

A GUIDE TO Farewell to Manzanar

Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston

*Mountain snow loosens rivulets of tears.
Washed stones, forgotten clearing.*

THE BOOK AT A GLANCE

True story of a Japanese American family's struggle to survive as a family while coping with life in an internment camp during World War II.

Setting: 1942–1945, Manzanar internment camp, in the desert, Owens Valley, California.

Point of View: The first-person narrator is Jeanne Wakatsuki, a Japanese American girl who spends three and a half years with her family in the Manzanar internment camp.

Conflicts: The overriding conflict in the story is the loss of freedom that Japanese Americans experience in the internment camps. The narrator faces her own personal conflicts because of the years she spent in the camp and the effects of that confinement on her later life.

Resolution: The major conflict is resolved when the family is released and individual members are able to resume their independent lives. Jeanne comes to terms with her memories of the camp and the childhood she lost there.

Themes: People will struggle to keep their dignity. Difficult times can make or break a family's attempt to stay together. Growing up away from family and background is difficult.

Tone: Acceptance of fate; humorous perspective on human nature; admiration for the grit that helps people survive disaster. There is no bitterness in the book.

Of Special Note: Setting is realistic and based on personal recollections.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The story is told through the eyes of a bright and energetic girl who tries to understand and cope with the difficult events in her life. It should not pose any problems for students reading at middle-school or high-school level. As would be expected, the book contains realistic details of life in an internment camp, some of them

unpleasant—for example, a threatening incident that takes place when Papa gets drunk. Overall, however, the book is upbeat, and through a child's eyes, we share a feeling of hope that someday the world might be a better place.

BACKGROUND

On December 7, 1941, Japan launched a surprise attack on a U.S. Naval base in Pearl Harbor on the Hawaiian island of Oahu, pushing the United States into World War II. The Japanese striking force steamed under cover of darkness and launched 360 airplanes against the Pacific fleet. The United States lost eighteen ships and 170 planes and suffered 3,700 casualties.

On February 19, 1942, two months after the attack, fearing that Americans of Japanese ancestry might assist the enemy (even those born in the United States), President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066. The order authorized the government to move thousands of Japanese Americans to relocation, or internment, camps, where they became virtual prisoners. In March 1942, the U.S. War Relocation Authority established internment camps for people of Japanese ancestry at ten relocation centers in California, Arizona, Idaho, Utah, Wyoming, and Arkansas. The best-known of these was Manzanar Relocation Center near Lone Pine, California. It operated from March 1942 to November 1945. More than 11,000 people were confined there.

The chronology on pages xi and xii summarizes historical events that place the story in context. Page xii also includes an explanation of some Japanese terms used in the story.

PEOPLE IN THE STORY (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Jeanne Wakatsuki, first-person narrator; youngest child of a Japanese American family living in California in 1942.

Mama, mother of Jeanne and nine other children.

Papa, a proud man accustomed to being in control. He is almost destroyed by the events surrounding his family's internment.

Woody, Jeanne's older brother. He finds ways to cope and to improve a terrible situation. Woody eventually serves in the United States Army.

Kiyo, brother closest to Jeanne in age. He tries to make matters easier with jokes and laughter.

SUMMARY

Part 1

Chapter One. We meet the Wakatsuki family as they stand at the wharf in Long Beach, California, watching Papa's boat *The Nereid* leave on a fishing trip. It is early December 1941. Papa, hoping to become an independent fisherman, has made a deal with one of the local canneries to pay for the boat with a percentage of his catch. He has taken this trip many times. But this time, the fishing boats are turned back when news reaches the mainland that the Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor. Two weeks later, Papa is taken to an interrogation center. It will be almost a year before his family sees him again.

Chapter Two. With Papa gone, Mama decides to move the family to a Japanese settlement on Terminal Island to be near her two married children and other Japanese families. Mama is **motivated** by her desire to keep the family together; but for Jeanne, unused to living among other Japanese, Terminal Island is like a foreign country. When the Navy later clears all residents from Terminal Island, the Wakatsuki family moves again—this time to Boyle Heights. Executive Order 9066 has been signed, and there is much talk of internment. The family's third and final move comes when they are taken by bus to Manzanar camp. None of them have any idea what or where Manzanar is. In the last part of this chapter, the **setting** changes to the camp itself—a barren, unfinished place with tents and row upon row of black barracks.

Chapter Three. It is bitterly cold and Woody sets everyone to work covering holes in the planks of the tiny barracks assigned to the family. Everyone attempts to make jokes to cheer up Mama. Woody promises to try to make things better for the family.

Chapter Four. The next morning it becomes clear that the camp has been hastily built and is not really ready for the internees. Wind and sand come through holes in the barracks, there are long lines for food, and most of the latrines are broken. Hardest for Mama is the lack of privacy. The War Department ships some army surplus material to help people cope.

Chapter Five. As a first-hand witness to the events she describes, Jeanne helps us visualize the camp's mess halls: Kids eat at one table, grown-ups at another. Some members of the same family are assigned to different mess halls. Jeanne remembers when the entire family ate at home around a big table. Soon Mama gets a job as a dietitian, Woody works as a carpenter, and Jeanne finds herself more and more on her own. In September, nine months after being taken away, Papa is released

from an interrogation center in Fort Lincoln, North Dakota, and joins the family at Manzanar. He is not the same proud man who was taken away. Gaunt and wilted, he walks with a cane and appears to have aged ten years. Jeanne runs and throws her arms around him, while the rest of the family looks on in shocked silence.

Chapter Six. Papa's appearance stirs Jeanne's memories of her father before he was taken away. We learn about his childhood as the oldest son of a samurai family in Japan and of his decision at the age of seventeen to leave Japan. Jeanne recounts his careers as valet, cook, chauffeur, and mechanic; of his time in law school; of his marriage. At the time of Jeanne's birth, he had taken up fishing, settling near Santa Monica.

Chapter Seven. This chapter is a transcript of Papa's interrogation at Fort Lincoln, North Dakota. The interrogator questions his loyalty.

Chapter Eight. With Papa back, the family's living space seems even more cramped, and his drinking becomes a problem. In one terrible scene he threatens Mama, but Jeanne's brother Kiyo stops him. It is the first time anyone has dared to defy the father, and the violence signals the continuing collapse of the family.

Chapter Nine. Exactly one year after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the December Riot occurs. A sign of the trouble brewing in the camp, it is triggered by a conflict between a young cook, who has been trying to organize a workers' union, and a leader in the Japanese American Citizens League, a "friend" of the camp administration. Two men are killed in the riot.

Chapter Ten. Jeanne's brother-in-law Kaz has a frightening night on a reservoir-maintenance detail outside the camp. He and others are surrounded by inexperienced MPs who think the men in the work detail are escapees from the camp.

Chapter Eleven. It is not much of a Christmas, but every family is given a tree and a promise of better treatment. Various options are opening up for the internees: recruitment into the infantry, return to Japan, or relocation away from the West Coast. For relocation it is necessary to find a sponsor and a job and to sign a loyalty oath. Conflict develops between Papa and Woody when Woody reveals that he would fight for America if given the chance. At a meeting of heads of households, Papa is accused of being a collaborator or informer. A fight breaks out and Papa returns to his barracks, broken in spirit.

Part 2

Chapter Twelve. Although Manzanar camp is in a desert, a few old pear and apple trees remain from the time when the land was green with orchards and fields. The Wakatsuki family moves to a barracks near the trees. Papa cares for the trees and the family picks and stores fruit. Congestion in the camp lessens as some take advantage of the relocation program. Life becomes

more tolerable for the family as the internees make the best of a bad situation. As the months turn into years, the camp becomes somewhat like a small town—with its own school, churches, dances, and a softball team.

Chapter Thirteen. Jeanne and Kiyō start school. Earlier, school had been just makeshift. Now two barracks are turned into Manzanar High School and a third into an elementary school. Jeanne is lucky enough to get a strict but fair and dedicated teacher. She sings with the glee club. On weekends she joins hikes that go beyond the fence, but she is afraid to venture any further.

Chapter Fourteen. Jeanne feels more and more cut off from her father. If she needs advice she goes to Woody or her mother.

Chapter Fifteen. It is 1944, and only the aged and young are left in the camp. For the Nisei (native U.S. citizens born to immigrant Japanese families and educated in the U.S.) anything is better than camp, and many have chosen relocation. Their parents, however, are reluctant to leave Manzanar. Woody is drafted, and in November the family gathers to see him off.

Chapter Sixteen. In December 1944, the Supreme Court rules on *Ex Parte Endo*, a case that challenges internment, and concludes that the government cannot detain loyal citizens against their will. It is announced that all camps will close within twelve months. To the Wakatsuki family, the news is not joyful. There is no home to return to, and they hear dreadful rumors about what they will find on the West Coast. Some of Jeanne's older brothers and sisters decide that their best hope is on the East Coast. As each group leaves, there is talk of the whole family being together there some day. But they all know that will never happen.

Chapter Seventeen. In June the schools close. Any hope that something will postpone their departure vanishes when atomic bombs are dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. By August the war is over.

Chapter Eighteen. Flash forward to April 1946. Woody, now serving in the occupying forces, visits papa's sister Toyo at Ke-ke, near Hiroshima. Toyo welcomes Woody and treats him royally; yet one day he wakes to find her staring at him, a tear running down her cheek.

Chapter Nineteen. Papa decides to buy a car, so that instead of taking the bus, they can leave Manzanar in style. They load the car with dishes, lamps, and bedding and put a mattress on the roof. The family heads for Los Angeles and finds an apartment in west Long Beach. Sadly, there is no record of Papa's fishing boats. To support the family, Mama finds work in the canneries.

Chapter Twenty. Jeanne is in the sixth grade with kids who treat her like a foreigner. For the first time, she feels deep humiliation, almost guilt, for the years she lost at Manzanar. Jeanne succeeds in school but soon learns

that her friendships outside school will be limited. Her attempt to join the Girl Scouts is rebuffed, but she is accepted as a majorette in a drum and bugle corps.

Chapter Twenty-One. In high school Jeanne accepts things the way they are, hiding her shame for the years spent in Manzanar. In her senior year the family moves to San Jose, where Jeanne is nominated for Carnival Queen. Papa is furious, worrying that Jeanne will lose her Japanese heritage. Mama, however, proves supportive and proud when Jeanne wins. Still, the victory is hollow for Jeanne, who knows that she is still not truly accepted by her classmates.

Part 3

Chapter Twenty-Two. It is 1972. Jeanne becomes the first person in her family to finish college and the first to marry outside her race. She represses her memories of Manzanar until she and her husband visit there with their children. In the desert, it is hard to even locate the landmarks of the camp that was once so important in her life. The visit helps her realize that although she has almost outgrown the shame and guilt she felt at being imprisoned for so many years, some traces remain. While the book serves as Jeanne's farewell to Manzanar, in some ways Manzanar will always be with her.

APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

An outstanding element of this book is the historical detail provided by a first-hand observer. The book offers opportunity for many group projects and is a natural link to a study of American history or world cultures. You may wish to have students complete one or more of the following activities.

1. Investigating the Time and Place

Today's readers might ask how internment could have happened in the United States. You might use these questions in a discussion of the historical setting of the book.

- How many internment camps were there in the United States? Where were they? Why was the location of the camps important?
- What was the justification for the camps in 1942? Did people protest?
- What adjustment problems were faced by internees returning to freedom?
- What legal challenges to internment have arisen since 1942?

2. Evaluating History Texts

Students might examine several American history textbooks to see how the subject of internment is handled there.

3. A Bibliography

Students could investigate other works about the camps and prepare a reading list on the topic. Be sure their research includes the art that came out of the camps.

MEET THE WRITER

Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston (1934–), was born in California to parents who had immigrated from Japan. She attended the University of San Jose and the Sorbonne in Paris. She is the author of novels, plays, and an award-winning screenplay based on *Farewell to Manzanar*, which she wrote with her husband, **James D. Houston** (1933–). Writing about Manzanar was a way of coming to terms with the impact that internment had on her life. Today she lives in Santa Cruz, California.

READ ON

Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, *Beyond Manzanar: Views of Asian American Womanhood*. A sequel to *Farewell to Manzanar*.

Yoshiko Uchida, *Journey to Topaz*. An autobiographical account by another Japanese American who grew up during World War II.

Dorothy M. Johnson, “A Man Called Horse.” Short story in which a white man learns from his life with the Crow Indians that all people share the same hopes and fears.

Judith Ortiz Cofer, “American History.” In this short story, a young girl learns a hard lesson about prejudice on the day President Kennedy was killed.

Harriet Jacobs, “The Loophole of Retreat.” A young woman held in slavery hides in an attic in this evocative episode from an autobiography.

Leslie Marmon Silko, “The Man to Send Rain Clouds.” A clash of cultures is resolved in a very human way, in this short story of the American Southwest.

Santha Rama Rau, “By Any Other Name.” An autobiographical story about discrimination in colonial India.

Langston Hughes, “Theme for English B.” An African American college student, later a famous poet, wrote this poem in response to an assignment in English class.

A. M. Rosenthal, “No News from Auschwitz.” An essay with an ironic title, about a return to the infamous concentration camp where millions of people—mostly Jews—were murdered during World War II.

Anne Sexton, “Courage.” Courage is found not only in great heroics; according to this poet, you should look for courage in the little things of ordinary life.

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