

Introduction to the Novel

It all began with a sign. Posted on telephone poles, park benches, community centers, and a Woolworth's. Executive Order No. 9066—issued by President Franklin D. Roosevelt—sought to prevent “espionage and sabotage” by citizens of Japanese descent in the wake of the 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor. Japanese Americans were arrested, rounded up, and transported to detention centers across the United States, where in some cases they were held for several years.

This sign, introduced in the first line of Otsuka's novel *When the Emperor Was Divine,* prompts “the woman” to begin packing important belongings. After her children return from school and work quietly on their homework, the woman tells them that tomorrow they “will be going on a trip.” That trip will take them from a comfortable existence at their home in Berkeley, California, to a sterile and uncomfortable internment site in Topaz, Utah, “a city of tar-paper barracks behind a barbed-wire fence on a dusty alkaline plain high up in the desert.”

Otsuka's novel unfolds in five different but interconnected narrative perspectives, and moves hauntingly through the family's internment experience in the voices of the mother, daughter, son, and father. The woman and her children recount, in sober detail, the daily events of their journey to—and time in—Topaz, where besides the internees, their barracks, and the soldiers, there was “only the wind and the dust and the hot burning sand.”

After the war, the family is permitted to return home. But they return to a neighborhood that is neither familiar nor hospitable. Their home has been vandalized, their neighbors are at best aloof or at worst hostile, and their sense of place in America is forever changed.

Though the novel tells a powerful story of the fear and racism that led to exile and alienation, Otsuka weaves a compelling narrative full of life, depth, and character. *When the Emperor Was Divine* not only invites readers to consider the troubling moral and civic questions that emerge from this period in American history but also offers a tale that is both incredibly poignant and fully human.

#### Major Characters in the Novel

**The woman**  
Following her husband's arrest by the FBI after Pearl Harbor, the woman is faced with abandoning her family's comfortable home and abruptly becomes sole caregiver of her two children. With a sense of both resignation and resolution, she manages to hold her family together throughout their forced internment.

**The girl**  
A child of ten when the story begins, the girl's growing sense of the hard realities of the family's situation stands in sharp contrast to her brother's innocence. Although she wears Mary Janes, owns a doll from the Sears catalog, and enjoys black licorice and Dorothy Lamour, this sense of her American identity, as well as her heritage, will be challenged by the novel's events.

**The boy**  
An eight-year old with a child's natural instincts to make the best of any situation, the boy struggles with the absence of his father, whom he sees everywhere, even in his dreams. He passes the time playing cops and robbers and war, and interests himself in the radio and magazine accounts of the conflict overseas, but his father's absence proves a deep sadness in his life.

**The father**  
Arrested and sent away prior to the opening of the novel, the father's presence through much of the story is seen at a distance through his letters to his wife and his children. After his extended detention at the Lordsburg Facility in New Mexico, he returns home to his family a hollow man. His narration in the novel surfaces angrily in the final chapter titled “Confession.”

#### Julie Otsuka (b. 1962)

Julie Otsuka was born in Palo Alto, California, in 1962 to parents of Japanese descent. Her father, an Issei or Japanese immigrant, was an aerospace engineer. Her mother, a Nisei or second-generation Japanese American, was a laboratory technician before Julie's birth.

Otsuka excelled in school, and eventually moved east for college. In 1984 she earned her Bachelor of Arts degree at Yale University. Through her early 20s she studied to be a painter, but decided instead, after suffering a self-described “creative breakdown,” to turn her attention to another art form: writing.

In New York City the seeds of a highly successful career were planted when she enrolled in a writing workshop. Otsuka earned her MFA in writing from Columbia University in 1999. Part of her MFA thesis became the first two chapters of her novel When the Emperor Was Divine,published in 2002.

Otsuka's family history figures prominently in the novel. A day after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, her grandfather was arrested by the FBI on suspicion of being a Japanese spy. Her mother, grandmother, and uncle were subsequently interned at a camp in Topaz, Utah. Otsuka drew on both research and personal experience to craft this debut novel, which won the American Library Association's Alex Award and the Asian American Literary Award in 2003. Emperor has been assigned to first-year students at more than 45 colleges and universities.

Published in 2011, Otsuka's second novel—*The Buddha in the Attic*—is based on Japanese “picture brides” who were brought to America to marry men they had never met. In 2012 it won the PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction and was a finalist for the 2011 National Book Award, among other notable recognitions.

The literary journal *Granta* published three of her short stories, “Come, Japanese,” “The Children,” and “Diem Perdidi,” the first two of which were excerpts from her novel *The Buddha in the Attic.* Her short story, “Whites,” which is another excerpt from *The Buddha in the Attic,* was published by *Harper's.* Her work has also appeared in *The Best American Short Stories 2012*and *The Best American Non-required Reading 2012.*

Otsuka says she writes every day at her local café.

#### An Interview with Julie Otsuka

On February 6, 2014, Josephine Reed of the National Endowment for the Arts interviewed Julie Otsuka. Excerpts from their conversation follow.

**Josephine Reed:** The main characters (who are the narrators of the story) are nameless. Why did you make that choice?

**Julie Otsuka:** I actually had written an earlier version of the first chapter in which the mother had...a Japanese surname, and as I continued to write about these characters I thought it seemed more effective actually to un-name them. I was really interested in the psychology of the situation. [I] happened to be writing about Japanese Americans but...could have been writing about any ethnic group at any point in history. I feel like there has always been another group that's been expelled and sent away, and I also thought that my characters were people from whom everything had been taken: their liberty, their belongings, their sense of self. And I think that the one thing that you can't take away from someone is their name, so I wanted to leave them just some tiny shred of self so only they and they alone know who they are.

**JR:** It's also interesting because each character is telling us a different segment of the story.

**JO:** [T]he daughter is right on the cusp of adolescence and I think she's in a semi-rebellious phase, even if she happens to be in an internment camp; she's a very kind of feisty girl. And the boy is a little younger, he's seven when the novel starts; and he's a little bit too young to understand what's going on. He's a very dreamy child and very much a magical thinker and he thinks in the way that children often do that everything is his fault, that everyone is being sent away because he's done something wrong.... And even if he's in a camp in the middle of the desert for three and a half years, I feel children have this sense of wonder and connection to nature. He's still very compelled by the natural world around him, by the scorpions, by lizards, by snakes, by turtles just in the way that children are. And so it's not an utterly bleak and devastating experience, although in many ways it is, but I feel like there are these kind of moment spots of color and he's just—he's very innocent and he...makes up stories about why he is where he is.

[T]he point of view of the father is kind of held back throughout the entire novel. He's just this missing presence who we see glimpses of through the other characters, their memories of the father, their dreams of the father. And when we finally see him at the end of the novel, when he's reunited with the family, he's not the man that...his wife and children remember. He's a very bitter, angry man and clearly something has happened to him while he's been away and detained but we don't know exactly what. So there's this outburst of anger at the very end of the novel which again came to me as a surprise...[but] looking back I think the novel's just a very slow, simmering buildup of nerves; there's all this tension that's built up. And throughout [the mother's] emotions are very, very deeply buried. On the surface she tries to remain very calm for the sake of the children but...there has to be a release to that tension somewhere and I feel like there is at the end of the novel with the father's angry rant.

**JR:** In the chapter where the family comes home, part of what you explore is the way they're coming to grips with their racial identity. In that chapter, they're very much rejecting things that are Japanese.

**JO:** [T]hey were ashamed and also they're children. They still don't quite understand, but I think they don't want to be identified with anything that's Japanese. And of course right after Pearl Harbor was bombed, American families were just burning all of their Japanese things. There were bonfires in everyone's backyard. And so they come back and all they want to do—I think all any child wants to do is on some level is just really to fit back in. They don't want to stand out, so they really try to downplay their Japanese-ness as much as they can, and yet they're still seen as being very foreign...by their classmates. But they're determined never to be seen as the enemy again, which, I think, in some way means further rejection of their parents.

**JR:** The book was published in the year following 9/11, and it has a very particular resonance in that context.

**JO:** I finished writing the novel in June of 2001, so I had no idea that it would resonate in the way that it has post-9/11 as a sort of cautionary tale about what can happen when the government starts singling out ethnic groups as being the enemy. So, I thought the book, if I were lucky, might be respectfully reviewed as a historical novel. But I think for many, many Japanese Americans, 9/11 just brought back so many memories. It was just all so very, very familiar. You just had a group that overnight becomes the enemy. And I think it brought up a lot of unpleasant memories for many of the older Japanese Americans. You have people being rounded up in secret and sent away to secret detention camps and Guantanamo. I think being a dangerous enemy alien is not that unlike being an enemy combatant. And there are just all these eerie parallels, and I always thought while writing the novel that this could never happen again, but it just seems like in so many ways we never learn from history.... I've been traveling the country for years and speaking to many young people about the camps, but a lot of them have not heard about the camps still. I think it's not something that's included in most American history books, and so some of them are surprised...they'll say, “This is a work of fiction, right? It didn't really happen.” I'll have to explain that, yes, it is a work of fiction, but it is based on a very big and often omitted historical truth.

**JR:** And it was very moving in the period after 9/11, because as you say, Japanese Americans tend not to speak very often about the camps and their experiences, but many, many spoke up right after 9/11.

**JO:** They did, and many reached out to Arab American, Muslim American groups, too, and I think it's very hard for Japanese Americans to speak up and assert themselves, especially Japanese Americans of that generation. I think it was a very important thing for them to do, to reach out and to say, “You are not alone,” and just to be a living lesson in history on what can go wrong.

#### The Life and Times of Julie Otsuka

**1940s**

* + 1941: Japan attacks Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, December 7.
  + 1941: FBI arrests Otsuka's grandfather as spy, December 8.
  + 1942: President Roosevelt issues Executive Order 9066, authorizes internment, February 19.
  + 1942: Otsuka's mother and family travel to Topaz Internment Camp.
  + 1944: In Korematsu v. United States, Supreme Court rules against Japanese American man who refused to leave his home for internment camp.
  + 1945: World War II ends in Japan, August 15.
  + 1945: Otsuka's family returns to home in Berkeley, California, September 9.

**1950s**

* + 1952: The Immigration and Nationality Act liberalizes immigration from Asia.
  + 1952: Japanese Americans given the opportunity, for the first time, to become naturalized U.S. citizens.

**1960s**

* + 1962: Otsuka born in California.
  + 1962: USS Arizona Memorial at Pearl Harbor dedicated.
  + 1965: Immigration and Naturalization Act abolishes quotas based on national origin.

**1970s**

* + 1971: Emergency Detention Act of 1950 repealed, removing threat that internment camps could be reactivated.
  + 1976: President Gerald Ford rescinds Executive Order 9066.

**1980s**

* + 1981: Otsuka visits Japan for the first time.
  + 1988: President Reagan signs Civil Liberties Act, HR 442, with an apology and reparations to Japanese Americans.

**1990s**

* + 1990: President George H.W. Bush proclaims May as Asian Pacific American Heritage Month.

**2000s**

* + 2002: When the Emperor Was Divine published.
  + 2007: Topaz Internment Camp designated National Historic Landmark.

**2010s**

* + 2011: The Buddha in the Attic published.
  + 2011: Otsuka wins PEN/Faulkner award for The Buddha in the Attic.

Discussion Questions

1. Each but the final chapter of *Emperor* begins with an image. Otsuka has said that her idea for the novel actually began with one: the image of the mother standing in front of the evacuation order. What do you imagine was going through the woman's mind when she read this evacuation order?
2. What possible reasons might Otsuka have had in depicting in such detail the images of Americana (Woolworths, the YMCA, Lundy's Hardware, etc.) in the first chapter?
3. What do you think about the United States government's choice of words like “evacuated,” “assembly center,” or “relocation center” to describe the internment camps?
4. “*Shikata ga nai*” is a phrase in Japanese that means “it cannot be helped now.” Does this phrase influence the mother's or father's behavior in the novel? What other factors might explain their behavior?
5. The boy inscribes on his pet tortoise's shell his family's identification number. In another place, we learn that the girl “[p]inned to her collar...an identification number.” We also learn that “around her throat she wore a faded silk scarf.” What might Otsuka be suggesting about the experience of internment for these children?
6. In an interview, Otsuka said that she “wanted [the novel] to be a universal story, although it happened to a particular group of people.” What universalities did you find present in the story or the characters' experiences?
7. Compare the views of the family's neighbors from before the internment and after. Do you notice any differences in the family's interactions with their neighbors? In what ways does the family itself act differently?
8. At one point in the fourth chapter, the narrator states, “we tried to avoid our own reflections wherever we could. We turned away from shiny surfaces and storefront windows. We ignored the passing glances of strangers.” How does this reflect one of the principal psychological effects of the internment on the family?
9. The final chapter of the novel is told in a much different voice than the preceding chapters. What purpose might Otsuka have wanted to serve by constructing the father's voice in this way?
10. What do you think the title means? How do you see it related to the experience of internment?
11. Otsuka skillfully places subtle but significant details in her narrative. When the mother goes to Lundy’s hardware store, she notices a “dark stain” on the register “that would not go away” [p. 5]. The dog she has to kill is called “White Dog” [see pp. 9–12]. Her daughter’s favorite song on the radio is “Don’t Fence Me In.” How do these details, and others like them, point to larger meanings in the novel?
12. When the Emperor Was Divine concludes with a chapter titled “Confession.” Who is speaking in this final chapter? Is the speech ironic? Why has Otsuka chosen to end the novel in this way? What does the confession imply about our ability to separate out the “enemy,” the “other,” in our midst?

Sources:

<http://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/13-fiction/9766-when-emperor-was-divine-otsuka?start=3>

<http://neabigread.org/books/whentheemperorwasdivine/readers-guide/>