

Kamishibai Isn't a City in Japan

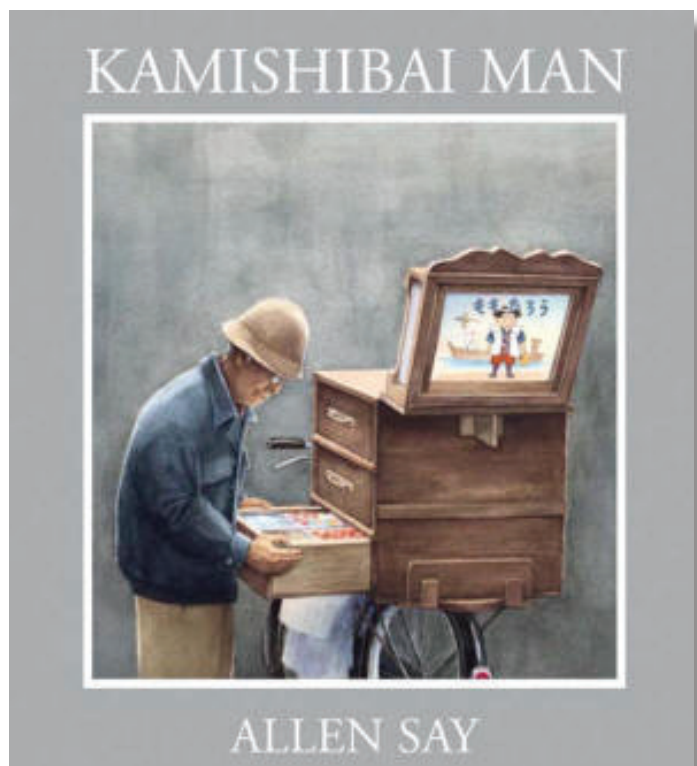
Using Japanese Paper Theater in Storytimes

KATE ECKERT

Japanese paper theater, or *kamishibai*, is one of the earliest popular forms of Japanese sequential storytelling art, with its Golden Age peaking in the early half of the twentieth century.

Eric P. Nash, in *Manga Kamishibai*, claims that scholars are unsure of its exact origin, but that kamishibai appeared “suddenly” on the streets of Tokyo during the 1930s.¹ Event admission was the price of a small sweet, providing relatively cheap entertainment for Depression Era Tokyo denizens. Eventually, after the influx of American comics after World War II, modern manga outpaced kamishibai as the most popular sequential storytelling medium in Japan.

I'm lucky to have access to kamishibai stories and a stage, which resembles a small puppet theater stage, through a colleague who purchased it to share throughout our public library system. The illustrations are ordered sequentially on the front of the card with the story's text on the back. As the story



progresses, the storyteller moves the cards from the front to the back, sometimes using the transition as a dramatic element in the narrative. I enjoy incorporating kamishibai into school-age and preschool programs when I can, not just for Japanese-themed events, but for everyday storytelling that engages the children with its wry folktales and unique presentation.

Earlier this year, I thought it would be interesting to use kamishibai to introduce the children to sequential art creation. After being inspired by various blog posts and books, I decided to use our newly donated iPads to create an easy, fun, do-it-yourself (DIY) kamishibai and technology program.

To ensure a decent turnout, our kamishibai group met on a Monday evening after school, one of our prime-time hours. I didn't specify an age range in the promotional materials; children from ages six to twelve showed up for the event, which was fine. I planned to have older kids use the iPads and the younger kids use paper and markers.



Kate Eckert is a children's librarian, artist, gaming enthusiast, world explorer, former pastry chef, and occasional voice actress. She sold her first painting at age seventeen. As an undergraduate, she studied Japanese Buddhist Art in Tokyo, Japan. She is now a member of the Free Library of Philadelphia's Pre-Kindergarten Committee and Association for Library Service to Children's School-Age Programs and Services Committee. Kate lives in Philadelphia with three cats.

I first introduced kamishibai—what it is, a little bit about its history, and its influence on modern Japanese manga and anime. I also read from Allen Say's *Kamishibai Man* to further increase their awareness of the medium, followed by a short discussion on the subject, and then we got started with creating our own kamishibai.

I selected the free StoryKit app for our program based on its user-friendly design. I preferred it to others because it didn't require a login. The older children easily created digital storybooks using StoryKit; its use came to them intuitively. While drawing the illustrations to their stories, several children noticed there was no eraser tool, so we simply used the white paint tool to erase our mistakes.

"Tiger Versus Radishes," one of the stories we created that is meant to be read sequentially on the iPad or iPhone can be seen at <http://iphone.childrenslibrary.org/cgi-bin/view.py?b=vnc7oa7xpjvmge2bnaor>.

The younger kids, with help from two teen assistants, created their own sequential art stories using construction paper and markers. The downside to having the younger kids use paper is that their work progressed much more slowly than the older children, some of whom were on their second or third digital kamishibai by the time the paper group finished their stories. This issue could be mitigated by having the DIY sequential art

program split into two separate times for different age groups, but I prefer age-inclusive programs, especially since many of the young children are attended by their older siblings.

The older kids were glued to their iPads, and a couple of them made more than just one story. I was initially concerned that the iPad's connectivity to the Internet might prove too enticing to resist, and that everyone would end up on social media sites, but I am glad to report that was not the case.

Another child, so intent in the actual writing out of his story became bogged down with text and added pictures later as an afterthought. The whole group showed an interest in returning to the program so I'll have to make sure to reserve the iPads for a future session.

Kamishibai theaters and story cards are available for purchase at several retailers, including Storycard Theater (www.storycardtheater.com; an entire set with two stories and a frame sells for \$105), and Kamishibai for Kids (www.kamishibai.com), which has slightly higher-end products. 📖

Reference

1. Eric P. Nash, *Manga Kamishibai: The Art of Japanese Paper Theater* (New York: Abrams, 2009), 16.



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