

# Samurai Shortstop

EDUCATORS GUIDE

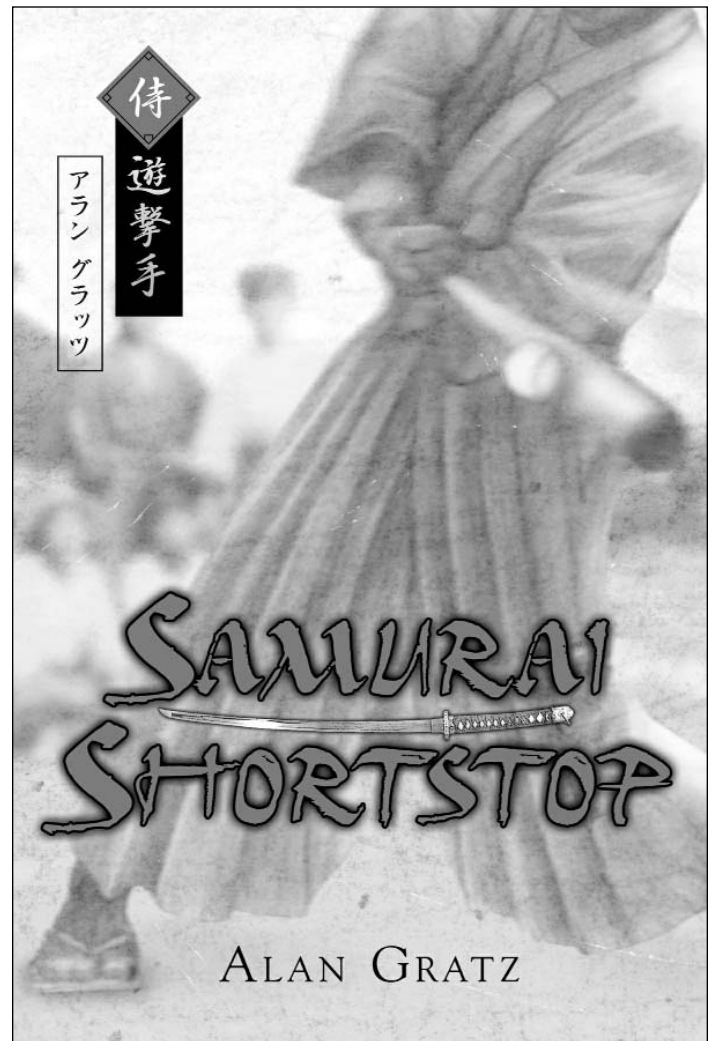
"Fast moving, culturally respectful, and flat-out engrossing, this should lead off the next book talk on sports or historical fiction."

*Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*  
Starred Review

## About the Book

*"Bushido is gone," Sotaro said sadly.  
"Like a cherry blossom ripped too soon from its branch by the harsh winds of spring."*

When its ruling Shogun warlords were overthrown in 1867, Japan awoke from a medieval dream to find itself three centuries behind the rest of the world. Almost overnight, the country transformed itself from a feudal society into an industrial nation. Black suits replaced kimonos, trains replaced horses, and salarymen replaced samurai.



Two decades later, 16-year-old Toyo Shimada is concerned only with surviving his first day at First Higher School of Tokyo and making the Ichiko baseball team. But Toyo is suddenly introduced to *bushido*, the way of the warrior, when his favorite uncle refuses to accept the modern world and commits ritual suicide.

Now Toyo must prove there is a place for his family's samurai values in the new Japan or watch his father follow his uncle's path. Toyo finds a perfect match with *bushido* and baseball - but will his father ever accept an American game that stands for everything he despises?

# Pre-reading Activity

## *The Tale of the 47 Ronin*

In perhaps Japan's most famous legend, 47 samurai disobeyed a direct order of the Shogun to exact revenge on the feudal lord who killed their own master. The ronin broke the law of the land but upheld bushido, the unwritten samurai code of honor.

The Tale of the 47 Ronin is central to Toyo's eventual understanding of bushido. Introduce the tale Sotaro tells in Chapter Six and assign sides for a mock trial:

- ◆ Are the 47 ronin heroes or criminals?
- ◆ Was revenge the right decision for the ronin?
- ◆ Was the emperor right in punishing the 47 ronin?
- ◆ Would your students ever defend their honor knowing they'd be punished for it?



The forty-seven ronin attack the evil daimyo's castle.

# Questions for Discussion

## *Family Relationships*

- ◆ Toyo has an awkward and at times antagonistic relationship with his father throughout much of *Samurai Shortstop*. What challenges do you face in your own relationship with your parents? Are there some problems that every new generation faces?
- ◆ Learning bushido helps bring Toyo closer to his father. Are there any traditions your family holds dear that bring you together?
- ◆ Toyo is embarrassed by his father's dress and behavior, particularly when they attend the Shinto festival together in Chapter Six. Has your family ever embarrassed you? How?

## *Society and Culture*

- ◆ During the Meiji Restoration, the samurai class was abolished and bushido was abandoned. What customs or traditions have come or gone in our world? Have any changed, for better or worse?
- ◆ In Toyo's world, many families that had once been samurai still felt superior to other members of Japanese society. To what extent do some people today in your world feel that same sense of entitlement?
- ◆ How does school fit into your life? Does it play as significant a role in your life as it does in Toyo's?
- ◆ Toyo begins to appreciate simplicity when his father teaches him the samurai art of flower arrangement. Would your life be better if it were simpler? Is there anything you could do to simplify it?

## *Challenge and Sacrifice*

- ◆ Toyo's Uncle Koji gives his life for bushido, and his father considers following the same path. Is there any cause or person you would be willing to die for? Is there anything in life worth dying for?
- ◆ Sotaro disapproves of his son's interest in baseball, and Headmaster Kinoshita later bans the boys from playing. Has someone ever made you give up something you loved? What did you do?
- ◆ Discuss the clenched fist scene in regard to the friendship between Junzo and Moriyama. Would you tell on your best friend if he/she broke the rules? Could you take part in your best friend's punishment?

# Questions for Discussion

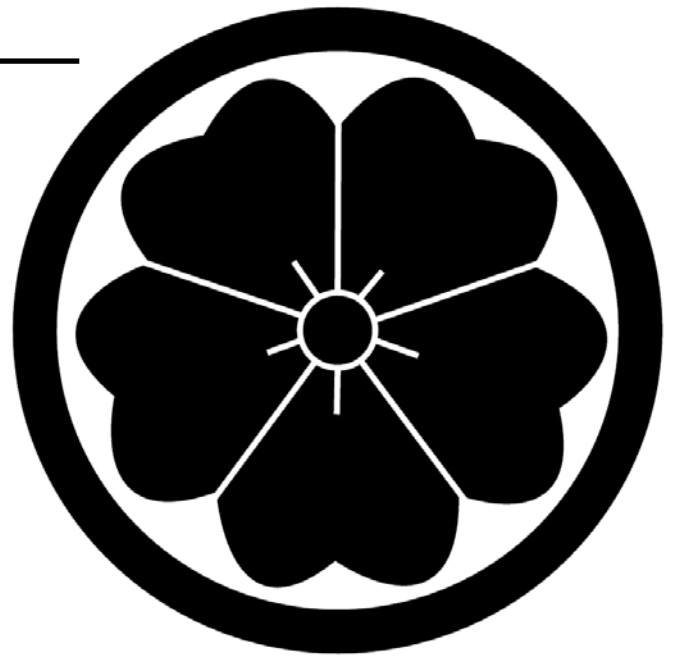
---

## Character and Conscience

- ♦ What are Toyo's core beliefs, and how do they change over the course of the book? Which of Toyo's beliefs do you share with him? Are there any that you do not share that you wish you did? Any that you disagree with strongly?
- ♦ Toyo abuses his position as an elite student when trying to retrieve Junzo's home run ball, and again later when confronting the servants in the kitchen. Have you ever felt ashamed at how you represented yourself to others? Did your actions reflect poorly on your friends or family? How did the experience help to shape the person you are today?
- ♦ Toyo makes many difficult decisions in *Samurai Shortstop*. Describe a troubling situation or a tough choice you've made through haiku.
- ♦ Despite their differences, Toyo fears losing his father above all else. What do you fear? Do you control fear, or does it control you?
- ♦ Was Toyo giving in to peer pressure or behaving out of his own convictions when he joined in Moriyama's punishment? Defend your answer with precedents from the story.

## Comprehension

- ♦ What was the Meiji Restoration, and how has it affected Toyo and his family?
- ♦ What are the dormitory storms, and what is the significance of "surviving" them?
- ♦ How does Toyo's friendship with Fuji begin to challenge his notion of samurai honor and tradition?
- ♦ What lesson is Sotaro trying to teach Toyo when he sends him to the eta village? What lesson does Toyo learn instead?
- ♦ What is the Tale of the 47 Ronin, and how does it parallel both Uncle Koji's seppuku and the Ichiko baseball team's decision to play to win against the Americans?
- ♦ How does Toyo finally convince his father not to commit seppuku?
- ♦ Explain both the literal and figurative meanings of Uncle Koji's death poem.
- ♦ Is Toyo more like his father, or his uncle? Explain.



## Vocabulary

---

- ♦ bokkoto: a wooden practice sword
- ♦ bushido: the samurai code; the way of the warrior
- ♦ gaijin: literally, "outsider;" used to refer to Westerners
- ♦ heimin: commoner
- ♦ kami: a ghost or spirit
- ♦ katana: a long, curved sword
- ♦ oendan: baseball fans
- ♦ ronin: a masterless samurai
- ♦ sakura: cherry blossoms
- ♦ sensei: teacher
- ♦ seppuku: ritual samurai suicide
- ♦ tatami: woven straw mats
- ♦ wa: harmony; oneness
- ♦ wakizashi: a short sword

## Further Reading

---

### Children's Fiction about Japan

- ♦ **A Samurai's Tale** by Erik Haugaard
- ♦ **The Samurai and the Long-Nosed Devils** by Lensey Namioka (first book in a series)
- ♦ **The Ghost in the Tokaido Inn** by Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler (first book in a series)
- ♦ **The Master Puppeteer** by Katherine Paterson

### Children's Fiction about Baseball

- ♦ **Summerland** by Michael Chabon
- ♦ **Free Baseball** by Sue Corbett
- ♦ **The Boy Who Saved Baseball** by John H. Ritter
- ♦ **Under the Baseball Moon** by John H. Ritter

### Non-fiction about Japanese Baseball

- ♦ **The Chrysanthemum and the Bat** by Robert Whiting
- ♦ **You Gotta Have Wa** by Robert Whiting
- ♦ **The Meaning of Ichiro** by Robert Whiting

### Adult Fiction about Japan

- ♦ **Shogun** by James Clavell
- ♦ **Memoirs of a Geisha** by Arthur Golden

## Internet Resources

---

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meiji\\_restoration](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meiji_restoration)

Learn more about the Meiji Restoration

[japanesebaseball.com](http://japanesebaseball.com)

All things Japanese baseball

[robsjapanesebaseball.com](http://robsjapanesebaseball.com)

Japanese baseball cards!

[baseball-museum.or.jp](http://baseball-museum.or.jp)

Japanese Baseball Hall of Fame

[npb.or.jp](http://npb.or.jp)

Home of Nippon Professional Baseball

[japaneseballplayers.com](http://japaneseballplayers.com)

Features Japanese players in MLB

## About the Author

Born and raised in Knoxville, Tennessee, Alan went from private school to the University of Tennessee. There he was accepted into the UT College Scholars program, where he tailored a program specific to his independent study of creative writing.



Alan wrote the obligatory “awful college novel,” sold a couple of short stories to literary magazines, and graduated in three years. Thus began a succession of writing-related jobs: publicist at an art museum, instructor at a Czech university, bookseller, radio commercial writer, graphic designer, librarian. After earning a Master's degree he taught eighth grade English for a time, but his dream continued to be writing fiction for young readers.

In the fall of 2002, Alan finally took the plunge. He quit his day job to become a part-time writer and a part-time stay-at-home dad, writing freelance episodes of A&E's *City Confidential* while writing novels for young readers. *Samurai Shortstop* was the first book he wrote as a full-time writer, and the first book he sold.

## samuraishortstop.com

---

Learn how to make miso soup, get the latest reviews, read an author Q&A, see pictures of Ichiko and baseball in Japan, find your family crest, and more at the official *Samurai Shortstop* web page:  
[www.samuraishortstop.com](http://www.samuraishortstop.com)

## Special Thanks

---

to Amanda Lee and Ben White at the Webb School of Knoxville, Tennessee, and to Jeanne Auensen at Holcomb Bridge Middle School in Alpharetta, Georgia, for their help in preparing this guide.