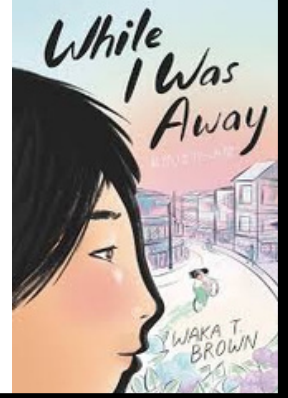


While I Was Away

By Waka T. Brown



Overview

This book is a memoir about a 12-year-old girl from the United States named Waka. It takes place in 1984. The book starts in the United States, but Japan is the setting of most of the book. This is a memoir, which means it is nonfiction. What happened in the book happened in real life to the person who wrote the story. In this book, Waka's parents decide to send her to Japan for five months. They do this so that she will become better at Japanese, of which she knows a little, but not as much as a sixth grader should know. They send her to live with her grandmother, Obaasama, who lives by herself in Japan. In this memoir, Waka immerses herself in Japanese culture to learn the language and ends up becoming closer with her family members along the way.

Lesson 1 will cover Chapters 1-3 from pages 1-54. Lesson 2 will cover Chapters 4-6 from pages 55-96. Lesson 3 will cover Chapters 7-12 from pages 97-150. Lesson 4 will cover Chapters 13-17 from pages 151-204. Lesson 5 will cover Chapters 18-23 from pages 205-257. Lesson 6 will cover Chapters 24-28 from pages 258-302. You can decide how many chapters/lessons you want to cover in each session depending on the time available.

Something special about this book is that it includes Japanese words and phrases. Japanese words are italicized in the text. Review the book synopsis with your student to confirm interest in reading the book. Share the title and author. Talk about the cover and read through Chapter 1. The publisher says this book is appropriate for ages 8-12.

Lesson 1

Before Reading: Get Ready

Activate comprehension and set a purpose for reading. At the beginning of the first section of this book, from pages 1-54, Waka's mom asks, in Japanese, for Waka to help with the laundry. Waka doesn't answer her mom's request. A few days later, Waka's mom tells her she is sending Waka to Japan to live with her grandmother for five months so Waka can learn Japanese better. Waka does not want to go to Japan by herself and tries to show her parents that her Japanese is good. However, her parents are determined for Waka to go to Japan. Waka tells her two best friends about her upcoming trip. All three girls are sad about all the summer fun Waka will miss. The night before Waka leaves, her mom makes

her favorite dinner. The next day, Waka's family says goodbye to her at the airport. In Japan, Uncle Makoto and Aunt Noriko pick Waka up from the airport and take her to their home. Aunt Noriko prepares a large dinner to celebrate Waka's arrival. Waka enjoys the time she spends at their home, especially playing with her cousins. On one of her last days living at her aunt and uncle's house, she buys stationary and some other supplies with her cousin. Her aunt later gifts her additional supplies such as a backpack and school shoes. Before reading, ask your student what they know about Japan. How would they feel if they were sent to another country by themselves for five months?

Introduce important vocabulary and ask your student to look out for these words while they are reading:

- **calisthenics**: Exercises performed without any machines or accessories like weights.
- **devious**: Deceptive or tricky.
- **scrappy**: Being determined or aggressive.
- **intrigued**: Becoming curious or interested about something.
- **lolling**: Acting or moving around in a lazy or loose way.
- **defying**: Not doing what you were told to or are supposed to do.

During Reading

Allow your student to choose how to read the book. Your student may want to read the book independently and silently. Alternatively, they may want to read it aloud or, if you sense they are struggling with the text, you can take turns reading aloud with your student. Provide the comprehension questions as they are reading to make sure they understand the text.

If your student asks you what a word is or stops reading because they do not know a word, tell them the word. If your student reads a word incorrectly, wait until your student finishes reading the page to see if they self-correct the word they read incorrectly. If not, tell your student the word they missed.

Comprehension questions. Provide these questions to your student during reading to monitor their understanding of the story.

- **After reading p. 10:** Based on Waka's parents' conversation, what do you think Waka's grandmother (Obaasama) is like?
- **After reading p. 27:** Waka's mom said that one day she'd be grateful that she learned Japanese, but Waka disagrees. Make a prediction—do you think Waka will be grateful by the end of the book?
- **After reading p. 34:** What are some differences in cars/driving between Japan and America?

- **After reading p. 35:** In what ways does Waka feel that her cousins are different from her?
- **After reading p. 46:** What was Waka excited about related to school?

After Reading: Discuss and Extend

After reading, briefly discuss the text and revisit vocabulary words to ensure your student understands the text. Have your student write down any new vocabulary words (not the words you previewed) and a simple definition or sketch of each word.

Post reading reflection questions. Encourage your student to write about or discuss the following questions.

- What are hiragana, katakana, and kanji? How are they similar? How are they different? Review pages 12–13 if you are having trouble remembering what they each mean.
- Make an inference. Why did Waka think on page 38, “I had a feeling I’d be doing a lot of nodding in the near future”?
- Think about Waka’s character so far in the book. How would you describe Waka? Do you think she will change throughout the book? If so, how will she change? If not, what will prevent her from changing?

Lesson 2

Before Reading: Get Ready

Activate comprehension and set a purpose for reading. In the next section of the book, from pages 55–96, Waka’s aunt and uncle drive her to her grandmother Obaasama’s home. Waka and Obaasama have sushi together for lunch and Obaasama shows Waka around her home. They both go to bed early the night before Waka’s first day in her new Japanese school. Waka wakes up to her obaasama learning English from a recording. Aunt Kyoko comes to Obaasama’s home in the morning to help Waka get ready for school and give her clothes from her cousin. Obaasama and Aunt Kyoko decide to cut Waka’s hair. Aunt Kyoko walks Waka to school and Waka runs into a friend she made from the last time she was in Japan, Reiko. Waka met her new teacher, Mr. Adachi, and he tells two students to help Waka acclimate to the classroom. On her first day, Waka has some upsetting moments like when a boy calls her a name and when she introduces herself to her music teacher incorrectly, but overall everything goes well. Waka has an easy time getting along with other girls in her grade.

Introduce important vocabulary and ask your student to look out for these words while they are reading:

- **ornate:** Decorated in a very fancy way.
- **assessed:** To determine how good or valuable something is.
- **cacophony:** Many noises mixed together.
- **shenanigans:** Mischievous or excited activity.
- **disdainful:** Full of dislike for something because it is inferior in some way.
- **berated:** To scold or yell at someone, often for a long time.

During Reading

Allow your student to choose how to read the book. Your student may want to read the book independently and silently. Alternatively, they may want to read it aloud or, if you sense they are struggling with the text, you can take turns reading aloud with your student. Provide the comprehension questions as they are reading to make sure they understand the text.

If your student asks you what a word is or stops reading because they do not know a word, tell them the word. If your student reads a word incorrectly, wait until your student finishes reading the page to see if they self-correct the word they read incorrectly. If not, tell your student the word they missed.

Comprehension questions. Provide these questions to your student during reading to monitor their understanding of the story.

- **After reading p. 65:** What made Waka realize maybe her grandmother wasn't as terrible as she thought?
- **After reading p. 77:** Who thinks Waka looks like a yuurei? Who doesn't?
- **After reading p. 81:** How does Waka feel when she enters her school for the first time?
- **After reading p. 90:** What mean name did the boy call Waka? What does it mean?
- **After reading pp. 93-94:** What did Waka learn about Japanese after her mistake with the music teacher?

After Reading: Discuss and Extend

After reading, briefly discuss the text and revisit vocabulary words to ensure your student understands the text. Have your student write down any new vocabulary words (not the words you previewed) and a simple definition or sketch of each word.

Post reading reflection questions. Encourage your student to write about or discuss the following questions.

- Waka uses figurative language to describe what was going on inside the school when she first arrived. She thinks, “It was like being in a hive and the students were bees, buzzing all around me” (p. 81). What does she mean when she says this? Why does she describe the school in this way?
- Why did Mr. Adachi’s crow’s feet comfort Waka? Have you ever liked someone more because they reminded you of someone else?
- On pages 84–85, Waka learns about five suffixes you can add to people’s names in Japanese. Think of an example of someone you know for each suffix example. Be sure to follow the Japanese rules about which type of people get each suffix.

Lesson 3

Before Reading: Get Ready

Activate comprehension and set a purpose for reading. This section, from pages 97–150, begins with Waka spending time at home with Obaasama. Waka is happy to receive her first letter from her family. She writes a letter back where she tries to make her parents feel guilty for sending her to Japan, but not too guilty. School continues for Waka. While she continues to struggle to learn more advanced Japanese, she finds that she is one of the top athletes in her class. Waka receives another letter from America, this time it is from one of her best friends. Waka quickly responds to this letter and writes another one for her other best friend. One night Obaasama has a nightmare, which worries and scares Waka. Waka goes to Sunday Mass with her Aunt Kyoko, her uncle, and her cousins. At school one day, her friends Emi and Fujita ask her to be in their social group, but Waka realizes this means she won’t be able to hang out with any of her other friends. She is hesitant to join any group because she wants to be friends with people from multiple friend groups. At the end of this section, Waka and Obaasama bond over Waka’s new interest in sewing. Before reading this section, ask your student to make a prediction about how Waka will do adjusting to her new school.

Introduce important vocabulary and ask your student to look out for these words while they are reading:

- **conspiring**: Planning in secret; scheming.
- **gloated**: To look at or think about something with happiness and satisfaction.
- **unsettling**: Upsetting or disturbing.
- **chided**: Spoke out with disapproval or anger; criticized.
- **clamoring**: A loud noise or noisy yelling.
- **crescendo**: A gradual increase in something, especially an increase in volume.

During Reading

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Comprehension questions. Provide these questions to your student during reading to monitor their understanding of the story.

- **After reading p. 101:** Why was Obaasama wearing such bright clothing?
- **After reading pp. 112-113:** Why was writing in Japanese so hard for Waka?
- **After reading pp. 130-131:** How does Waka normally feel about attending Mass? How does she feel about attending Mass in Japan?
- **After reading p. 136:** Why did Waka give her socks to Obaasama?
- **After reading p. 145:** What made Obaasama laugh?

After Reading: Discuss and Extend

After reading, briefly discuss the text and revisit vocabulary words to ensure your student understands the text. Have your student write down any new vocabulary words (not the words you previewed) and a simple definition or sketch of each word.

Post reading reflection questions. Encourage your student to write about or discuss the following questions.

- Waka begins struggling in school for the first time. In what ways could Waka's struggling be helpful to her in the future?
- On page 138, Waka thinks, "Sometimes having more choices was harder than no choices at all." Have you ever had an experience where you had too many choices? How did you feel and what happened? If you've never had an experience like that, what's a time when you didn't have any choice at all? How did that go?
- How does the relationship between Waka and Obaasama develop in this section?

Lesson 4

Before Reading: Get Ready

Activate comprehension and set a purpose for reading. In the beginning of this section, from pages 151-204, Waka makes a decision about which friend group to join, but she's still not completely comfortable with her new friends. Waka's class celebrates the Tanabata Festival by writing down their wishes. Waka's wish is to be able to read Japanese well. Waka and Obaasama continue to get to know each other at home; Waka learns how to eat noodles the Japanese way and Obaasama learns to eat Jell-O with her fingers. In Chapter 16, summer vacation begins for Waka. She travels to be with her Aunt Noriko and her cousins. They visit Disneyland in Tokoyo, where Waka rides a rollercoaster for the first time. Later on, they go to their cottage on the beach. They watch the 1984 Olympics and Waka realizes she's the only one in her family who is excited when Americans win events. She eventually returns to Obaasama's house and wonders if Obaasama missed her while she was away. Waka reads letters from her family and friends and starts to worry that she will be behind when she returns to school in Kansas. Before reading this section, ask your student to predict how Waka will spend summer vacation. How will summer vacation in Japan be different from what Waka typically experiences?

Introduce important vocabulary and ask your student to look out for these words while they are reading:

- **forbade:** To say something is not allowed.
- **flailing:** Having many difficulties; struggling.
- **stammered:** To speak in a way that has many stops and repeats.
- **stern:** Serious and not friendly.
- **incredulous:** Not believing something.
- **careened:** To sway from side to side.

During Reading

Allow your student to choose how to read the book. Your student may want to read the book independently and silently. Alternatively, they may want to read it aloud or, if you sense they are struggling with the text, you can take turns reading aloud with your student. Provide the comprehension questions as they are reading to make sure they understand the text.

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Comprehension questions. Provide these questions to your student during reading to monitor their understanding of the story.

- **After reading p. 161:** Why did Waka decide not to show Obaasama her school work?
- **After reading p. 169:** How has learning Japanese helped Waka to understand her mom's experiences in America?
- **After reading p. 171:** What did Waka wish for?
- **After reading pp. 174-175:** What did Waka learn about the difference between eating noodles in America versus Japan?
- **After reading p. 201:** Why does Waka want her trumpet in Japan?

After Reading: Discuss and Extend

After reading, briefly discuss the text and revisit vocabulary words to ensure your student understands the text. Have your student write down any new vocabulary words (not the words you previewed) and a simple definition or sketch of each word.

Post reading reflection questions. Encourage your student to write about or discuss the following questions.

- If you were Waka, what decision would you make about friend groups? Have you ever had to make a decision similar to Waka's?
- If you participated in the Tanabata Festival, what would you wish for?
- What character in the book do you relate to the most so far? Why do you relate to this character? Who is a character in the book that you think is very different from you? Why do you feel so different from this character?

Lesson 5

Before Reading: Get Ready

Activate comprehension and set a purpose for reading. In the fifth section of this book, from pages 205-257, Waka finishes the last two weeks of her summer break at Obaasama's home. Waka joins Obaasama on her errands, and with Obaasama's encouragement Waka sews two purses. Obaasama tells Waka about her daughter Sakura who died when Waka's mom was in fifth grade. Waka and Obaasama have a nice two weeks in which they start to become closer. On the first day back in school, Waka makes the mistake of stepping into Obaasama's house while still wearing her shoes, which makes Obaasama angry. Waka tells her social group at school a little about her vacation, but they all make fun of her for mispronouncing a word. Later that day, the students have a swim test. Waka was happy because she swims very well, but at the end of the test Waka accidentally opens the door to the boys' change room. Her male classmates call her a "pervert" and begin teasing her. Waka's friend group does not stand up for her and she starts to realize they may not be her friends at all. She believes that only Reiko is a real friend to her. Waka begins to go to Reiko's house after school so they can do their homework together. One night she stays at Reiko's house for dinner. When she returns to Obaasama's house, Obaasama is infuriated at Waka's rudeness for staying at Reiko's home for so long. Her anger confuses and upsets Waka. Things between Waka and Obaasama remain tense for the rest of this section.

Introduce important vocabulary and ask your student to look out for these words while they are reading:

- **staggered:** To move unsteadily from side to side.
- **relentlessly:** Marked by not giving in or not becoming less harsh.
- **idolized:** Worshiped or admired.
- **shuttered:** Closed up; having closed shutters.
- **impose:** To force someone to accept or deal with something.
- **burden:** Something difficult to take or carry.

During Reading

Allow your student to choose how to read the book. Your student may want to read the book independently and silently. Alternatively, they may want to read it aloud or, if you sense they are struggling with the text, you can take turns reading aloud with your student. Provide the comprehension questions as they are reading to make sure they understand the text.

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Comprehension questions. Provide these questions to your student during reading to monitor their understanding of the story.

- **After reading p. 208:** What do Waka and Obaasama have in common?
- **After reading p. 217:** Waka thinks, “Maybe we Japanese don’t hug each other a lot, but some actions say a lot more and last a lot longer.” What action is Waka referencing when she thinks this?
- **After reading pp. 230-231:** How did Reiko make Waka feel better about being teased?
- **After reading p. 236:** What decision did Waka make about her friends?
- **After reading p. 245:** Why was Obaasama angry with Waka?

After Reading: Discuss and Extend

After reading, briefly discuss the text and revisit vocabulary words to ensure your student understands the text. Have your student write down any new vocabulary words (not the words you previewed) and a simple definition or sketch of each word.

Post reading reflection questions. Encourage your student to write about or discuss the following questions.

- On pages 215–216, after Obaasama tells Waka the story about Sakura and the painting, Waka reflects, “Aunt Sakura. Painted by my grandfather. With my mother’s eyes. Three people who weren’t here with us, but actually were. Their stories, their relationships, their lives all tied together and echoing across time. I would never have understood if I hadn’t come here and heard Obaasama tell me herself.” Explain what she means by saying three people who weren’t here, but actually were. What wouldn’t Waka have understood if she hadn’t heard Obaasama’s story?
- On page 234, Waka thinks “honors English might be a bit of a struggle for Kris.” Use your close reading skills to identify the clue from Kris’ letter on page 233 that supports Waka’s thought.
- What did Waka mean on page 254 when she thought, “With every potato I found, I buried my feelings too”? What feelings was she burying?

Lesson 6

Before Reading: Get Ready

Activate comprehension and set a purpose for reading. In the final section of this book, from pages 258–302, Obaasama reveals more about her life to Waka. However, Waka is not fully interested in hearing Obaasama’s stories because she is still upset about how she treated her the night she had dinner at Reiko’s home. Now that Waka doesn’t belong to a social group in her class at school, she spends her free time studying. She is finally able to read aloud in class and does so with the support of her teacher, Mr. Adachi. Obaasama and Waka take the train to visit Aunt Noriko and Waka navigates the train system easily. They have a nice dinner and a sleepover. When they return to Obaasama’s home, Waka goes with Reiko to buy gifts for her friends in America. Waka’s class has a going-away celebration to say goodbye. On Waka’s last day, her dad arrives at Obaasama’s house to take Waka back to America. Waka still feels awkward and nervous around Obaasama, but Obaasama cries when Waka is leaving, which helps Waka think more about Obaasama’s perspective. Waka cries most of the way to the airport. She is happy to return to her family in Kansas. She goes to school the next day and is excited to catch up with her friends. In the end of the book, she discusses hydrangeas in Japanese with her mother. Before reading, ask your student to predict how they think the story will end. How will Waka and Obaasama say goodbye to each other?

Introduce important vocabulary and ask your student to look out for these words while they are reading:

- **musings:** Thoughts or contemplations.
- **enveloped:** To surround or enclose completely with a covering.
- **rollicking:** Joyful and loudly carefree.
- **frail:** Weak or small.
- **inkling:** A slight idea about something or a small hint.
- **fickle:** Being inconsistent; changing your mind a lot without a good reason.

During Reading

Allow your student to choose how to read the book. Your student may want to read the book independently and silently. Alternatively, they may want to read it aloud or, if you sense they are struggling with the text, you can take turns reading aloud with your student. Provide the comprehension questions as they are reading to make sure they understand the text.

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Comprehension questions. Provide these questions to your student during reading to monitor their understanding of the story.

- **After reading pp. 262-263:** What does Obaasama tell Waka about her childhood?
- **After reading pp. 265-266:** Why does Waka feel confident in reading the book?
- **After reading p. 269:** What goal did Waka finally reach?
- **After reading p. 290:** Why was Waka so surprised to see Obaasama cry?
- **After reading p. 301:** How is Waka like a hydrangea flower?

After Reading: Discuss and Extend

After reading, briefly discuss the text and revisit vocabulary words to ensure your student understands the text. Have your student write down any new vocabulary words (not the words you previewed) and a simple definition or sketch of each word.

Post reading reflection questions. Encourage your student to write about or discuss the following questions.

- On page 273, Waka thought, “I wasn’t scared like I was before, though, because the months that stretched ahead of me were now the months that stretched behind me.” What does this mean?
- Why do you think Waka cried so much as she was leaving Japan?
- What do you think will happen to Waka after the story was over? What about the rest of her family?