

A Tale of Two Nations: The Perception and the Role of Disability in *Flowers for Algernon* and *A Personal Matter*

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A Personal Matter, 1964

Ōe Kenzaburō writes about one man, known as Bird, who has become disillusioned with his life. Although he has become a teacher at a cram school, and is married with a baby on the way, he is discontent with his life, and where he wants to go. Even though he has dreams of going to Africa to escape his current life, those are merely his dreams. His feeling of discontentment only grows when his wife gives birth to a baby boy with brain hernia, and the doctor does not even think that it is worth letting the baby live. Bird struggles to make a decision between taking care of the baby, and killing the baby. This story explores one man's challenge of choosing what he believes is best according to society versus what he would really like to do.

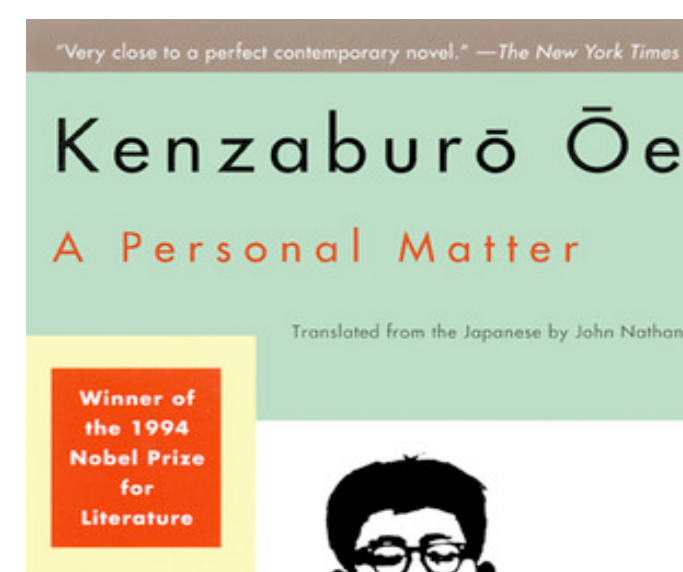


Flowers for Algernon, 1959

Daniel Keyes writes about a man named Charlie with a low IQ, who undergoes an operation designed to make him smarter. The science community, having succeeded on increasing the IQ of a mouse, Algernon, is convinced that the procedure will be a success on humans as well, and Charlie becomes their first human experiment. At first, the operation seems like it is a success—the doctors and the scientists see the immense amount of increase in Charlie's IQ. However, what they did not expect is for Charlie's intelligence to surpass those of his creators, for Charlie to develop his own sense of humanity, and for his mental health to deteriorate rapidly. Through this novel, Keyes explores what it means to be a person with disability, and their sense of humanity.

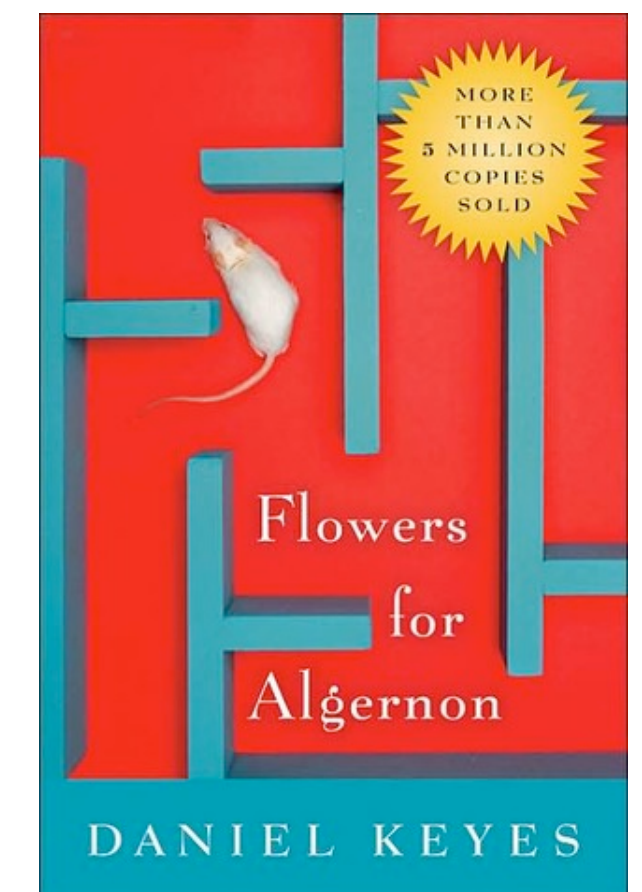
Japan Contexts:

- Anti-Anpo (Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between United States and Japan)
- Ōe himself had first hand experience with his child being born with disability
- Japan → group-oriented values



U.S. Contexts

- Civil Rights Movement
- Culture that focuses on individualism and autonomy



Research:

What are some fundamental differences between Japan and the U.S. that impacts disability? How do authors of the same time period in these two countries portray these values and disability? What are the bigger implications, and what are they ultimately saying about disability?

Conclusion

These two novels depict fundamental values of the two countries—Japan and the U.S. Japan tends to emphasize the group over the individual, while the U.S. emphasizes the opposite. However, what these two novels truly show us is that being tied down to only these perceptions and values is not doing anything for the people with disability. In fact, the best way to improve the lives of those with disabilities is to implement values that are outside of traditional norms. If U.S., rather than promoting autonomy, emphasized the importance of allowing people with disabilities—along with others who are dependent—into a group, and if Japan emphasized the idea of people breaking away from the mainstream culture, then the people with disabilities could be treated much better.