

# **A Child in Prison Camp Short Guide**

## **A Child in Prison Camp by Shizuye Takashima**

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## Overview

Although first published in Canada in 1971 and in the United States in 1974, *A Child in Prison Camp* assumes contemporary significance because of recent landmark court decisions, especially in the United States, favoring reparations for the injustices suffered by the people of Japanese origin who were sent to relocation camps during World War II. Generally, both the Canadian and United States governments have decided that the internments were discriminatory and unjust, ideas Takashima suggests in her novel.

In addition, *A Child in Prison Camp* is another rendering of a child's experiences during World War II, and its autobiographical basis suggests other such accounts: Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* (1952), Bette Greene's *Summer of My German Soldier* (1973), and Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1960). In a universal sense, *A Child in Prison Camp* emphasizes how children can adapt to extreme situations and from these experiences establish meaning and purpose for their lives. Shizuye must, for example, adapt to her new surroundings but also must come to terms with school, petty jealousies, sad partings, and disagreements with her father.

Finally, Shizuye's narrative provides insights into a historical event with which the modern reader may be unfamiliar: the Japanese internments. Her story also sheds light on Japanese customs and traditions, such as Kabuki plays, religious rites, bathing customs, and Christmas celebrations.

## About the Author

Shizuye "Shichan" Takashima was born on June 12, 1928, in Vancouver, British Columbia, to Senji and Teru Fujiwara Takashima. As a result of her premature birth, Takashima was sickly and walked with a slight limp.

Although she was actually fourteen when the Canadian government uprooted her family during World War II, in *A Child in Prison Camp* she makes herself two years younger because she "felt younger" and "seemed so helpless" at the time. Her four brothers were separated from the family and sent to another camp, and Joseph, her younger brother, eventually joined the Canadian Army and served in India. Along with her parents and sister, Takashima was sent to a relocation camp near New Denver, seven hundred miles from Vancouver.

At the New Denver internment camp, she attended grade school first under makeshift arrangements and then formally under the nuns of Notre Dame des Agnes. After the war, Takashima attended high school in Hamilton, Ontario, and chose art as her major subject. After graduation, she enrolled in the Ontario College of Art, earned an associate degree in 1953, and then attended the Pratt Institute in 1966.

Takashima became a distinguished artist whose paintings were exhibited in the Gerold Morris Gallery, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, and the Art Gallery of Toronto. In addition, she was a guest instructor at the Ontario College of Art in 1971. Her excellent and delicate water colors appear in *A Child in Prison Camp*, which received numerous awards, including the Canada Council Award, the Canadian Association of Children's Librarians Gold Medal, and the Look of Books award.

According to Takashima, she wrote *A Child in Prison Camp* because she believes young readers need and appreciate beautiful, meaningful books.

Regarding the subject of *A Child in Prison Camp*, she says its prime thrust is toward children, which accounts for the book's "language of the heart" that also appeals to adults. At the same time, Takashima argues that children should learn about this infamous period of Canadian history. Arising from her professed religion, Agni Yogi, and the influence of her personal guru, Ralph Harris Houston, to whom she dedicates the book, *A Child in Prison Camp* emphasizes universal brotherhood and describes how nature's beauty helped Takashima transcend the unjust, often inhumane treatment of her family, friends, and other Japanese-Canadians and Japanese-Americans.

# Setting

A Child in Prison Camp has two secondary settings and one primary setting that span the years between 1942 and 1964. The first secondary setting occurs in March 1942 in Vancouver as the Canadian government begins relocating Japanese-Canadian men and boys.

Some of the older men board the trains stoically, others loudly protest, and some are bodily thrown onto the trains.

During this time, Shizuye and her mother visit Vancouver's Exhibition Grounds, where Japanese women and children await relocation amid foulsmelling and unsanitary conditions.

This initial setting emphasizes the unjust, sometimes brutal treatment of the Japanese-Canadians who are, after all, Canadian citizens and human beings.

The other secondary setting is Toronto, Ontario, on June 7, 1964, when Canadian prime minister Lester B. Pearson dedicates the long-awaited Japanese Cultural Center, and during the dedication Pearson admits that the Canadian government's treatment of Japanese Canadians "was a black mark against Canada's traditional fairness and devotion to the principles of human rights."

This epilogue underscores the narrative's primary aim—to transcend the tragedy of this historical "black mark."

The book's major setting is the relocation camp near New Denver. In this setting Takashima focuses upon life in the camp and in New Denver. Her experiences in New Denver reveal the prejudicial Canadian attitudes towards the Japanese. When Shizuye and her sister Yuki go into town, the residents are rude or sullen, and the merchants charge exorbitant prices for most supplies. In the relocation-camp setting, Takashima concentrates on the natural beauty of the area, which contrasts with the camp's primitive conditions and the people's attempts to get water, lights, schools, bathrooms, and bath houses.

While the primitive conditions emphasize the prevailing prejudices, the area's natural beauty eventually enables Shizuye to transcend the terrible injustices. In addition, the narrative alludes to historical events that will eventually affect the camp, Canada, and the world: Germany's surrender, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the end of World War II.

## Social Sensitivity

In the afterword, Takashima writes that *A Child in Prison Camp* is "based on what happened to me and other people of Japanese origin living in Canada," and she adds that some of the names have been changed because "not all of us care to be reminded or questioned about those painful years." Her account portrays with great sensitivity the discrimination against naturalized Japanese-Canadians and Japanese-Americans. This discrimination becomes particularly evident in certain sections of the narrative. For example, Yuki says, "West Coast people never liked the Orientals. Yellow Peril is what they call us." Shizuye's father also complains that Canadians think Asians are inferior and hire them only for menial jobs as servants, gardeners, and common laborers. In a larger sense, such prejudicial treatment extends to the plights of Native Americans and blacks in the histories of Canada and the United States.

Despite the grave social injustices that Takashima's novel portrays, it is as a whole an optimistic work that celebrates the resilience of the human spirit.

Shizuye not only survives the tribulations of internment but manages to make the best of a bad situation, gaining strength and insight into human nature from her experiences.



## Literary Qualities

*A Child in Prison Camp* belongs to the rites-of-passage literary tradition that traces a child's or adolescent's maturation process as he or she experiences and learns from life. Shizuye is only eleven years old when she and her family are uprooted and forced to move to the relocation camp. This experience will shape her life and affect her destiny. For instance, while Shizuye misses hustling, bustling Vancouver life, she loves the natural beauty surrounding the internment camp: the mountains and dark pine trees, the clear lakes and streams, the various seasons, and the ever changing skies. After the war, when she begins to concentrate on her art career, landscapes become one of the themes in her paintings. In addition, the natural beauty makes her aware of her desire to remain in Canada and enables her to transcend the harsh realities of this period in her life.

Another valuable literary quality of *A Child in Prison Camp* resides in Takashima's poignant, color-filled descriptions that recall and refine her childhood impressions through the eyes of the more mature painter. She describes, for example, the first snow and the "lemony-yellow moon . . . her silver falling on the white earth." In another instance, as night comes slowly, she describes "the pale, pale moon . . .

suspended in the scarlet sky." The mountain river roars "with great strength," and "white candles . . . create a circle of light on the wood table."

Takashima's bright but delicate water colors complement her verbal images as well as the book's plot and themes.

The narrative is also suspenseful.

First, the suspense results from the evacuation to an unknown place— Shizuye wonders where the camp is, what it will be like, and what may happen. Other suspenseful elements include the fire at night, Shizuye's first trip into New Denver, and her father's initial decision to return to Japan after the war, a move the other family members oppose.



# Themes and Characters

Shizuye "Shichan" Takashima is the protagonist of this autobiographical novel about a girl's rites of passage.

Through her personal recollections, the author records the hardships and beauty of camp life while providing insights into Japanese culture and traditions. Although she realistically records the narrow-mindedness of some Canadians and Japanese, her insights and reflections underscore the narrative's affirmative theme: the ability of the individual to see beauty and meaning in life and thus transcend human foibles, follies, and even tragedy.

Senji Takashima, Shizuye's father, represents the defiant Japanese who, angry about their unjust treatment, protest and petition until improvements are made in the camp. Senji also represents those Japanese who, because of this treatment, wish to return to Japan after the war. In this sense, his desire to return to Japan contributes to the narrative's suspense. Yet, when he eventually decides to remain in Canada, his decision reinforces the plot's affirmative theme since he finds work with a wealthy Canadian family who treat him extremely well.

As a naturalized Canadian who has lived in Canada for twenty-five years, Teru Takashima, Shizuye's mother, does not wish to leave Canada, where she knows her family will fare well, and she even adamantly tells her husband that she will not follow him to Japan.

Mrs. Takashima preserves Japanese culture and tradition when she teaches her daughters to make clothes and cook Japanese foods.

Yuki Takashima, Shizuye's older sister, has her own rites of passage, and she also instructs and guides Shizuye in the ways of the world. After the war and internment camp, Yuki's life also highlights the book's affirmative theme as she moves to Hamilton, Ontario, begins working, and eventually marries and has three children. Although Takashima actually has four brothers, only one appears in *A Child in Prison Camp*. The author explains that she made the character David a composite of all her brothers "to keep the account uncomplicated," and so David's characterization suggests what happened to most Japanese-Canadian boys. David's experiences further illuminate the social injustice theme. He is separated from his family and sent to a different internment camp, a fate that befell Takashima's four brothers. In relation to the transcendence theme, David finishes school, moves to Toronto where he obtains a good job, and becomes very successful.

Mr. and Mrs. Kono and Day-ko, their daughter, typify Japanese-Canadian families who endure much suffering and even think about returning to Japan but fare better by remaining in Canada. Mr. Mori, who fought in World War I for Canada, underscores the prejudice theme because as a camp official he is not trusted by the prisoners, yet he works diligently to improve conditions within the camp.



# Adaptations

With a cast of over one hundred children, the Fuji Drama Company in Tokyo, Japan, produced a musical adaptation of *A Child in Prison Camp*.

The Canadian Broadcasting Company produced an hour-long radio adaptation of the novel.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Takashima believes that the natural beauty surrounding the relocation camp helped her transcend the harsh realities of life. Cite and discuss two or three instances in the narrative that show this.
2. A Child in Prison Camp contains many suspenseful elements. What are some of these elements and how do they create suspense?
3. The narrative contains many instances that emphasize the importance of education. Cite some of these and explain why education is important for the characters.
4. Cite several examples of prejudice in the plot and determine how you would react to similar situations if you were the victim. What remedies would you suggest to alleviate such prejudice?
5. The instances of social and racial prejudice in A Child in Prison Camp may be universal, applying to other ethnic or social minorities as well. Using examples from your own life and observations, discuss the instances in the novel that have universal implications.
6. The beauty of Takashima's narrative lies in her poetic descriptions and imagery. Discuss how specific descriptions affect the mood and motion of the story.
7. Considering the injustices perpetrated upon them during World War II, should Japanese-Canadians and Japanese-Americans receive monetary or other compensation?
8. Minor characters contribute to the plot and theme in a story. Discuss the significance of the following characters in terms of both plot and theme: Mrs. Abe, Mr. and Mrs. Kono, Miss Mizuno, Yoko-San, Mr. Mori.



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Takashima is also a famous artist whose paintings hang in prestigious galleries. Prepare a report about her painting career, including a discussion of her typical subjects, the medium she uses (oil, water color, etc.), and what critics say about her art.
2. Consult *The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, choose two or three articles, and report on the latest efforts of the United States or Canada to compensate for the injustices their citizens of Japanese descent suffered during World War II.
3. Read Marnie Mueller's personal account in the *Progressive* (June 1988) and report on the effects her experiences with Japanese relocation camps had on her.
4. Examine Ansel Adams's *Born Free and Equal: Photographs of the Loyal Japanese Americans at the Manzanar Relocation Center* and prepare a report on Adams's photographs as they relate to Takashima's written account.
5. Prepare a report on the role of Japanese-American soldiers in World War II.
6. Prepare a report on Ralph G. Martin's *Boy from Nebraska: The Story of Ben Kuroki*. Focus on why Kuroki enlisted in the military, whether he was discriminated against, and how he became an American hero.
7. Like *A Child in Prison Camp*, the following are autobiographical accounts of the effects of World War II on a child or adolescent: Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*, Bette Greene's *Summer of My German Soldier*, Elie Wiesel's *Night*.

Read one of these or another of your own choosing and prepare a report comparing your choice with *A Child in Prison Camp*. Some possible considerations include conditions the characters experience, how they cope with their experiences, and whether they transcend their experiences.

8. The following are fictional accounts about children's experiences during World War II: Hester Burton's *In Spite of All Terror*, Rumer Godden's *An Episode of Sparrows*, and Erik Haugaard's *Little Fishes*. Either read one of these or another similar account and prepare a report in which you discuss the conditions the characters experience, what they do to cope with their experiences, and how they transcend their experiences.
9. Read Brent Ashabranner and Russell Davis's *Chief Joseph: War Chief of the Nez Perce* or Shannon Garst's *Crazy Horse*. Prepare a report about social injustices perpetrated on Native Americans by the United States government and indicate any similarities or differences between these injustices and those in *A Child in Prison Camp*.

## For Further Reference

Adams, Ansel E. *Born Free and Equal: Photographs of the Loyal Japanese at the Manzanar Relocation Center*. New York: U.S. Camera, 1944. Proving that a picture is worth a thousand words, Adams records the sorrows and joys of the interned Japanese-Americans.

Christgau, John. "Enemies": *World War II Alien Internments*. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1985. An informative, easy-to-read account with photographs of the internment of German prisoners of war and Japanese-Americans.

Drinan, R. F. "A Thousand Days' Detention." *America* 157 (October 17, 1987): 247-249. This excellent article about the Japanese-American detention includes photographs.

Leo, John. "An Apology to Japanese Americans." *Time* 131 (May 2, 1988): 70. This article explains what is being done to compensate the Japanese-Americans.

Martin, Ralph G. *Boy from Nebraska: The Story of Ben Kuroki*. New York: Harper & Row, 1946. A nonfiction account of how one Japanese-American became a hero in World War II.

Mueller, Mamie. "Interned." *Progressive* 52 (June 1988): 34. Mueller reminisces about the Tule Lake Relocation Center where her father was a guard.

Myer, Dillon S. *Uprooted Americans*.

Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1972. Myer's account includes informative photographs, government documents, reports, and official papers about relocating Japanese-Americans.

Schindehette, Susan, and N. Y. Mineta.

"The Wounds of War." *People's Weekly* 28 (December 14, 1987): 173-174.

This is an excellent background source about the Japanese-Americans and relocation camps.

Weglyn, Michi. *Year of Infamy: The Untold Story of America's Concentration Camps*. New York: William Morrow, 1976. With pictures, maps, and newspaper clippings, this book provides informative background material.



# Copyright Information

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