Brutality and carnage have long been part of the human experience; violent death has long scarred the human narrative. The twentieth century was arguably the most vicious in history, with the Holocaust, nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, genocides in Armenia, Cambodia, Bosnia, and Rwanda, and numerous other crimes against humanity. The nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 stand out from other atrocities not in terms of numbers of people killed or square miles destroyed; more people were killed and more square miles destroyed in the firebombings of Tokyo and other major Japanese cities during the Asia Pacific War than in the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Rather, as the first tactical deployment of nuclear weapons, the strikes on Hiroshima and Nagasaki revealed the fragility of existence, exposing how quickly people can annihilate both one another and the (a)biotic nonhuman. Just as significant, the aftermath of these attacks revealed a newfound willingness to risk obliteration. Far from leading to a worldwide ban on nuclear weapons, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki marked the beginning of the atomic age. More than six decades later, policy specialists and activists continue to debate the future of nuclear weapons in the face of worrisome proliferation, increased sophistication, and ominous threats of use.

Creative writings that engage with the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—self-consciously literary works that address circumstances leading to the attacks, the attacks themselves, their immediate aftermaths, their long-term consequences (imagined and actual), and their implications for individuals, societies, and the planet—have been an important part of global literary production from 1945 to the present day. Although long spurned by Japanese readers, critics, and
scholars, and until recently conspicuously absent from international bibliographies and anthologies of nuclear literature. Japanese atomic bomb literature is the most substantial subset of this corpus. In the last sixty-five years, authors writing in Japanese have created thousands of novels, poems, plays, and short stories, as well as testimonials, essays, and manga that discuss the atomic bombings. The multiplicity of Japanese creative work on the atomic bombings is in no small part attributable to disparities in writers’ experiences and motivations, as well as differences in the political and social circumstances surrounding textual production. At first, most Japanese who wrote self-consciously creative work on the atomic bombings were themselves hibakusha (survivor; lit. explosion-affected person); some had been established authors before the bombings, while others launched their careers with writings on the nuclear attacks. Many hibakusha were driven by survivor guilt (death guilt), understood as “the need to justify [one’s] own survival in the face of others’ deaths, a sense of ‘guilt over survival priority’” (Lifton 1967: 35). Many used writing about their experiences, and those of their loved ones and communities, in part as a way to work through some of their trauma, establish agency, instance, is one of the world’s best-known creative works on the bombings. Since the mid-1940s numerous creative artists outside Japan have incorporated discourse on the bombings into their poetry, prose, and drama. These include the Palestinian writer Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008), who in Dhākirah lil-nisyān (Memory for Forgetfulness, 1986) likens the Israeli siege on Beirut (particularly on August 6, 1982) to Hiroshima and the “forgetfulness” surrounding Hiroshima to that surrounding Palestine.

It was not until 1984 that Japanese published their first major anthology of atomic bomb literature, the fifteen-volume Nihon no genbaku bungaku (Japanese Literature of the Atomic Bomb), edited by the Kaku-sensō no kiken o uttaeru bungakusha. John Treat’s Writing Ground Zero: Japanese Literature and the Atomic Bomb, published half a century after the bombings, is the first monograph in English on Japanese literature of the atomic bomb. Likewise, in Nuclear Holocausts: Atomic War in Fiction, 1895–1984, a 250-page bibliography of creative texts on nuclear weapons, Paul Brians lists only a handful of Japanese writers, while Morty Sklar’s anthology Nuke-rebuke: Writers and Artists Against Nuclear Energy and Weapons contains only one selection by a Japanese writer.

For an overview of Japanese literature of the atomic bomb, see Thornber 2001. The present chapter looks primarily at narratives that are self-consciously literary, but it is important to keep in mind the increasing accessibility and popularity of other discourses on the atomic bombings. Websites such as www.geocities.jp/s20hibaku/index.html (English translations available at www.voshn.com), launched in 2006 and making accessible recordings of the stories of nearly 300 survivors, are greatly improving the availability of survivor testimonials. The popularity of Nakazawa Keiji’s (1939–) manga series Hadashi no Gen (Barefoot Gen, 1973–74 [1987–2008]) and its many adaptations, a series based on Nakazawa’s childhood experiences in Hiroshima, reveals sustained Japanese and foreign interest in survivor narratives.