable Books for a Global Society, International Reading Association (IRA)

Not Just for Children Anymore Selection, Children's Book Council

NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts for 1999

1999-2000 Read-Alouds Too Good to Miss, Indiana Dept. of Education

"Starred Review," THE HORN BOOK

"Starred Review," PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

BEFORE READING

Prereading Focus Questions

Before reading the book, you may wish to read a few poems aloud and have students discuss one or more of the following questions as a motivation for reading.

1. How did the poems I just read make you feel? What parts of the poem made you feel that way?
2. How do you show what you are feeling or thinking about?
3. How are poems different from stories?

4. Do you think poems are easier or harder to understand than stories? Why?

Setting a Purpose for Reading

Introduce the book and read the title aloud. Ask students what they think the title means. Have students write their ideas in their journals and then check their notes after they have read the book. Then invite students to study and discuss the cover illustration. What is in the tub? What is jumping out? Why would a melon turn to a frog?

Ask students if they know what haiku is. You may wish to share this definition of a haiku from the book's last page: "Traditional haiku describe a single moment in nature, something that the poet observes or discovers." You might also point out that a traditional haiku contains 17 syllables in three lines (5, 7, and 5 syllables), but some of the haiku they will read in this book have different numbers of syllables because the poems were translated from Japanese into English, and Japanese words often have more syllables than English words. Encourage students to flip through the book and note the Japanese writing down the sides of the pages. Why is it there? What might it say?

Vocabulary

Reinforce the use of context as a way to understand vocabulary by having students refer to the illustrations for help in determining the meaning of these words from Issa's poems:

silhouette intent, plucking locusts
bamboo shoot peony soothing

Based on the illustrations and haiku, have students write a sentence defining each word.

READING & RESPONDING

Discussion Questions

After reading the book, you may wish to use some of these questions to generate discussion and expand students' understanding of the text and poems.

1. This book is different from most books you have read because it contains both a story and poems. What did you learn about Issa from the story? What did you learn from the haiku? How do the story and haiku work together?
2. The book begins by describing Issa's life as it relates to the seasons. How do the first four poems illustrate the different seasons? What words in each haiku suggest the season it represents?
3. Why do you think Issa came to think of birds and insects as his friends?
4. Why did Issa's schoolmaster encourage him to write haiku? What do you learn about how Issa was feeling from the haiku he wrote at this time?
5. What does Issa's father mean when he tells his son that his gift "cannot grow in this soil"?
6. A haiku often describes two events side by side. What are the two events in the poem "Lilies blooming"? How might these two events be related?

7. Issa was a country boy, so when he moved to Toyko, the bustling city seemed overwhelming. How might the poems "Sparrow chicks—" and "A newborn butterfly" relate to Issa's life in Tokyo?
8. Read the haiku "Climb Mount Fuji" again. What might this poem be saying about Issa's journey to become a master poet?
9. How might the poems "Needlework—" and "Asleep on the ocean—" relate to Issa's years of traveling around Japan?
10. In "Spring rain—," who is the owl? Who is the dove? What do you think this haiku means?
11. What feelings does Issa express in "A dewdrop world—"?

Literature Circles*

If you use literature circles during reading time, students might find the following suggestions helpful in focusing the roles of group members.

The **Questioner** might use questions similar to items 6 through 10 in the Discussion Questions section above to help students think about the relationship of the haiku to events in Issa's life.

The **Passage Locator** might look for passages in the book that reveal information about Japan in the 1700s.

The **Illustrator** might draw a picture to go with part of the text for others in the group to interpret.

The **Connector** might report on the status of poetry in contemporary Japan.

The **Summarizer** should provide a brief summary of the group's reading for each meeting.

The **Investigator** might research additional information about haiku and/or Issa.

*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. One such book you may wish to refer to is LITERATURE CIRCLES: VOICE AND CHOICE IN THE STUDENT-CENTERED CLASSROOM by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 1994).

Reader's Response

Help students personalize what they have read by encouraging them to respond to one or more of the following. Students might respond in sketchbooks, journals, or oral discussion.

1. Which haiku in the book is your favorite? Why?
2. How do Issa's haiku help you "see" things in new or different ways?
3. Reread the poems and try to figure out which ones suggest sounds, tastes, odors, and things you can touch? Which ones are funny, sad, and show joy?

4. Try writing and illustrating your own haiku based on your own experiences. (If necessary, review the definition of a haiku and the rules for syllables, as noted on the last page of the book. Compose a few practice haiku as a group to get students started.)
5. Write a letter to Issa telling how his haiku affected you.
6. Which illustrations do you like best? Why? How did they help you understand the poems?

Other Writing Activities

Ask students to respond to one or more of the following writing activities.

1. Have students create similes by writing what things are like. Brainstorm with students a list of familiar items, such as the sample list shown here. Ask students to compare the items in unusual ways to other things. For example: My shoes are like a soft pillow.

Familiar Items
Shoe
Fingernail
Chalkboard
Pencil
Scarf
Calendar

Challenge students to write haiku based on the comparisons expressed in their similes. For example:

My old yellow shoes—
cushions for my tired feet,
soft like a pillow.

2. Have students choose one of the haiku in the book and write a descriptive paragraph about the same topic.

ESL Teaching Strategies

The following activities may be used with students who speak English as a second language.

1. Have strong English speakers make tape recordings of the haiku in the book. ESL students can follow along in the book as they listen to the tapes to become familiar with the spoken and written words.
2. Use photographs, real objects, and the book's illustrations to help students identify concrete nouns such as cat, child, dew, kitten, leaves.
3. If you have students who speak and read Japanese in your class, invite them to read aloud the Japanese versions of some of the haiku in the book. Have students make a chart showing the Japanese and English words for nouns and verbs used in the haiku.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

To integrate students' reading experiences with other subject areas, you may wish to have students complete some of the following activities.

Social Studies

1. Poetry plays a role in several Japanese holidays. For example, on the second day of the new year, Japanese families often engage in the activity called Kakizome. They write poems or favorite proverbs on long strips of paper and hang them in a place of honor. Poems also feature in another holiday, called Tanabata, which falls on the seventh day of the seventh moon (around July 7). Students might do research to learn more about these holidays, exploring questions such as:

What kind of poems do people write for these occasions?

What is the legend associated with Tanabata?

What role do poems play in this holiday?

2. Challenge students to use the book's text and poetry to find clues about Japan's geography, climate, architecture, religion, and traditional clothing. For example, students should be able to determine that Buddhism is practiced in Japan. Have students follow up each clue with research to verify and expand what they have learned.

3. Students might want to learn more about Issa and then make a timeline covering his life span (1763-1827). Have students include six to eight important events in Issa's life on one side of the timeline. On the other side, have students show a similar number of important events in U.S. history. Students who have access to their own family histories during this time period, might want to try plotting important events in their families opposite the events in Issa's life.

Literature

Expand students' experience with haiku by having them read and discuss works by other seventeenth century and eighteenth century poets such as Basho, Jōso, Ryota, Buson, or Sanpu. Students may also enjoy reading more contemporary haiku and comparing the contemporary poetry with the more traditional.

Science

Remind students that observation is an important skill for a scientist, but it is also important for a poet. Challenge students to find as many plants and animals as they can in the book's text and poems. Then have students make an illustrated chart showing these plants and animals along with basic information about each.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR

Matthew Gollub is the author of many award-winning books for children including *THE JAZZ FLY* and *THE MOON WAS AT A FIESTA*. Since its publication in 1998, *COOL MELONS - TURN TO FROGS!* has won critical acclaim and numerous awards, including selection as an ALA Notable Book and CBC/NCSS Notable Children's Trade Book in the Field of Social Studies, and starred reviews in *THE HORN BOOK* and *PUBLISHERS WEEKLY*. Says Gollub, "Haiku is a wonderful introduction to poetry for children, consisting of sensory details -- things that students can see, hear, taste, smell, and touch -- these short poems serve as an excellent stepping stones to writing longer verse or prose."

Gollub was born in Los Angeles, California, and presently lives in Santa Rosa. He is fluent in Spanish and holds degrees in international studies and the Japanese language from the University of the Pacific. He has traveled extensively and lived in other countries including Japan, Mexico, and India. In Japan, he worked as an advertising copywriter and also toured with a Japanese taiko drum troupe.

Kazuko G. Stone has illustrated many books for children in the United States and her native Japan. Some of her American titles include DOROBO THE DANGEROUS, GOOD NIGHT, TWINKLE GATOR, and ALIGAY SAVES THE DAY. Stone was born in Tokyo and now lives in New York City. She has two grown children, a daughter and son. In addition to illustrating, she teaches design at the Fashion Institute of Technology and Parson's School of Design.

Resources on the Web

For the latest reviews and awards related to *Cool Melons – Turn to Frogs* go to:
<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/2379>

For the booktalk interviews with the author and illustrator of *Cool Melons – Turn to Frogs* go to: <https://www.leeandlow.com/books/2379/interviews>

For information about *Ten Oni Drummers*, also by the creators of *Cool Melons – Turn to Frogs* go to: <https://www.leeandlow.com/books/2460>

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Order Information

On the Web: <http://www.leeandlow.com/order> (general order information)

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