

EDUCATOR GUIDE

MIRA AND BAKU

by Sara Truvert

illustrated by Michelle Theodore

Educator Guide by Carolyn Nakagawa

GENRE: Picture book, children's fiction

THEMES: military & wars, Asian Canadian, Asian American, racism, imagination & play, discrimination, family separation, Japanese Canadian incarceration

SUITABLE FOR: Grades P–2, Ages 4–7

GUIDED READING LEVEL: Fountas and Pinnell L

LEXILE: AD500L

COMMON CORE STANDARDS: RL.3.1,2,3,4,5,6,7,9
W.3.1,1a,1b,1c,3,3a,3b,3c,3d,4,5,6
SL.3.1,1a,1b,1c,1d,2,3,4,5,6
L.3.4,4a,4b,4c,4d,4e,5,5a,5b,5c,6

SUMMARY:

With the help of a magical friend, a young girl searches for her missing father in this poignant story set during Japanese Canadian incarceration in World War II.

It's a week until Mira's birthday, and she's getting worried. Where is Papa? He has never missed her birthday before. When Mira's friend Baku, a creature from Japanese folklore, offers to help, they journey over farmlands and forests, mountains and river mouths, gathering clues to Papa's whereabouts—clues that echo Mira's memories and overheard conversations in the camp where she lives with Mama.

This tender, moving picture book explores the profound impacts of family separation and the different forms comfort can take for a child processing loss.

Further reading on Japanese Canadian and Japanese American incarceration during WWII and a note from the author add to readers' understanding of this underrepresented period of history. *Mira and Baku* is an emotional exploration of the power of imagination and hope in difficult times.

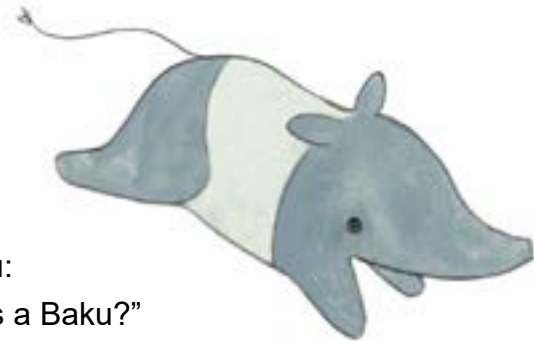
Please remember that the suggested questions and activities within this educator guide are meant to serve as a starting point. Educators are encouraged to select items from each part of the guided inquiry process that work best for their style of teaching and will help them meet their goals when covering the topics in this book. Activities and prompts should be tweaked and/or reformatted to best fit your students, context, and community to ensure equity and inclusion.

BEFORE READING THE BOOK

These activities build the context, introduce the topic of the book, and establish prior knowledge and interest.

1. Ask:

- Have you ever had to move to a new place?
- What was hard about living somewhere new?
- What made you feel at home after you moved?



2. What is a Baku? Play the podcast's description/explanation of Baku:

2:30–4:35 or read aloud from the written transcript section: “What is a Baku?”

Theresa Matsuura, *Uncanny Japan* podcast: <https://uncannyjapan.com/podcast/baku-the-eater-of-dreams/>

Excerpt:

[A baku] has a long nose like an elephant, four feet that look like they belong on a tiger. Its body resembles a bear. Its eyes? That of a rhino. It sports two tusks, and on its backend flicks the tail of an ox.

But keep in mind there are several different varieties.

Why such a patchwork beast? Well, one explanation is that when the gods were done creating all the animals, they looked around, gathered up all the scraps and cobbled together the baku.

Which is a legendary creature that made its way from China to Japan at about the same time as Buddhism did. The China version is a little different, actually protecting a person from pestilence and evil, while once in Japan the baku's soul purpose seems to be to eat your dreams, or better, your nightmares. It needs them to survive.

It's said that back in the day, children who woke from a nightmare would know to repeat three times, “Baku-san, come eat my dream.” I've seen a couple different versions in Japanese, one being “Kono yume, baku ni agemasu.” Literally, “I give this dream to the baku.”

Either way, after repeating three times one of these lines, or something similar, the baku will enter the room, make its way over, and gobble up the bad dream. The dreamer will never have that particular nightmare again.

So that's what a bizarre looking baku does. It spends the night hopping from rooftop to rooftop, listening for someone to yell out, so it can hurry over and feast on their bad dreams.

I read in a couple places that you have to be careful. If you call a baku too often it will get greedy and won't stop at your nightmares. It will proceed to devour all your hopes and dreams and aspirations, leaving you with an entirely meaningless life.

But I couldn't find that exact sentiment written in Japanese. There's no way I can read everything about this adorable little guy, so maybe I missed it. There was one thing I did find, though, and that is that, sadly, in recent times, some stories about the baku have flipped the mythology. Instead of eating only your nightmares, it does eat all your dreams. And I guess this could include your hopes and goals, which turns this adorable little weird beastie into a bad guy. But he isn't, no matter how bizarre he looks and how he might be sneaking into your window late at night.

[...]

Here's something interesting: If you live in Japan or are planning to visit, you can sometimes still see depictions of the baku at old shrines or temples. Look up. You know how in the corners of those fancy curved roofs where you can sometimes find carvings of lucky mythical creatures, well, at some temples they'll also have a baku or two looking down at you. Easily identifiable by that long nose.

3. Ask:

- What is a baku's job?
- Why would you need a baku?
- Where do baku normally live?

4. Show the cover of the book.

Ask:

- This isn't Japan, it's somewhere in Canada. What kind of place is it? (Mountains, fields, river)
- Is it the city or the country?

Show pictures of New Denver, Tashme, Lemon Creek surrounded by mountains.

Lemon Creek: NNM 195.133.2.19 https://nikkeimuseum.org/www/item_detail.php?art_id=A14060

New Denver: NNM 1992.32.19 https://nikkeimuseum.org/www/item_detail.php?art_id=A2466

Sandon: NNM 2014.10.1.5 https://nikkeimuseum.org/www/item_detail.php?art_id=A22609



WHILE READING THE BOOK

These activities check on comprehension, stimulate interest, involve readers in reflection as they read, and encourage consideration of other readers' reactions.

“We fly over fields and houses that lean and creak”

Ask students:

- What special powers does this baku have? Is it different from the baku we learned about earlier?
- Mira's house leans and creaks. What do you think those noises say about the house she lives in? Do you think it is comfortable?

Show students a picture of an internment camp shack. Read these quotations from people who were kids like Mira living in internment camps:

“My brothers and I stuffed newspapers into the cracks but they didn't keep out the blistering heat of summer or the cold in the winter.” —Aki Horii, East Lillooet internment camp

“When we woke up in the morning, my mum said, ‘Don't move,’ because our bedding was frozen onto the sheet of ice on the wall.” —Mary Kitagawa, Rosebery internment camp

Ask students:

- How do you think it would be like to live in a place like this?

“Papa found a lot of our stones. I make them into a spiral. I make them into a star.”

Point out the women sitting at the table in the picture.

Ask students:

- How do you think they are feeling?
- Can you guess the reason for their feeling? What are they looking at?
- What might the letters say that makes them feel this way?

“Baku and I fly over mountains and cedar trees that bob and bow”

Ask students:

- Where are Mira and Baku going this time?
- Is it closer or farther away than the fields and houses from last time?

“It fell out of a box of fresh salmon Papa was unpacking”

Mira and her family sold fresh fish and seafood. Explain to students that their store is on the west coast, near the ocean, where people catch lots of salmon.

“Everything is empty”

Ask students:

- Why is the store empty?
- Why is the window broken?

“He gave it to me. “It’s a good one,” he said, and his voice was quiet.”

Ask students:

- Why do you think Papa’s voice is quiet?

Point out the letter on the page. Remember the letters on the table when Mira’s mom and the others looked sad. Explain that the letter is from the government. They are making Papa go away from Mira even though he doesn’t want to. If he doesn’t go, he’ll get arrested.

“Baku and I fly over pine trees and golden fields. We fly over wide, blue lakes . . . for a long time”

Ask students:

- Where are Mira and Baku going? (Not through mountains and cedar trees. They’re going the other way, away from the ocean.)

Look at the picture of Papa and where he is. What kind of place is it? What work are they doing?

“And she gives me a letter”

Ask students:

- Is this a different kind of letter from the other ones in the book. What makes it different?
- How does it make Mira feel?



AFTER READING THE BOOK

These activities inspire continued reflection and response to the text, bring conclusion to the experience of reading this particular text, and stimulate further extensions.

1. Read the Author's Note and discuss why the author wanted to write this story. How would you feel if you were imprisoned because of your heritage? What kinds of stories from your own family do you want to share?

2. Mira's papa has to go away after he gets a letter from the government. How would you feel if the government made someone important to you go away?

Write a letter to the government explaining why Mira's papa should be allowed to go to Mira.

3. Draw Mira's stones in a spiral, star, or other shape. Label where each stone is from locations that are described in the book.

- Match each location to a real-life place from one of these pictures:

i. internment camp [photo] https://nikkeimuseum.org/www/item_detail.php?art_id=A18969

ii. in the spring in a stream (on the coast) [photo] https://nikkeimuseum.org/www/item_detail.php?art_id=A10842 or https://nikkeimuseum.org/www/item_detail.php?art_id=A32888

iii. fish store [photo] https://nikkeimuseum.org/www/item_detail.php?art_id=A9056

iv. the ocean with fishing boats [photo] https://nikkeimuseum.org/www/item_detail.php?art_id=A5182

v. family's yard (that they had to leave) [photo] https://nikkeimuseum.org/www/item_detail.php?art_id=A44249 or https://nikkeimuseum.org/www/item_detail.php?art_id=A23766 or https://nikkeimuseum.org/www/item_detail.php?art_id=A24194

vi. work camp in Ontario [photo] https://nikkeimuseum.org/www/item_detail.php?art_id=A2474 or https://nikkeimuseum.org/www/item_detail.php?art_id=A57749 or https://nikkeimuseum.org/www/item_detail.php?art_id=A2503

4. Discuss what it would have been like for Mira and her family to reunite with Papa:

- Explain that Mira's papa would have been separated from the family for months or maybe even years.
- When reunited, they didn't get to choose where they would live. Share with students that



Japanese Canadians were not allowed to return to any of the coastal areas until 1949; the fish store and house were sold, gone forever; most internment camps closed in 1945.

- If your family was in Mira's situation, where would you go to live?
- Draw a picture of Mira and her family's new home.

5. In 1988, 46 years after Mira's papa was taken away, Japanese Canadians received an official apology and compensation from the Canadian government. This is commonly called the Japanese Canadian Redress settlement.

- Show students a copy of the official acknowledgment sent to survivors:
https://nikkeimuseum.org/www/item_detail.php?art_id=A45971
- Imagine adult Mira reading this letter. How do you think this acknowledgment might make her feel?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

These activities are only a start. They are designed to support the goal of helping students explore the story and their own creativity.

1. Do some activities from the Landscapes of Injustice teaching resources:

<https://loi.uvic.ca/elementary/>

The "Fair/Unfair" game is a helpful tool for reflection on the story of Mira and her papa. Other lessons will share more about the history of Japanese Canadians.

2. Make up a creature (like Baku) who has other powers that can help Mira's family. Draw the creature, give it a name, and explain its special powers.

