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Happily Ever After?
Children's Literature about Internment

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Introduction

As the United States began its involvement in World War II, it also displaced its own citizenry-approximately 100,000 persons of Japanese descent were removed from their homes on the West Coast and placed in "relocation centers" and eventually in more permanent "internment camps." The story of internment has garnered more attention recently and has, as a result, been told in a number of ways-through books, movies, museum displays, etc. In addition to the historical studies of internment, there has also been a slowly growing number of fictional works about the interment period. From the novel and feature film *Snow Falling on Cedars* to the series of young reader's books written by Yoshiko Uchida, fictional accounts of the internment period are gaining some popular attention. Within the literary realm, one genre in particular where the story has been told with some regularity is children's literature.

The value of children's literature

Children's stories about internment represent an interesting body of work about internment because of the unique constraints and opportunities faced by the authors of the stories. First, as Jill Payton Walsh, commented, the stories must be simplified to the point of "transparency." She wrote, "The children's book presents a technically more difficult, technically more interesting problem-that of making a fully serious adult statement, as a good novel of any kind does, and making it utterly simple and transparent" (3-4). This "transparency" then, should help illustrate some of the ways in which the society interprets the internment period. In particular, that literature about an historical event should prove illuminating. Joan Aiken noted that one aim of the writer of historical fiction was to, "interpret the past and make it visible, intelligible, and coherent" (62).

In addition, children's literature is often deliberately educational, attempting to teach the readers about the society in which they are to live. Julia Briggs, for example, noted:

> because of the general obligation to instruct, and in particular to teach the child about his [or her] place in society, children's fictions express with particular clarity their society's sense of itself and its structures, as well as its justification of those structures. Even in children's books where there is no evident didactic intention, the necessity to simplify is inclined to reveal the nature of social interaction (24).

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Children's literature, then, provides an opportunity to examine the societal considerations of internment-the reasons behind it, the actions and feelings of the interned and the lessons to be learned. In this project, I examined several children's books about internment and its consequences: *The Bracelet* by Yoshiko Uchida, *Baseball Saved Us* by Ken Mochizuki, *Blue Jay in the Desert* by Malene Shigekawa, and *So Far From the Sea* by Eve Bunting. I selected these books because they are all picture books, further emphasizing the limitations on the text as well as providing additional information for analysis. As Perry Noodleman noted in his discussion of different versions of Snow White, "pictures show things that no words could ever convey" (245).

The reasons for internment

The logical first question when telling the story of internment would seem to be: why? Why were the people of Japanese descent taken from their homes and moved into the desert? The potential answers range from some culpability on the part of the internees through a random action or mass hysteria to a deliberately racist action on the part of the government.

In these children's stories, the explanations of internment tended to center around trust and fear. In *The Bracelet*, the internees were forcibly removed from their homes because of their appearance and a lack of trust on the part of the government of people who had that appearance:

> Emi and her family weren't moving because they wanted to. The government was sending them to a prison camp because they were Japanese-Americans. And America was at war with Japan.
>
> They hadn't done anything wrong. They were being treated like the enemy just because they *looked* like the enemy. The FBI had sent Papa to a prisoner-of-war camp in Montana just because he worked for a Japanese company.
>
> It was crazy, Emi thought. They loved America, but America didn't love them back. And it didn't want to trust them (2).

Similarly, the reason offered in *Baseball Saved Us* was a lack of trust based on the ancestry of the internees:

> As Dad began walking over the dry, cracked dirt, I asked him again why we were here.
>
> "Because," he said, "America is at war with Japan, and the government thinks that Japanese Americans can't be trusted. But it's wrong that we're in here. We're Americans too!" (1)

In these two books, the government acts irrationally. It takes action against its own citizenry because it cannot trust them, not because they are not worthy of trust. In *So Far From the Sea*, however, the answer is fear and the prevention of possible sabotage-a subtle and yet meaningfully different answer:

> "Why did they put you and Grandmother and the aunts and uncles here, anyway?" he asks.
>
> Dad pulls his head far back in his hood, like a snail going into its shell. "Because Japan attacked the United States," he says. "It was a terrible thing. Suddenly we were at war. And we were Japanese, living in California. The government thought we might do something to help Japan. So

they kept us in these camps."

Here the government is provoked into action and responds in an understandable way to protect itself. While the internees did not directly provoke the actions taken against them they were a potential threat and the government responded to that threat.

Blue Jay in the Desert, interestingly, does not mention a reason behind the internment in the text of the story-saving the explanation for an afterward.

Oddly, the subtle difference between the first three stories does not fit their emotional tones. *So Far From the Sea* is a sad and personal story of loss. It is a book about death (in a literal sense) and memory. *Baseball Saved Us and The Bracelet* both deal with emotional losses but are ultimately hopeful. Baseball saves "Shorty" in the camp and also in the larger society. Emi learns that she has not lost her memories of her friend or her father-only her physical connection to them. In both cases, a wrong occurs and is, to some extent, righted by the actions and resiliency of the protagonists. But, in *So Far From the Sea*, there is only tragedy and survival. It was not demonstrably wrong to be interned and so the grandfather's death is sad, but not a cause for anger or activism.

The lessons of internment

Against the backdrop of the reasons behind internment, we can consider the more clearly educational message of the books: the lessons to be learned. The second question is the affect of internment on the interned: What were the consequences and the lessons learned?

In *The Bracelet*, the lesson is that the truly valuable things cannot be destroyed as long as the person continues to remember:

> "You know, Emi," she said. "You don't need a bracelet to remember Laurie any more than we need a photo to remember Papa or our home and all the friends and things we loved and left behind. Those are things we carry in our hearts and take with us no matter where we are sent" (26).

The lesson of *Baseball Saved Us* is not communicated in words so much as it is in illustrations. The story itself ends with a hopeful but uncertain conclusion to an at bat for the protagonist. The last line of the book reads, "it looked like it was going over the fence." It is in the subsequent illustration that we see "Shorty" surrounded by his teammate, who are hugging and tackling him, that we get the lesson that effort and success will lead to acceptance. Here is an example of an illustration communicating more than text. It would be overly treacly and unrealistic to say that "Shorty" gained acceptance that day and lived happily ever after, but the ability of the illustrator to show a moment of joy and acceptance allows the readers to share in the joy without having to worry too much about the other problems the protagonist will face in his life.

Baseball Saved Us also discussed the consequences (in the short run) of internment on the interned. Shorty's older brother Teddy stops eating with his family and becomes rebellious-refusing to get a drink of water for his father. Interestingly, this plot thread is not followed up on. Baseball saves "Shorty," but we have no knowledge of what happed to his older brother.

The lesson of So Far from the Sea is that internment is an experience best forgotten-best put in the past. The father says when pressed by his daughter, the protagonist of the story that internment "was more than thirty years ago, Laurie. We have to put it behind us and move on" (14). The final exchange begins with Laurie protesting that internment was "wrong. Wrong." Her father replies that, "sometimes in the end there is no right or wrong" and continues, "it is just a thing that happened long years ago. A thing that cannot be changed." The book then ends with Laurie reflecting on a boy scout neckerchief that she has left at the grave site of her grandfather: "It looks like a boat-a boat with sails skimming the wind, heading away from this unhappy place. A boat moving on" (30).

The potential lessons of Blue Jay in the Desert are somewhat diffused by the lack of explanation behind the internment. Because the internment itself is not explained, the lesson is simply that the internees do not belong in the desert. Junior, the protagonist, says, "This blue jay is like us. We all want to go home where we belong. This blue jay doesn't belong here either. Blue jays belong in the woods . . . not in the desert . . . a blue jay in the desert?" (24)

Conclusions

The lessons learned are somewhat standard: Emi learns that love transcends objects; "Shorty" learns that achievements can overcome hatred and bigotry; Laurie learns not to dwell on the past: and Junior learns that he does not belong in the desert. What is interesting about the lessons is that the first two are generalizable-that is, the lesson can easily be taken from *The Bracelet* that a child should not be so upset about the loss of a toy. The idea of work and effort overcoming obstacles is so commonplace that I feel odd referencing Horatio Alger. The last two lessons are specific to internment. Not many children (I hope!) will find themselves interned or out wandering in the desert. The lesson to move on and forget the past is, I think, a painful one in connection with internment. In a real sense, the Japanese community in the United States did "move on" and "forget." It is only recently that the story of internment started being told with regularity. It is odd to me that the lesson was made specific to internment-a lesson taught through the father's voice when he tells his daughter that internment wasn't good or bad, it just was. This lesson is not generalizable because other events might actually be bad. In the end, the daughter internalizes the message, seeing her father's old neckerchief sailing away from Manzanar, never to return. Just as she will never return.

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