When the Emperor Was Divine: A Novel Study Guide

When the Emperor Was Divine: A Novel by Julie Otsuka

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The novel When the Emperor Was Divine tells the story of a Japanese-American family separated and incarcerated after the outbreak of World War II. The novel begins in Berkeley, California in the days leading up to the forced relocation and follows the family until their return after the war.

The first chapter comes from the perspective of the mother. She has been packing for nine days after first seeing announcements requiring all people of Japanese descent to report for relocation. She completes the majority of her work while the children, a girl and a boy, are in school. Some of the tasks she completes would upset the children, so she does these while the children are away. She must complete these tasks alone because her husband is away, having been arrested immediately after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor.

The second chapter comes from the perspective of the eleven-year-old daughter while three of the family members are on an eastbound train. The family has been confined at a horseracing track for the past four and a half months, and now they are on their way to a relocation camp in Utah. The girl observes events on and off the train as if she is on an adventure rather than on her way to a long confinement.

The third chapter takes place inside the Topaz War Relocation Center in Central Utah. It comes from the perspective of an eight-year-old boy. He understands things as an eight-year-old, but the reader will gather far more than the boy. In addition to witnessing events and conditions inside the camp, the narrative from the boy's perspective tells a great deal about his love for his family and his intense longing for his father who is imprisoned at a camp in New Mexico.

The fourth chapter of the novel is set back in Berkeley and begins immediately after the family returns to their home. It comes from a first person plural perspective, and it is a collective perspective of both children. The children are wiser and perhaps a bit cynical as they observe how conditions and attitudes have changed during their absence. While they had been wealthy before being relocated, they now have no financial assets beyond owning their empty and ransacked home. Employment prospects for Japanese-Americans are few, and the family must work hard just to survive. The father is finally released and joins the family at home in Berkeley. The children struggle to try to understand how their father, though still caring, has changed such a great deal in their years apart.

The fifth and final chapter is distinct from the previous four chapters in that it comes from a singular first person narrator, the father. This short but powerful chapter illustrates the father's views on having been accused of being a dangerous "enemy alien" and taken from his family and his livelihood. The chapter could narrowly address those who made him suffer, or it could address all who allow themselves to think in stereotypes. The final chapter also serves as a sort of epilogue for all those who were wrongly incarcerated based on national origin.

Chapter 1 Evacuation Order No. 19

Chapter 1 Evacuation Order No. 19 Summary

When the Emperor Was Divine tells the story of a Japanese-American family from Berkeley, California that was forced to relocate during World War II. The story begins in the spring of 1942 as the family is preparing to report for internment.

Signs have begun appearing all over town instructing people of Japanese descent that they must prepare to be relocated. After the first time a woman sees a notice, she goes home to pack. She is still packing nine days later. Storefronts are being boarded up, and newspapers deliver reports of the ongoing war.

The woman visits the hardware store, and the owner compliments her on her new glasses. The woman asks about buying a large hammer, but the store does not stock any hammers larger than what she already owns. The woman and the owner make small talk about the weather while she buys tape and twine. The owner does not want to accept her money, and he gives her candy for her children. As she is leaving he compliments the woman on her dress, and when she thanks him she calls him by name for the first time even though she has known him for many years.

The woman shops for duffel bags but learns that all stores in town have sold out of duffel bags. She returns home and resumes packing, separating things she will store from things she will need to take on the journey. In her boy's room she sets aside clothing and packs away his comics and toys. Her girl's room has a do not disturb sign on the door.

The woman packs all the household items in boxes and locks the boxes in a single room in the house. She does not know where she is going or for how long she will be away. The sign about the relocation says pets could not be taken, so the woman gives the cat to the neighbors, and she cooks the chicken. Tired from working, the woman listens to the radio while she eats her lunch.

After lunch the woman feeds an old dog. While the dog eats, the woman thinks about how her husband had been arrested months earlier. First he had been taken to Montana and then to Texas. She has received letters. The letters arrive with the stamp "Detained Enemy Alien Mail." The woman ties the dog to a tree and is kind to it while she praises it for being such a good dog. The woman tells the dog to roll over and play dead. While the dog is pretending to be dead, the woman smashes it in the head with a shovel. She buries the dog beneath a tree. She thinks about how she is tired and how she is forty-one.

Her children, a boy and a girl, arrive home from school. The woman reminds the girl, ten, and the boy, seven, that they will depart tomorrow. The boy asks about the dog, and

he calls for the dog. The boy says that the dog is getting deaf with age. The mother slices apples and pours barley water for the children.

The mother and children have chicken for dinner. While the boy eats, the girl recites prime numbers. After dinner, the girl practices piano, and the boy asks his mother where they are going. She does not know but tells the boy to complete his packing. He cannot fit all he wants to take in his suitcase.

With the children in bed asleep, the mother releases the family's pet macaw. She drinks some plum wine and then hides the bottle in the basement behind the furnace. The woman tries to sleep and thinks that in the morning they will have to report to the Civil Control Station and board a bus to an unknown location.

Chapter 1 Evacuation Order No. 19 Analysis

The narration is third person from the perspective of the woman. The action begins shortly after the United State's entry into World War II. If the woman's husband had been arrested in December of 1941, instead of being allowed to relocate with all the other people of Japanese ancestry, then he must have been a person the FBI considered to be of significant influence within the Japanese-American community. The hardware store owner's actions are significant. He knows that Japanese-Americans have been ordered to report for relocation, and he thinks a valued customer has enough worries without having to pay for twine and tape.

The decorations within the house, particularly the boy's room, are remarkable in that they look like those of any other boy at that era in time. They seem very American, not something one would expect from an "enemy alien." Both the children seem very mainstream American. All of the girl's concerns are typical of a child that age.

The woman takes precautions to shield the children from the most traumatic elements of the preparations for forced relocation. She spares them the knowledge of what has to the beloved dog and macaw. The woman's demeanor throughout seems surprisingly stoic considering all that she is losing.

Chapter 2 Train

Chapter 2 Train Summary

In September of 1942, the girl, her brother, and her mother are on an eastbound train with many other Japanese-Americans. The girl observes the scenery out the window, and to combat boredom throws a lemon out the train window.

Since spring the family had been living with many other Japanese-Americans at the Tanforan horse racing track south of San Francisco. Now they are on a train bound for Utah. Soldiers put crates of oranges and lemons on the train, and though the girl likes oranges, she cannot eat them because the motion of the train makes her feel ill. She vomits.

At noon the train passes through a small town in Nevada. The girl watches the people on the streets, and she leans out the window to wave and yell at the people. A soldier touches her on the shoulder and politely asks her to stop. The soldier tells the other occupants of the train car to pull down their window shades. A man in the seat in front of the girl turns and says something in Japanese, but the girl can only shake her head because she speaks only English.

The girl thinks about how the last time the train had gone through a city someone threw a rock through a window. Her brother asks her if she thinks they will see horses, and the girl remembers what she had once read in National Geographic about wild mustangs in the American west. The girl says, yes, they likely will see horses, and when he asks how many they will see, she says possibly eight. The girl thinks about how her brother has been interested in horses ever since their time at Tanforan.

In remembering Tanforan, she thinks of the summer living in what had once been horse stalls. In the mornings they had washed their faces in the water troughs, and at night they had slept on mattresses stuffed with straw. Though the stalls had been painted and had linoleum floors, they still smelled of horses, and horsehair was everywhere. The flies had been bad. Her brother has decided that when he gets older he wants to be a jockey. She explains that jockeys are very small men and asks if he too hopes to always be very small. The boy cannot decide.

Late in the afternoon the boy shows his sister a book about hunting in Africa. One photograph shows a charging elephant. The boy asks what his sister thinks happened to the photographer, and she says he was probably trampled.

While waiting in line for the restroom, the girl speaks to a man. She sees his initials on his handkerchief and asks the man what they stand for. He tells her that his name is Ted Ishimoto. The girl does a great deal of talking and Ted makes occasional polite comments. The girl tells Ted that her father is now being held in Lordsburg, New

Mexico. Ted asks if her father writes to her, and despite receiving letters weekly, the girl says that her father never writes.

On the way back to her seat, she passes a younger girl playing with a doll. The little girl offers to give away her doll. Once back in her seat the girl tells her mother about meeting Ted while her mother brushes the girl's hair. Later the girl takes a deck of playing cards from her suitcase and tries to entice her brother to pick a card. He is not interested, so she picks a card herself and throws it out the window. She then asks her brother to guess what card she threw out the window. The mother tries to encourage the children by saying that the train trip will be over in one more day.

One by one the girl throws the playing cards out of the window. When she gets to the last card, she turns it over and sees an image of Yosemite National Park. This reminds the girl of the trip her family took to the park. They had stayed in a nice hotel, and every evening at dinner the girl had ordered lobster.

The boy and the girl work together on a drawing of their father. The girl is a good artist and has won some contests in elementary school. After completing the drawing, the girl looks at her collection of postcards from her father. The postcards are from various places in Montana and New Mexico. In one, her father mentions her birthday and says that if she will tell him what she wants, he will order it from a department store in San Francisco. On her birthday she had received a bottle of perfume, which she has used up a long time ago. She still has not written her father because to her every day seems like the next.

A soldier enters the train car and orders the people to put down the window shades. The mother sits on suitcases so the children can have more room to sleep. They wake when someone throws a brick through a window of the train. The girl tries to go back to sleep and thinks of home. She remembers a time that the dog ran away for a week, and she remembers reading the newspaper with her father in the mornings before anyone else woke.

The girl pulls back the shade and looks into the night. In the moonlight she can see a herd of mustangs running, and she tells her brother to look out the window.

In the morning the train arrives in Delta, Utah. Armed soldiers escort the people from the train onto busses. The bus drives through the town and out into the desert until it arrives at a camp called Topaz.

Chapter 2 Train Analysis

Again the narrative comes from a third person narrator, but this time the perspective is from the girl. Six months have passed since the last chapter, and the girl is now eleven, and the boy is eight. The girl has the innocent and positive views of a healthy child that age. She does not realize that the same people she enjoys looking at through the train window could be the same type of people who throw bricks through the window of the

train. She seems to make the most of the trip by reading maps, looking at scenery, and recalling what she has read of the American west.

Further evidence of the Americanization of the children comes when the old man speaks Japanese to the girl. She does not speak Japanese. She speaks only English.

Though not intended as punishment, the fact that the people had been housed in former horse stalls is symbolic. The internees have as much choice in their lives as livestock.

The girl's reasons for telling Ted that her father does not write to her probably do not require much analysis. She is eleven. She is bored. She knows that saying that her father does not write will get her much more attention or sympathy than saying that he writes every week and even arranges for her to receive birthday gifts.

The girl's remembrance of the trip to Yosemite provides evidence that the family had been wealthy or at least financially well off before the war. Her mention of her father's travels might also provide some explanation of why he is not with the rest of the family but instead had been arrested immediately after the outbreak of war. If his job required a great deal of international travel, the authorities might have worried that it also afforded more opportunities for espionage regardless of the father's loyalty to the United States.

While the girl may not notice, the presence of soldiers armed with bayonet tipped rifles is an image showing that these Japanese, Americanized or unthreatening as they are, truly are regarded as the enemy.

Chapter 3 When the Emperor Was Divine, pages 49-76

Chapter 3 When the Emperor Was Divine, pages 49-76 Summary

At the internment camp in Utah the boy thinks he sees his father everywhere. Once at mealtime in the mess hall he shouts out, "Papa." His mother corrects him, and his sister kicks him.

The boy and his mother and sister live in a single room in some tar-papered barracks. They have few furnishings besides their three iron cots and radio. The boy has a photo of Joe DiMaggio fastened to the wall. At night the boy listens to reports of the war on the radio, and he can also hear through the thin walls the activities of other people.

The guards at the camp are soldiers, and the boy imagines that some of them have been in combat in the Pacific. His mother gives him specific directions for behavior. She tells him to never touch the fence, never talk to the guards, never stare at the sun, and never say the emperor's name out loud. The boy often walks under the guard towers whispering the name of the emperor, Hirohito.

The boy thinks that the desert is not like any desert he has read about. There are no images of the Arabian deserts he has seen in books. He and other children make life as normal as possible. They play games. He sees Life Magazine and photographs of the war.

Most of the boy's days are the same. His mother tries to encourage him by saying that when the war is over they will go home. The boy asks when his mother thinks the war will end, but she does not know.

In the next room live a man, his wife, and the wife's mother, Mrs. Kato. Mrs. Kato is old. Sometimes she gets lost or forgets where she is. Mrs. Kato sometimes imagines that she hears her mother calling her.

Many of the men who have menial jobs at the camp, like dishwashers or janitors, had had important jobs before the war. Some had supervised large companies or had even owned their own companies. Others who had menial jobs before the war find the camp life easy. Once, the boy's mother encounters her former housekeeper when she carries a bucket of water. Mrs. Ueno, the former housekeeper, takes away the bucket and carries it for the boy's mother despite his mother's protests. Mrs. Ueno says she is afraid the boy's mother will hurt her back.

Sometimes the boy wonders if he had done something wrong that caused his father to be taken away and his mother and sister and him to be sent to the desert. He tries to

think of all the things he might have done wrong. He thinks about things like letting a pet goldfish die or breaking a chain letter. Often he hopes he is dreaming and when he wakes he will find his father in the kitchen cooking breakfast.

The boy's sister wears a Panama style hat because she says she does not want her face to get too tan. Often, the boy's sister tells him of things she has learned. She tells him of the natural history of the area they inhabit and how once long ago it had been under a giant inland sea. She tells him of the nearby town and how there life goes on as normal.

The boy often dreams of water and fantasizes often about having a Coca Cola. He looks forward to the letters from his father that arrive every few days, but sometimes the letters are so heavily censored that he has no idea what his father is saying. Despite the hardships of life at the camp, his interests remain typical for an American boy his age: baseball, outlaws, his pet tortoise, and flying kites.

The boy thinks about all the rules at the camp. One cannot go through the fence in any way, and if the boy's kite goes over the fence he has to simply forget about it. There are all sorts of rules about what words that cannot be used, and there are rules about eating. There are rules against books written in Japanese, and there is a rule against practicing the religion of Shinto.

The boy often thinks about his father in great detail. His father is an incredibly polite man, and he seems knowledgeable about everything. No matter what his father is doing he always makes the boy feel welcome. His father is fond of nice suits. His father says the thing he likes most about America is the glazed jelly donut.

The boy's mother rations her facial cream and worries about the aging effects of sun exposure. She tells the boy that his father will not even recognize her, but the boy says he will remind his father. The sun is not the only thing that bothers the family. Dust is ever-present no matter how hard they try to keep their room clean. The dust and the sun combine to produce beautiful sunsets that the boy often watches with his sister.

The War Relocation Authority allows some camp residents to leave to go work for farmers. A few return happy with new shoes and a little money, but most come back with stories of extreme prejudice and vow never to go again.

The boy has a pair of his father's shoes. Often he takes them out of his suitcase and looks at them before wiping them on his sleeve and then putting them back in his suitcase. Often when the boy cannot sleep he remembers home. He remembers his room, the backyard, his bicycle, and his friend from next door, Elizabeth. Before he had to leave Elizabeth had given him a blue stone and said that when he returned they would go to the beach. He carries the blue stone with him always. He had promised to write, but he has still not written a letter to Elizabeth. Of all his friends from home Elizabeth is the only one who writes, and she writes often.

The boy hears adults discuss rumors, and many of them are terrifying. Some say that the men and women will be separated. Some say that they will be killed. Other people

discuss the things the government has told them about the forced relocation, including that it is done for the evacuees' protection or that it is an opportunity to prove their loyalty to the United States.

The boy remembers how the FBI had come in the night and taken away his father without even letting him dress. He remembers seeing his father led away in his bathrobe and slippers. Their mother had immediately begun destroying Japanese things in the house, and when the children had gone to school she hadn't sent them with Japanese food as usual. She had told the children if asked to always say they are Chinese, not Japanese.

Chapter 3 When the Emperor Was Divine, pages 49-76 Analysis

At this point in the story the principle characters, the mother, the girl, and the boy still do not have names. This chapter has a third person narrator like the previous two, but this chapter centers on the perspective of the boy.

More evidence of the boy's identity as more American than Japanese is in the art that he hangs on his wall. He hangs a magazine photo of Joe DiMaggio. Before DiMaggio had become nationally idolized as a member of the New York Yankees, he had been a hero to baseball fans in the San Francisco Bay area where the boy is from and where DiMaggio had played for a San Francisco team.

In a rare bit of humor in the narrative, some of the sounds the boy hears late at night are those of neighbors having sex and other neighbors making heckling comments. Of course, the boy does not understand what he hears. Much of what the boy sees and hears at the internment camp is a mystery to him.

Many of the boy's activities, especially with other children, are the same as those of any children anywhere in the world. The boys play board games, and they also play soldier. When they shout things like "Kill the Japs!" their own heritage does not occur to them. Even when the boy walks below the guard towers and whispers "Hirohito," his actions have more to do with childhood curiosity than defiance or pride in national identity.

In the boy's references to his father, we see an image of a man who is intelligent and kind, kind to his own family as well as everyone else. The boy misses his father intensely. Given the opportunity to choose what to pack in his suitcase he takes a pair of his father's shoes. Choosing these items comes at the cost of sacrificing something of his own. The boy wants some artifact to make him feel closer to his father, and the boy is still haunted by the image of seeing his father led away in only a bathrobe and slippers.

Chapter 3 When the Emperor Was Divine, pages 77-105

Chapter 3 When the Emperor Was Divine, pages 77-105 Summary

At the Topaz War Relocation Center in October of 1942 the days are warm, the nights are cold, and the dust storms last for days. The occasional snow and rain turns the camp to a muddy quagmire. The boy's boredom is broken by the occasional postcard from his father, and the boy thinks about how his father had promised to take him traveling and show him the world.

The camp abounds in rumors. With little else to do, some of the camp residents circulate rumors of others being informants, and one man is even beaten at night for being a suspected FBI informant. At night the boy talks to his mother about what she misses most. They discuss things like chocolate, fruit, shade, and how much they miss their home. Sometimes at night the boy listens to news of the war on the radio, and he imagines he is a heroic and decorated soldier.

The boy's sister has begun requesting that he turn his head when she changes clothes. Ever the conversationalist, she recounts many of the camp rumors, the more fantastic and unbelievable the better. One night the boy awakes and notices his sister is not in the room. He finds her outside digging in the dirt with a spoon. She tries to convince him that she is digging a hole to China, but he discovers that she is burying his dead pet tortoise, and she wants to spare him the sadness. She consoles him by saying that they can dig up the tortoise in the spring and resurrect it.

The boy thinks about his father being called a "dangerous enemy alien." He pictures his father as an old west outlaw. Still troubled by his father being taken away in only a bathrobe and slippers, the boy talks to other boys about the way their fathers had been arrested. He finds only one boy whose father had been arrested in a way he finds more disturbing than his own father's circumstances. That boy's father had been wearing geta, traditional wooden Japanese footwear.

As winter turns colder the War Relocation Authority distributes World War I surplus to the internees. The boy's mother gets two men's sized coats for the boy and girl and does her best to alter them to fit. The winter is indeed bitter. On multiple occasions, the temperature drops more than twenty degrees below zero. One of the camp residents freezes to death.

Sometimes at night, the boy lays awake thinking about the bicycle he had left chained to a tree in the backyard. Thoughts of home lead to thoughts of his father, and the boy remembers the arrest. For the first four days the family knows nothing. Every night at dinner the mother sets four places, and every night before going to sleep she hidea a

house key outside in case the father comes home. After getting word that the father is being held in San Francisco and getting to visit him, the mother stops setting four places at dinner and sets only three. The morning after visiting the father the mother takes all of the father's suits to the dry cleaner except one. She leaves one in the closet for the boy to remember the father, but whenever the boy thinks of his father he still has the image of him being led away in his bathrobe and slippers.

Christmas brings a few brief moments of happiness. The boy receives a Swiss Army knife from a woman in Ohio, and he carries it in his pocket with the blue stone Elizabeth had given him.

The boy worries about his mother and sister. His sister has been spending more and more time with other children, and sometimes she returns in the evening smelling like cigarettes. The boy's mother seems to slip ever further into depression. She has lost her appetite and sometimes the boy must bring food back to her and encourage her to eat.

Army recruiters arrive in the camp and internees are again given the loyalty questionnaire. One of the family's neighbors answered no to the question about being willing to serve in the military, and his entire family had been sent first to another camp and the following year had been sent back to Japan. One evening in spring an evacuee is shot and killed by a guard. The guard claims that the man had been trying to escape, but some internees claim this is not true.

The first army volunteers leave the camp. No mail from his father has arrived in weeks, and a long and dull summer begins. Often the boy thinks about the possible ways his father could return and often the boy imagines the first conversation with his father.

Chapter 3 When the Emperor Was Divine, pages 77-105 Analysis

This late in the story, the principle characters still do not have names. They are still referred to one as woman or mother, girl or sister, and boy or brother. The boy receives some valuable advice from his father in a letter. His father reminds him to be patient and tells him that it is "better to bend than to break." That seems to be the attitude of most of the evacuees.

Similar to taking a pair of his father's shoes, the incident where the boy collects some hair of his father's shows how much the boy longs to be near his father and how much the boy worries about his father's well being. The boy is still haunted by the image of the FBI leading away his father in only his slippers and bathrobe. Despite knowing that his mother had been able to visit his father and take some better clothes, the boy cannot stop worrying that his father does not have adequate clothing. This is not simply a matter of being the worries of a boy. The mother also remembers that the father had wanted a drink of water but she had been too tired to get it for him. Despite knowing that her thoughts are not rational, she cannot shake the worry any more than the boy can forget the image of seeing his father led away.

The boy's observation of the aftermath of the shooting mirrors real history. At Camp Topaz, a shooting that resulted in the death of an internee did occur, and the guard who fired the shot had claimed that the man had been trying to escape, though few of the Japanese internees hadbelieved the guard's story.

Chapter 4 In a Stranger's Backyard

Chapter 4 In a Stranger's Backyard Summary

The mother, the daughter, and the son arrive back in Berkeley after being released from the internment camp. The mother has cautioned the children that many will not be happy to see them return. They find the outside of their house in a state of disrepair, and they find the inside of their house neglected and ransacked. All of their furniture has been stolen, and the room where the mother had locked away the family possessions has been broken into and all the items stolen. Filth and broken glass is everywhere. The mother reminds the children that many Japanese families have lost their homes.

Before their departure a lawyer had convinced the mother to allow him to rent the house to tenants and collect money for the family. He had promised to send the money, but the family had never heard from the lawyer again.

Though they have spent the last few years confined to a single room together, upon returning home the three family members all sleep in the same area. They are afraid to sleep at night for fear that someone intending to do them harm will come. One night a whiskey bottle is thrown through the window. They sleep in their clothes.

While all the other belongings have been stolen, the buried silverware is still where the mother and boy concealed it. They dig it up and use it. The town is much as they remember it, but the people are colder. Most pretend not to see the family, but some do offer greetings and ask where the family has been as if they do not know.

The father is still incarcerated, and the family wonders when he will be released. What little money they had had has nearly run out. When released from the internment camp each family member had been given train fare and twenty-five dollars. This seems like a ridiculously low sum to the mother, and then she learns that this the amount given to inmates when they are released from prison.

Many soldiers return home from the war with stories of atrocities in Japanese prison camps. There is much hatred toward the Japanese, and the children are ashamed to go away from the house. At school the teachers and the other students are polite but distant. The family learns that a possible reason they had not received mail from friends is because their local mailman had told residents that it would be considered a crime to send letters to internees.

The boy and girl keep to themselves. Sometimes at night they hear noises and always they hope it is their father returning. They work hard to help their mother clean the house and get it back to its previous condition even if all of their possessions are gone. The money is gone, and the mother encourages the children to ration everything possible. The mother begins answering help wanted ads but she cannot find a job. Most often she is told that the position has been filled, but sometimes the prospective

employers are honest and say that they cannot or will not hire Japanese. Eventually the mother finds work cleaning houses and taking in laundry.

One day the family receives a telegram informing them that the father will be arriving. When they go to meet his train, they hardly recognize him. All of his old vitality is gone, and they have difficulty believing the old man they see is the same one they had known as father. Though he is still kind to the children, the father is bitter toward the world. He has no job. The company for which he had worked is no longer in business, and no one is willing to hire a Japanese man. The children watch their father slowly deteriorate.

Chapter 4 In a Stranger's Backyard Analysis

This chapter, unlike the previous three, is presented by a first person narrator, but the perspective is a collective one. The first person perspective comes simultaneously from both the girl and the boy. Their tone has changed dramatically from the earlier chapters. They now have an outlook of sarcasm, even cynicism.

Three years and five months have elapsed since the family had been forced to leave their home. Even though they have dreamed of coming home and having a greater amount of personal space, the institution has left such a deep impression that they are unable to sleep apart.

The boy and the girl are both determined to "never be mistaken for the enemy again" even if this means suppressing their own personal identities and intentionally parroting the identities of others. They want to belong, but most of all they do not want to fear. Adopting a new reserved persona must be especially hard for the girl who by nature is an outgoing fun-loving individual.

The father understands the bleak situation in ways that the children do not. All of his financial assets have been stripped away, and even if an opportunity to rebuild had existed, his health has also been permanently damaged.

The chapter does end with a dim ray of hope. The children say that slowly things are returning to normal.

Chapter 5 Confession

Chapter 5 Confession Summary

The father answers the accusations of being a dangerous enemy alien. He says he had spied on the government and its citizens. He admits to sabotaging industry and poisoning the water and food supplies. The father identifies himself as any one of the many people who are encountered on a daily basis. He concludes by saying that since he has admitted to every preposterous notion that has been presented he wonders if he may now leave.

Chapter 5 Confession Analysis

While the father could be addressing the specific people who had taken him from his family, he is more likely addressing a wider audience. He is addressing all those who in a moment of hysteria had begunviewing society in stereotypes. His tone is intentionally sarcastic and understandably bitter. His implication is that no rational person would believe him to be anything other than an American man, husband, and father who just happens to be of Japanese ancestry. His narrative gives voice to all those who had been done a grave injustice during this time of fear and paranoia.

Characters

Mother

Like the other principle characters, this character does not have a name that the reader ever learns. The reader can learn some things about this character from the first chapter where the third person narrative centers on her perspective, but the reader learns more through the details of the narratives from the perspectives of the mother's daughter and son.

In the first chapter, the quality that stands out in regard to this woman is her amazing poise in the face of adversity. She knows she is about to be taken away from her home, her husband is already incarcerated, and she knows she has limited ability to protect her children. What few things are within her control she handles with systematic efficiency in such as way as to spare her children unnecessary trauma. The woman's methodical systematic manner does not extend to her children. She is a warm and caring mother.

In the second chapter, which covers the train journey and comes from the perspective of the daughter, the mother is still caring and as optimistic as possible. She frequently encourages the children, reminding them that the train journey will not last forever. She sacrifices her own comfort so her children can get some sleep on the train.

In the longest narrative of the novel, the third chapter that comes from the perspective of the son, we see the mother slowly slip into lethargy and perhaps depression. While she still offers words of encouragement to the boy about how one day they will return home, she loses her enthusiasm as time passes. She no longer has any interest in the news, and she even loses her appetite.

Girl

Like her unnamed mother, we learn as much about this character from the narratives from the perspective of her other family members as we do from Chapter 2. In the first chapter, the girl is a typical ten year-old. She has a favorite candy, a favorite song, she is beginning to like boys, and she enjoys mildly picking on her little brother. She has a beautiful exuberance and enthusiasm for life.

The girl's zest for life is further illustrated in the chapter that comes from her perspective. In addition to her constant energetic enthusiasm, the reader can see glimpses of an extraordinarily intelligent and mildly mischievous girl. We also learn that the girl has a vivid and creative imagination, as revealed by her filling in the conversations of the people she sees from the moving train. The reader can also see the beginnings of a quick thinking and pleasantly manipulative personality, as when the girl tells Mr. Ishimoto that she never receives letters from her father.

The third chapter shows what could appear as a sort of slide into youthful rebellion as the girl stays away all day and often has the odor of cigarettes, but with the fourth chapter and the need for the family to pull ever tighter together we see not just a loyalty but a collective wit and sarcasm. The sarcasm borders on the cynical, but it will serve the girl and her brother well in the hard times to come.

Boy

Like his mother and sister the boy is an instantly likable character. Because of his young age he has a tendency to take everything literally, and this gives the novel some of its few moments of humor and a few warm moments. Told by his sister that people will not look at a person that is too tan, the boy answers that no one looks at him anyway. Told by his mother that his father will not recognize him, the boy says he will remind the father. When his mother expresses her boredom by saying she does not know if she is asleep or awake, the boy reassures her that she is awake. Part of this is due to the boy's young age and not yet developed ability to think figuratively, but it also shows the beginning of a pragmatic worldview.

The most notable characteristic of the boy in any of the four chapters where he is mentioned is his longing for his absent father. Some of the boy's thoughts and actions in regard to his father are heart wrenching. Given the opportunity to choose only a few personal belongings for his upcoming journey, the boy selects a pair of his father's shoes and shines them frequently over the years in captivity. He constantly thinks of his father and their reunion. Occasionally. the boy wonders if he could have done anything different in order to prevent the tragedy.

Though the boy is locked away in a camp for enemy aliens, it is difficult to imagine a more American eight year-old.

Father

Two versions of the father are presented in Chapters 1-4. The first version is of a successful professional with a love of life and an undying love for his family. He is described as a man who absolutely delights in being near his children, a man who is never too busy to talk with them. The man sings, loves to cook breakfast for his family, and professes a love of jelly donuts.

The man who returns from years of incarceration is broken physically and mentally. He has no job prospects, and he knows it. Even if he had prospects, it is doubtful whether his physical health would permit him to work. He has mental problems similar to those victims described as having post-traumatic stress disorder, and he slips further and further away even after he arrives home.

The final chapter of the book gives the father a voice. It is the voice of extreme bitterness. It is the voice of a man wrongly, absurdly accused.

Joe Lundy

This man owns the hardware store. He is very kind to the mother and gives her candy to give to the children.

Teizo

This man meets the girl on the train. He compliments her on her scarf and he repairs her broken hair ribbon.

Mrs. Kato

This is a next-door neighbor of the family at the Topaz War Relocation Center. Though very old, she often thinks she hears her mother calling her.

Mrs. Ueno

This woman had once been the servant of the family. Once she sees the mother carrying a bucket of water at the Topaz War Relocation Center, and she takes the bucket as if she is still a servant.

Elizabeth Morgana Roosevelt

This is the only friend of the boy and girl who writes to them while they are incarcerated. Before the boy leaves she gives him a blue stone and says they would go to the beach upon his return.

Mrs. Delaney

This is the schoolteacher for the children at the Topaz War Relocation Center.

Milt Parker

This unscrupulous lawyer convinces the mother to allow him to rent her house to tenants and promises to send the money while she is away, but he disappears without ever paying for the many people who stay in and damage the family's home.

Objects/Places

Berkeley, California

This town is located northeast of San Francisco across San Francisco Bay and is where the novel begins.

Evacuation Order No. 19

This is the title of the signs the mother sees all over the town of Berkeley that prompt her to go home and begin packing. The order states that all Japanese must report to a Civil Control Station on a specified date.

Tanforan Racetrack

This horseracing track located south of San Francisco, California held Japanese-Americans before they were sent to other internment camps. The mother, daughter, and son are held there for four and a half months.

Lordsburg, New Mexico

In this town in southwestern New Mexico the U.S. Army operated an internment camp for Japanese -Americans and captured German and Italian soldiers. The father in this novel is held there, and he often sends letters and postcards from this location.

Delta, Utah

This was the closest town to the Topaz War Relocation Center.

Topaz War Relocation Center

This was where the mother, daughter and son were sent after being confined at Tanforan Racetrack. This was a place that confined Japanese-Americans during World War II. It was in central Utah.

Shinto

This is a type of traditional Japanese spiritual observance, kind of like a religion but not so rigid and organized.

War Relocation Authority

This governmental organization was responsible for relocating thousands of Japanese-Americans during World War II.

Loyalty Questionnaire

This written questionnaire was given to the Japanese-Americans in the belief that it could test their loyalty to the United States.

Geta

This is a traditional form of Japanese wooden footwear. The boy is glad his father had not been wearing these when arrested.

Themes

Alien and Enemy

Say the term "enemy alien" today, and most of us immediately think of science fiction. But to the characters in the book, the term means something closer to home.

These are not people who speak a foreign and incomprehensible tongue. They speak American English with liberal use of the idioms of their day. The father does not subsist on some grotesque diet. He professes a love of jelly donuts. The mother does not adorn herself in some bizarre tribal uniform. She buys two-way stretch girdles and silk stockings from her local department store. The girl bounding about in her Mary Jane shoes knows what she likes: boys, candy, and popular music. According to the boy, next to his father, the greatest hero is Joe DiMaggio. These are the aliens, enemies to the American wholesome way of life.

To the children, the classification of "enemy alien" is especially incomprehensible. Asked to respond, these children would most likely say, "Me? I like Coca Cola. I love baseball. I have a crush on the girl next door. I sing along to the radio. I was born here. I'm just like you."

To many of the adults the issue is more understandable, though no less painful. Many have built successful careers and business in their adopted country. Most probably appreciate the opportunity their nation affords in ways the native born residents take for granted. Some possibly do know some real enemy aliens and think that if only others knew, they would see just how American I really am.

In the end, if the principle characters in this book are "alien" and "enemy," then so are we.

Disruption of Community and Family: The Greatest Loss

The typical modern reader cannot comprehend incarceration on a massive scale. To the modern reader, the very idea of imprisonment is something that occurs to the individual, not something that happens to entire families and communities. During World War II entire Japanese communities on the west coast of the United States were relocated to prison camps. Families were often separated much the like the nameless family in this novel. The nameless family in this novel could be any one of thousands of families torn from their communities and torn from each other during this time of crisis. Seemingly overnight people disappeared, homes were emptied, and businesses were boarded up. Entire ethnic communities became void of the residents who formed the neighborhoods.

Many, if not most, contemporary people take certain things for granted. All of these things are taken away from the principle characters in When the Emperor Was Divine. Their income is stopped. Their assets are frozen. Their home is taken away, and they are sent to live in an unfamiliar and barren land. Worst of all, one of their members is separated from the others and sent away with no warning. Everything upon which these characters rely is removed.

It is fitting that much of the language is understated, even stoic. It is as if the characters are stunned into near silence. That is perhaps the same reaction most modern readers would have if everything they hold dear were removed at once for what, to many, would seem like an arbitrary reason.

The Artifacts of Freedom

The characters in When the Emperor Was Divine long for freedom. Freedom can be an abstract term when one possesses choice and will, but when deprived of the liberty most of us take for granted, freedom takes on a tangible aspect. Many times throughout the novel physical items seen or remembered symbolize the freedom the characters crave.

The first and one of the most vivid symbols of freedom appears in the second chapter when the girl and her brother see a herd of wild mustangs running across the desert. Whether these two characters realize it or not at the time, these wild and beautiful creatures symbolize the freedom that they will soon crave. Later, after they have spent many months imprisoned, the boy asks the girl where the horsemeat served in the mess hall comes from. When she says that some of it comes from the same kind of wild mustangs they had seen and admired, the characters have something in common with those creatures, and the commonality is not freedom. It is the shared condition of being pursued and herded into a situation devoid of liberty.

Other recurring symbols evoke a longing for freedom. White sheets look like sails. The purpose of a sail is to propel a seafaring vessel and transport occupants. The characters at camp Topaz long to be transported away. Little things like soft drinks and shade are vestiges of the freedom the boy and girl have lost. Perhaps one of the more poignant symbols for freedom is a pair of the boy's father's dress shoes. They remind the boy of a more secure and happier time.

Style

Point of View

The point of view in When the Emperor Was Divine comes from five different perspectives. One chapter for each of three family members is told from the third person perspective of one of the family members. One chapter, Chapter 4, is told from the collective first person perspective of the two children after their return to their home in Berkeley. The final chapter has a singular first person narrator, the father. Though the first three chapters each have third person narrators, there are some distinct differences that are the result of the respective chapter's main character's perspective.

The first chapter, which comes from the perspective of the mother, is surprisingly matter-of-fact in tone. This lack of emotion is not the result of an uncaring attitude or coldness but rather the knowledge that something must be done, and the best way to ensure that the coming changes least affect the children is to do so in an efficient a manner as possible.

The second chapter centers on the thoughts and perceptions of the girl. Her outlook, as one might expect from a child, is more enthusiastic, and to her the train ride is less a punishment and more of an adventure. Because all of the action takes place on a moving train, the point of view is dominated more by observations of external events than internal thoughts.

The boy's perspective, revealed in the third chapter, is predominantly internal. Though there are plenty of external events to observe, the narrative centering on the boy's perspective is chiefly centered on the boy's concern for family members and his longing for his missing father.

Setting

There are four principle settings in the novel and some brief flashbacks of a fifth setting. The first major setting is the family's home in Berkeley, California. Through seeing the rapidly unfolding changes, such as the boarding up of Japanese owned business, the reader gets a glimpse of what life in Berkeley might have been like prior to the war.

The second major setting is the train. Through the girl's observations of events outside the train, the reader can see into a world gone for well over half a century. The girl observes people's dress and even the advertisements visible from the moving train.

The chapter covering the boy's perspective is the longest of the book, and though the boy's thoughts are predominated with the welfare of his family members, his observations include plenty of detail about the camp called the Topaz War Relocation Center. Through the boys observations, the reader can see that though the camp might have been called by different names it is in essence a fenced-in prison camp.

Another remaining physical setting is presented through flashback in the second and third chapters. Tanforan Racetrack in San Bruno, just south of San Francisco, is home to the family for four months. Though designed to house horses, the stables become the place of captivity for the mother, daughter, and son.

The final chapter presents a non-physical setting. The setting in this chapter is the mind of the father that has been away for most of the book. Through this chapter he presents his thoughts, which are probably also the same thoughts of all the other Japanese-American men who had been wrongly imprisoned.

Language and Meaning

The language of the first four chapters of When the Emperor Was Divine is unadorned and direct. These chapters are told in a matter-of-fact tone, and even in the brief moments of flashback, the descriptions are clear and precise. There is nothing figurative in the language because there is nothing figurative in the family's circumstance. As difficult as it is for the average reader to comprehend, this family is quite literally broken apart and taken from their home. They have been, in fact, herded together with others of their national origin and imprisoned and labeled as "enemy aliens." There is nothing allegorical about it. It happens in reality, and the language reflects this.

Noticeably absent from the characters who give voice to the first four chapters is any outcry of rage or indignation. The mother, daughter, and son quietly accept their circumstance. On one level the meaning behind this use of language is simply a reflection of how many of the people who lived through this unfortunate moment in history behaved. On another level the meaning behind the understated language could allow the reader to feel the moral outrage that the characters refrain from expressing.

The closest thing to an outright condemnation of the government's actions comes in the final chapter through the voice of the father. But even this assessment is subdued and resigned. Again, the language leaves the reader to fill in the meaning and feel the moral indignation that the characters leave unstated. The final lines of the novel say it best: "There. That's it. I've said it. Now can I go?"

Structure

The novel When the Emperor Was Divine is divided into five parts, or chapters. The first four chapters are distinct from the final chapter in that the first four have third person narrators while the last has a first person narrator. The fourth chapter is distinct from the previous three in that while it has a third person narrator it comes from a collective perspective of two characters simultaneously rather than simply from a single character.

The plot progression is linear and chronological except for occasional and brief flashbacks. Most of the flashbacks concern the night of the father's arrest that occurred more than three months prior to the action at the opening of the novel.

The internal structures of the chapters differ from one another. The first two chapters, told from the perspective of the mother and daughter respectively, have a starting point and proceed mostly in a seamless fashion to the end. By contrast, the third chapter told from the perspective of the boy and encompassing the longest timeframe is more a series of vignettes rather than a linear narrative. The episodic nature of the third chapter does not detract from a vivid portrayal of conditions within the camp. In fact, this piece-by-piece aspect of the chapter illustrates the boredom of the camp and how each day is like the next.

The final chapter lacks a definite physical setting, and its structure is tight and focused. It provides a sort of parting thought on incarceration of human beings based on nothing more than national origin.

Quotes

Chapter 1, p. 7
She wrapped up his stamp collection and painted wooden Indian he had won with the long headdress he had won at the Sacramento State Fair. She pulled out the Joe Palooka comic books from under his bead. She emptied the drawers. Some of his clothes—the clothes he would need—she left out for him to put into his suitcase later. She placed his baseball glove on his pillow.

Chapter 1, p. 13
She was ten years old and she knew what she liked. Boys and black licorice and Dorothy Lamour. Her favorite song on the radio was "Don't Fence Me In." She adored her pet macaw. She went to the bookcase and took down Birds of America. She balanced the book on her head and walked slowly, her spine held erect, up the stairs to her room.

Chapter 2, p. 25
The girl had always lived in California—first in Berkeley in a white stucco house on a wide street not far from the sea, and then, for the last four and a half months, in the assembly center at the Tanforan racetrack south of San Francisco—but now she was going to Utah to live in the desert.

Chapter 2, p. 26
The girl saw a larger sign on the side of a water tower that said BUY U.S. WAR BONDS EVERY PAYDAY. She saw advertisements for Old Schenley Whiskey and the American Melody Hour. They were still in Nevada and it was still Sunday.

Chapter 2, p. 45
She pulled back the shade and looked out into the black Nevada night and saw a herd of wild mustangs galloping across the desert. The sky was lit up by the moon and the dark bodies of the horse were drifting and turning in the moonlight and wherever they went they left behind great billowing clouds of dust as proof of their passing.

Chapter 3, p. 49
It was 1942. Utah. Late summer. A city of tar-paper barracks behind a barbed-wire fence on a dusty alkaline plain high up in the desert. The wind was hot and dry and the rain barely fell and wherever the boy looked he saw him: Daddy, Papa, father, Oto-san.

Chapter 3, p. 58
Late at night, after the lights had gone out, she told him things. Beyond the fence, she said, there was a dry riverbed and an abandoned smelter mine and at the edge of the desert there were jagged blue mountains that rose up into the sky. The mountains were farther away than they seemed. Everything was, in the desert. Everything except water. "Water," she said, "is just a mirage."

Chapter 3, p. 78
The day after the FBI had come to the house he had found a few strands of his father's hair in the bathtub. He had put them in an envelope and placed the envelope beneath the loose floorboard under his bed and promised himself that as long as he did not check to make sure the envelope was still there—not peeking was his rule—his father would be all right.

Chapter 3, p. 90
For four days after his arrest they had not known where he was. The phone had not rung—the FBI had cut the wires—and they could not withdraw any money from the bank. "Your account's been frozen," the boy's mother had been told. At dinner she set the table for four, and every night before they went to bed she walked out to the front porch and slipped her house key beneath the potted chrysanthemum. "He'll know where to look," she said.

Chapter 4, p. 114
We would join their clubs, after school, if they let us. We would listen to their music. We would dress just like they did. We would change our names to sound more like theirs. And if our mother called us out on the street by our real names we would turn away and pretend not to know her. We would never be mistaken for the enemy again!

Chapter 4, pp. 128-129
At the department store where she had once bought all her hats and silk stockings they would not hire her as a cashier because they were afraid of offending the customers. Instead they offered her work adding up sales slips in a dark room in the back where no one could see her but she politely declined. "I was afraid I'd ruin my eyesight back there," she told us. "I was afraid I might accidentally remember who I was and . . . offend myself."

Chapter 5, p. 140
It was me. I did it. I poisoned your reservoirs. I sprinkled your food with insecticide. I sent my peas and potatoes to market full of arsenic. I planted sticks of dynamite alongside your railroads. I set your oil wells on fire. I scattered mines across the entrance to your harbors. I spied on your airfields. I spied on your naval yards. I spied on your neighbors. I spied on you . . .

Topics for Discussion

What purpose might the author have in mind by not giving the principle characters names?

The wild mustangs are a recurring image. What might these creatures symbolize to the brother or sister while on the train and later when they recall them while at the Topaz War Relocation Center.

To whom might Chapter 5 be addressed ? Is it specifically to those who arrested the father, or might it be addressed to a broader audience?

White sails, sometimes as bed sheets, are a recurring image. What significance might the symbol of a sail hold for incarcerated people?

What are the literal and figurative meanings of the title of Chapter 4?

Characterize the narrative voice in Chapter 4. What makes it different from other third person narratives?

The boy seems troubled, even traumatized, by the thought of his father without proper shoes. He even brings along a pair of his father's shoes during his incarceration. Examine the times during Chapter 3 that the subject of shoes arises and propose explanations for the boy's preoccupation with shoes.