

A book review of

Becker, H. (2021). *Himawari House*. First Second Books.

## It's a Marathon, Not a Sprint! A Review of the Graphic Novel *Himawari House*

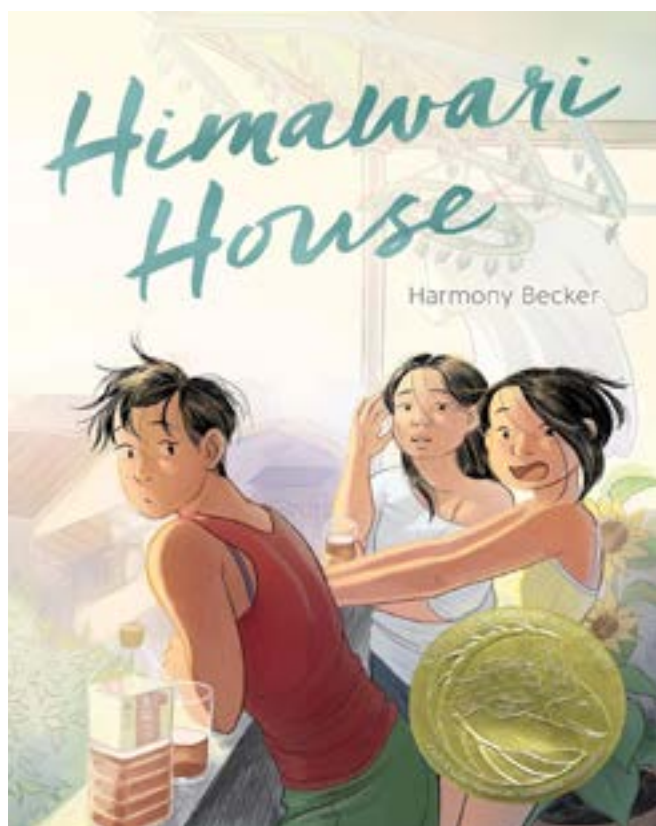
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When I started teaching in 2001 a coworker gave me a nugget of wisdom “Teaching is a marathon, not a sprint”. I had no idea what that meant until this 2023-2024 school year. I finally landed my dream job as a Multilingual Language Learner Specialist (MLL Specialist). Similar to running a marathon I had to have clear goals, find a support system, and not stress about going the long run. Ten years before I heard this saying I was trekking around Spain with a girl from California, both of us there to master Spanish as a second language. Now I sit in her living room helping her prepare for her pilgrimage back to Spain for the famous El Camino. I'm comfy with a book in hand reading while she finalizes last-minute responsibilities before her 6-week walk of endurance. She too is working on a marathon, not a sprint, as she creates goals for her cultural and challenging journey.

Ironically, the book in my lap is about young adults also on a cultural journey in another country where they, like Ellen and I, are immersed in a rich language-learning adventure. The book I plucked from her tidy decluttered bookshelf is *Himawari House* by Harmony Becker. Harmony Becker, winner of the 2023 Asian/Pacific American Award for Young Adult Fiction Literature does an excellent job walking us through the uncomfortable transformation of 3 young adults and their life abroad in Japan while they attend a preparatory school. This graphic novel takes me back to the time Ellen studied abroad similar to the characters of this book. This 2 Manga creation is a quick read that brilliantly executes the challenges of learning additional languages while fitting in and maturing into yourself without losing your future becoming. It is a great example of how we think in our native language and then have to produce communication output to connect with others simultaneously.

It has been over three decades since I stumbled into Spain and a long time since I had an emotional uptick in

nervousness speaking another language. Yet, reading *Himawari House* reminded me of the days of anxious traveling as I tried to make sense of a second language, what elders were saying, and the continuous neuroplasticity workout of a new environment. This story has us rooting for multilingual young people and their passage through the ups and downs of stepping out of their comfort zones as they acquire a new language. The author writes the scenes so well using language to dive us into the thoughts and struggles of each character as they attempt to communicate with others and assimilate to their new environment. A literary hike that reminds MLL



teachers how similar the characters in this book are to our students that start at the Early production stage and move to Speech Emergence.(Robertson, K., & Ford, K. (2009). This well-written peek into the lives of Nao who grew up in America but was born in Japan, a Korean student named Hyejung, and finally Tina from Singapore, all in the process of extending their Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS). Panel by panel, we see the three main characters gaining an understanding of the language. Through their language development and personal triumphs, they create the deepest friendships. Like the characters in the book *Ellen and I* came from separate faraway places. We 3 continue to be ourselves much like the students at Himawari House but remain tethered because of our mutual language learning investment. Himawari House plops us into the experience of learning another language, the struggle to speak correctly, and the fearless courage it takes to do so. I gleaned so much

more from reading this 374-page graphic novel plucked from the shelf for the patient love of a friend. However, the most valuable takeaway is that learning a language is a marathon, not a sprint. Using excerpts of this book in class for upper grades may help students connect with the three main characters while aiding in comprehension through visual literacy. Reading this book will help teachers to remain cognizant that second language learning is a risk you train for. It is a whole-body experience, your students will trip, and fall but in the end create a level of comfort that will foster confidence and everlasting real friendships.

Don't believe me just ask Nao, Hyejung, and Tina. I would also tell you to ask Ellen, but she's busy right now lacing up her boots, weaving through her second language acquisition, and meandering on her marathon in Spain.

## REFERENCES

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Robertson, K., & Ford, K. (2009). *Language Acquisition: An Overview*. Colorín Colorado. <https://www.colorincolorado.org/article/language-acquisition-overview>

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