

YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction for Young Adults

For over twenty years I've been fascinated by Minamoto Yoshitsune. I see him as someone in the tradition of King Arthur and Luke Skywalker: here is a young man from a noble tradition, raised in obscurity, who becomes a war hero—only to discover that his greatest enemy is a member of his own family. What makes Minamoto Yoshitsune stand out is that his story is true.

Or at least *some* of his story is true. When I began researching and writing SAMURAI RISING I never imagined that sorting nonfiction from fiction, extracting truth from exaggeration, and sifting honesty from fakery would become so topical. Unfortunately.

How do individuals and events become fictionalized and mythologized? Obviously the passage of time clouds memory and allows the erasure or glossing over of inconvenient truths. In my case, the most important source documents about Yoshitsune were compiled about forty years after his death. Those early medieval Japanese wrote for audiences of their own time and place, not for future historians. Over time—and eight hundred years have passed since Yoshitsune's passing—layers of fiction and mythology have been laid over the historical reality like sediments over a fossil.

Individuals and events are also commonly fictionalized and mythologized when gaps exist in the historical record. Nothing much is known about Yoshitsune's youth, and in Kyoto you can visit a statue commemorating the teenage Yoshitsune's entirely fictional battle on Gojo Bridge with the warrior-monk Benkei. In a similar vein, nothing is known about the two years Yoshitsune spent on the run as Japan's most wanted. His life as a fugitive, packed with all the elements of a grand Shakespearean tragedy, inspired some of Japan's great dramatic artists to fill in the gaps. Fan fiction, it seems, is not an invention of the twenty-first century. Yoshitsune's admirers even refused to accept his death. My favorite he-didn't-die-after-all tale involves Yoshitsune

setting sail for the Asian mainland, taking the name Genghis Khan...and conquering China.

Historical persons tied to national identity are particularly vulnerable to being mythologized. It's no coincidence that John F. Kennedy's White House is called "Camelot." When I was going to elementary school that story about George Washington and the cherry tree was taught as fact. Abraham Lincoln, who himself spoke of "the mystic chords of memory", has been mythologized as an early leader of civil rights, though the historical record is more complicated. As for Minamoto Yoshitsune, it is hard to name a historical figure more deeply embedded in his nation's history: after his victories, samurai ruled Japan for seven hundred years.

The techniques for sorting fiction from fact aren't flashy or frankly, much fun to describe in a speech. For me it involved reading a great deal of academic literature on both the historical period and the source documents. (Historians take a certain delight in bursting mythological bubbles.) I could find no example for what I wanted to do within children's literature, but Stacy Schiff's CLEOPATRA: A LIFE provided a very welcome model of the possibilities. And though this might sound far afield, I studied the work of New Testament scholars who have attempted to extract purely historical data from the gospels.

Clearly, in our contemporary political moment, it's crucial that we teach young people not just what nonfiction is, but also how and why nonfiction is fictionalized. We need to help them understand that fictionalizations are a part of history too, but they aren't about the original event. Fictionalizations are about the fictionalizers. Sometimes their underlying agenda is innocent: a myth is created, like "fan fiction", solely for entertainment. Sometimes the underlying agenda is morally repugnant: created, like "fake news," to willfully deceive, to undermine truth itself and our trust in each other.

There are many people I'd like to thank, because writing a biography takes a village. I drew heavily on the work of generations of scholars and translators that have written about Japan during the

tumultuous late twelfth-century, and in particular I owe a debt to Dr. William Wayne Farris, Professor Emeritus at the University of Hawai'i, who provided expert review.

Yolanda Scott at Charlesbridge saw something in my odd little manuscript and teamed me up with Alyssa Mito Pusey, who kicked off our relationship by writing me the kind of editorial letter every author dreams of receiving. I was half-expecting that Alyssa would insist on getting rid of the modern asides, the gallows humor, and most of the back matter, but much to my surprise she asked for more.

We were all delighted at our luck in landing illustrator and graphic novelist Gareth Hinds, an artist who has dedicated his career to making the old stuff cool again. Art Director Susan Sherman put together a design that has made us all proud. Many thanks also to the marketing team lead by Donna Spurlock for helping to get SAMURAI into the hands of young readers.

Many, many, thanks to the YALSA committee members. Having been on an awards committee myself, I know it's hundreds of hours of work subtracted from other important tasks, like watching GAME OF THRONES or making a living. I also know that these decisions can go any number of directions, all equally well deserved. I'm just happy to be in the company of writers like Karen Blumenthal, Kenneth Davis, Linda Osborne, John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell. Thank you all very much.