



TEACHERS' NOTES

Tomodachi: The Forest of the Night

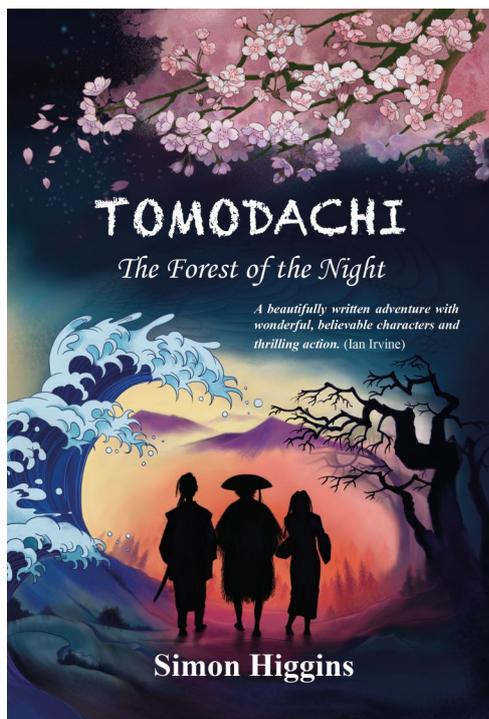
By Simon Higgins

Cover and internal illustrations by Jenny (Yuxiao) Wang

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About the book:

Shipwrecked at the far end of the world in a land at war.

Befriended by runaways fated to harrowing paths.

In constant danger from warriors, bandits and superstitious villagers who take his blue eyes and pale skin as proof that he's a demon...

Young Daniel Marlowe and his Japanese 'tomodachi', his friends, Otsu and Kenji, are about to stumble into a stomach-knotting adventure where a ferocious public test of samurai virtue and a murder investigation will collide. Their hazardous journey promises answers. The hope of being joyfully reunited, the risk of confirming loss.

But the spirit world has its own part to play in their destinies, for someone -or something- waits watchfully in the ancient Forest of the Night.

A beautifully written adventure with wonderful, believable characters and thrilling action. (Ian Irvine)

About the author:

Simon Higgins is a former police officer, prosecutor and private investigator specialising in murder cases. A martial artist and published author with an international career spanning over 20 years and 14 novels published in several languages, he has also been an Australian Government Ambassador for Asia Literacy and an Endeavour Award Recipient, funded by his country to live and study in China. Simon was the first westerner to pen an interactive Visual Novel published in both Chinese and English. In 2008 he competed in Kyoto, Japan, in the annual Taikai, the world championships of the

sword art laido, held on a mountaintop before a Japanese prince. Simon placed fifth. When not working on novels or teaching around the world, he leads a professional team writing an animated series for Chinese TV.

www.simonhiggins.net

About the illustrator

Jenny(Yuxiao) Wang, who also happens to be Simon Higgins's wife, is the CEO of Crane Animation and the creator of the iconic animated Chinese characters Cocoa and Little Love, watched on over 1000 TV channels in Asia and on planes, trains, buses, internet channels, even giant screens on skyscrapers. Her series has won over 160 awards. She has a Masters Degree in Creative Media from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, plus a degree in Engineering from the Chinese equivalent of MIT. An expert animator and artist, Jenny has taught students of all ages how to draw Manga and Anime style characters using techniques she developed that instantly impart skill and confidence. Her life story, going from a desperately poor village childhood in rural China to seeing her own creative and business dreams realised, is an empowering message of self-esteem and positivity she has shared with young people around the world.



Something from the author:

In 2007, after making several trips to Japan to study the art of the sword (laido), compete in martial arts contests and immerse myself in Japanese traditional culture, I wrote a novel called *Tomodachi: The Edge of the World*. Although Pulp Fiction Press, the press that published that novel no longer exists, the book itself went on to become a bestseller, a Readers Cup favourite in many states of Australia, and even a curriculum text for studies of medieval Asia in numerous public and private schools. More than 10 years after its publication, I am still receiving orders for the novel, sometimes for class sets. Most importantly in our present context, that book introduced the characters of Daniel Marlowe, Asano Kenji and Mori Otsu to a wide readership (*Publisher's note: Unlike in Western*

culture, Japanese names have the surname or family name first, given or personal name second). The main thrust of 'Edge of the World' was to show how Daniel wound up in Sengoku Jidai era Japan with rudimentary language skills on which, driven by desperate necessity, he could quickly build. Also to show that the three unlikely new friends were all separated from their families due to various hardships. Therefore they would have a common purpose and bond of suffering that united them.

In 2016 I was invited to contribute to the anthology (and later CBC Notable Book) *Rich & Rare*, for which I wrote an almost novella-length prequel to 'Edge of the World' called 'Tomodachi: The Silkworm and the Leaf'. It focused on Kenji's backstory; his circumstances as a political hostage, his first mentor, his eventual escape. The story was reviewed by Pam Harvey on the CBC's Reading Time website as the first of her favourites from the anthology: 'an exciting epic adventure of samurai with elegantly-written fight scenes'. Having again dabbled in the world of Daniel, Kenji and Otsu, my love for these characters was rekindled and I resolved to write a fresh novel about them that would be both a standalone introduction to the characters and a continuation of their saga. I had started, way back in 2010, playing with some ideas and had even written a few chapters, but after *Rich & Rare*, I was motivated to finish the work. The result was *The Forest of the Night*.

On one of my last trips to Japan before 2010, a group of my Japanese friends took me to the forested Mount Takao, just out of Tokyo, where, they told me, a large group of people in the 19th century had sighted a legendary Tengu monster high in a tree. They showed me the deep 'claw marks' visible in that tree's trunk to this day, high above ground level. I was fascinated by the impact that 'spirit world' beliefs still have on -in many cases, highly educated- Japanese people even now, and decided to base *The Forest of the Night* around one central idea. My three young heroes would have some kind of confrontation with the fabled Tengu monster, which, based on the earliest stories of Japanese history, pretty much comes across as either an alien predator fallen to the earth or a supernatural serial killer.

In my readings of Japanese history, I noticed that no matter what else was going on, members of the samurai culture both high born and 'petty' in rank generally did their best to regularly stage sword contents of various kinds. There is a great tradition in detective fiction that competitions of all kinds make wonderful backdrops for murder mysteries, a la Agatha Christie. So I decided to bring together three threads; a great 'taikai' (a public gathering of swordsmen for competition purposes), a series of grisly and baffling murders, and at least one of my characters discovering the fate of their immediate family and clan.

I chose Otsu as the focus character for this novel. 'Edge of the World' had concentrated on Daniel, and I had already decided that a future (and as yet still unwritten) 'epic finale' for this trilogy would centre around Kenji, his high-born relatives, and the siege of their castle by their clan's enemies. I also felt that in this story, we should get to know two exciting and impressive sides of this tough young woman: Otsu the fighter, Otsu the aspiring detective.



As with all my stories about Asia, the martial arts sequences featured in *The Forest of the Night* are completely true to life, practical and historically grounded. Each taikai fight scene found in the novel was fastidiously rehearsed with fellow laido black belts before becoming part of my narrative. While planning the book, I also committed myself to incorporating two fascinating aspects of samurai culture that are often overlooked in stories: that deep, abiding, almost childlike love of beauty on the part of these hard-bitten warriors and the impressive ji-samurai (farmer-samurai) knowledge bank of herbal and fungal medicine.

Something from the illustrator

I drew heavily from Japan's Ukiyo-e art tradition, for example, the work of masters like Hokusai. But I also included modern, familiar elements drawn from manga and anime character design, most recognisable in the internal illustrations. The wave on the cover signifies the shipwreck that brought Daniel to Japan, the shadowy, distant castle Kenji's home, the lonely, menacing forest the overall setting of the novel, the landscape that surrounds Otsu's battered village. The barely implied 'eye' ahead of the three young heroes, the cloud/wing-like texture in the sky and the tips of the waves and tree branches gradually assuming the shape of claws, all implies the lurking supernatural presence of the Tengu.



Classroom research and discussion activities

Aunt Masami is a skilled healer whose methods, though effective, are utterly unfamiliar and at times even disturbing to Daniel. Research medical 'science' as practiced by the Japanese in the mid-late 1500s and compare it with the methods used by doctors and folk healers in (Daniel's) England of the same period. Who would you rather be treated by?

The Japanese 'world of the *Yokai*' or 'spirit world' consistently surfaces in the novel through the various beliefs voiced by different characters including the *ronin* (wandering, masterless samurai) who brag of encounters with creatures such as the *Oni* and *Nukekubi*. Research this 'world of the Yokai' and estimate how many ghosts, goblins and unseen forces the average Japanese person of this era would most likely have believed in. Which would have been seen as the most relevant to their daily lives? Do any of these beliefs persist to this day in Japan?

The Tengu, which has a central place in this story, can be seen in many different ways in Japanese folklore, whether reasonably helpful if unpredictable—for example, see Duncan Ball and David Allan's *Two Tengu Tales from Japan*, published 2015 by Christmas Press—or, as in *Forest of the Night*, as a terrifying monster. If you were to treat the *Nihon Shoki* (Japan's ancient 'history' text) as literally true in what it says about the Tengu (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tengu>) then what do you make of this monster? Can you suggest a scientific explanation for it?

In Chapter Eight, 'Yin and Yang', we witness the surprising feminine power of the sophisticated entertainer as she uses a sorrowful, romantic song to diffuse a potentially deadly affray. This incident betrays the deeply emotional character of samurai society, often overlooked beneath the

more obvious layers of machismo, discipline and obligation. Using research, can you find other examples in Japanese history of 'yin' disarming 'yang'?

(The author recommends this site for credible research: <http://www.samurai-archives.com>)

Classroom creative activities

Study the dialogue and behaviour of the following supporting-role characters in the novel and write half a page for each sharing their 'withheld thoughts' on some aspect of the drama at hand. Share the things you can imagine them thinking but keeping to themselves out of caution, manners or for self-protection.

- a. Inspector Saito b. sword master Kuroda Jinsai c. the new lord of the domain

Imagine a Tengu has been spotted in a forest near your village. Draw a poster warning people to be careful.

Daniel is often the focus of unwelcome attention because of his 'strangeness' in the world in which he has found himself. Imagine if the roles were reversed and Otsu or Kenji were to be marooned in the England of that time. What might their experiences be like? Write a diary entry from their point of view.

Samurai warriors often wore masks as part of their armour, both to protect their faces and to make themselves look fierce. Look up some examples and create your own using cardboard, paper, and other such simple materials.

