

BOOK CLUB To Go!
FAREWELL TO MANZANAR
BY JEANNE WAKATSUKI AND JAMES D. HOUSTON

Introduction

On the morning of December 7, 1941, a little seven-year-old Japanese American girl says goodbye to her papa as he sails out in his sardine boat. When he returns at the end of the day, their life will never be the same. No longer will her father and family have the freedoms that they once knew. Because the Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor, Japanese Americans are looked upon with fear and hatred. In February 1942, President Roosevelt gives the executive order to the military that they have the authority to relocate United States citizens who may be potential enemies of the state. One month later Jeanne Wakatsuki and her family move to Manzanar Relocation Center in the California desert 225 miles northeast of Los Angeles.

Upon arriving in the camp, the Japanese Americans find very poor living conditions. Their food is badly prepared. Their housing units are filthy. Dust blows in every crack of their bunkhouses. These bunkhouses have little privacy. Warm clothing is in short supply since most of these people are originally from the California coast.

Many people fall ill from allergic reactions to immunizations. The Japanese American families have to eat all of their meals in a barracks. This proves to be the beginning of the disintegration of their families. No longer do families come together for meals or talk together as a family.

Jeannie Wakatsuki's father is arrested for his pro-Japanese cultural ideas and is separated from his family for a year. When he returns to them, he is a broken man. He has been accused of disloyalty and spying. He no longer has a trade or a worthwhile way to take care of his family. He becomes violent and drinks heavily. He is abusive to his wife and son. Many others in the camp feel these frustrations. Consequently, a big riot takes place and the Japanese American people have to take loyalty oaths to the government before they will be allowed to leave the camp; soon after families are relocated to other parts of the United States. Men are drafted into the army and friends are uprooted from each other again. It is a very stressful time for these very stoic and honorable people.

Many years later Jeanne Wakatsuki's comes back to this place to relive this awful time in her life. Many of her problems with sexuality, self-esteem and family relations stem from this time in her life.

This book is a true account of a sad event in our history. Through the eyes of a child and her family we really feel their pain and understand their anxiety.

(Barnes & Nobel-Spark Notes)

Author Notes

Jeanne Wakatsuki Huston's Story

The youngest of ten children, I was born in Inglewood, California, on September 26, 1934. At the time, my father was farming what was then the outskirts of Los Angeles. Today, huge airliners streak across asphalt runways.

I have no concrete memories of that time, only stories told within the family of life on the farm. My older brothers and sisters talk about how I used to get lost in the bean patch.

I don't remember this and, in a way, I am glad. My family refers to the "thirties as the dust-bowl period of our history". So, I was born during the Great Depression. But when I was two my father turned to commercial fishing, and we moved to Ocean Park, a small coastal community whose main attraction was its amusement pier.

When Japan bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, I was seven years old. The FBI came to our house and arrested my father on false charges that he was supplying enemy Japanese submarines with oil from his fishing boat. He was incarcerated in a federal prison in Bismarck, North Dakota. We didn't see him again for a year.

In April 1942, my mother, nine brothers and sisters (some married), and I arrived at Manzanar, located off Highway 395 in eastern California between Death Valley and Independence. The Book *Farewell to Manzanar*, authored by myself and husband James D. Houston, related in detail my remembrances of camp life.

When the book was published in 1973, my life changed. The year spent delving into those three years of my childhood and its aftermath was as powerfully therapeutic as years with a psychiatrist. I reclaimed pride in my heritage; I rediscovered my ability to write. I realized I could no longer hide "in the country of my husband's shadow." With Jim's encouragement and support, I left the comfortable safety zone of domesticity and ventured out into the open field. I began to write again.

Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston lives in Santa Cruz, California with her husband Jim. She is the mother of three adult children. Jeanne and her husband won the prestigious Humanities Prize for their teleplay for the NBC television drama based on *Farewell to Manzanar*.

(biography.jrank.org/pages/2133/Houston-jeanne_wakatsuki)

Reviews

“A staple of school curriculum Jeanine Wakatsuki Houston’s powerful and revealing first person account describes life at the Japanese internment camp of Manzanar during World War II.” – *School Library Journal*

“In this timely reissue of a 1973 edition, Ms. Houston recalls her childhood experience of being interred with her family at Manzanar, a Japanese internment camp. Ms. Houston's parents and extended family were Issei, the Japanese word for first generation Japanese-Americans. Many Issei had settled in the coastal areas of California, just as her parents did. They prospered there, only to have it all taken away after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Suddenly, all Japanese were suspect, and a presidential order demanded that they all be removed from their homes and sent to hastily prepared camps. Jeanne, her mother, father, brothers and sister were sent to Manzanar, a camp near the high Sierra Mountains in California. 23 short chapters recall what her family had to endure both physically and emotionally. Only 9 years old at the time, Jeanne witnessed what this social and cultural disruption did to her family, especially to her father. A patriarch in the true sense of the word, he suffered immeasurably from the humiliation of losing his status as head of the family. Jeanne's descriptions of camp life relate the good and the bad of communal living. Once envisioned as a memoir for her extended family, this story has been reissued in the hopes that the more recent tragedy of 9/11 would not result in the same fears and misjudgments that a similar event like Pearl Harbor precipitated. Seeing the events through the recollections of a young child makes for perfect reading as parents or teachers seek ways to assist young people find appropriate avenues to allay fears and anxieties and to foster understanding of other cultures.” – *Houghton Mifflin (originally from Children's Literature)*

Further Reading

Being Japanese Americans by Gil Asakawa

The Devil's Arithmetic by Jane Yolen

I am an American: A True Story of Japanese Internment by Jerry Stanley

Japanese American Celebration and Conflict: A History of Ethnic Identity and Festival
by Lon Kurashige

Japanese American Internment Camps (Cornerstones of Freedom) by Gail Sakurai

Film adaptations of the Novel

Made for Television

Not long after *Farewell to Manzanar* was published, the Houstons and producer-director John Korty wrote a screenplay for a television movie based on the book. *Farewell to Manzanar* – starring Yuki Shimoda, Nobu McCarthy and Pat Morita – aired on NBC in March 1976. The film was subsequently nominated for an Emmy, and it won a Humanitas Prize and a Christopher Award.

In 2003, Lt. Governor Cruz Bustamante arranged for 10,000 VHS copies of *Farewell to Manzanar* to be distributed free of charge to all public middle schools, high schools and libraries in California – along with copies of the book and accompanying lesson guides for teachers.

“This project aims to educate students and the general public about the unjust incarceration of more than 120,000 Japanese Americans during World War II,” said Bustamante. “I hope that we as a people can be more tolerant of our differences and understand that diversity is our nation's strength, not its weakness.”

Farewell to Manzanar has never been released on video or DVD, but thanks to Bustamante's efforts, thousands of California students and Californians have viewed the film to learn about an important event in U.S. history, told through the experiences of one family.

On the Stage

Playwright/actress Cynthia Gates Fujikawa (*Old Man River*) adapted *Farewell to Manzanar* as a theatrical production for the Cornerstone Theater Company's Literature to Life program, which afforded thousands of local high school students the opportunity to see the production at the Mark Taper Auditorium in the Los Angeles Public Library, and to discuss the play in relation to their own experiences.

The production, starring Page Leong and Leslie Ishii, was also performed at the Japanese American National Museum in November and December 2006. Leong and Ishii perform all of the roles in the play, including Jeanne Wakatsuki, her mother, and other characters. The actors alternately manipulate a bunraku-style puppet (designed by Lynn Jeffries) to portray Jeanne's father, Ko Wakatsuki.

Looking to the Future

Many students and Californians have already experienced *Farewell to Manzanar* and learned about the Japanese American internment during World War II by reading the book, viewing the movie, or seeing the theatre production. To bring the story and the history to an even wider audience in a different form, Jeanne Houston is currently working on adapting *Farewell to Manzanar* as a musical feature film.

(www.jamstore.com/farewelltomanzanar/)

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Possible Discussion Questions

1. Farewell to Manzanar is as much the story of Jeanne's growing from childhood to beginning adolescence and becoming aware of the people and the world around her. Do you think she was a good narrator for the story? Was the personal story well-integrated into the history? Discuss your answers.
2. Much of *Farewell to Manzanar* deals with Jeanne's struggle to discover her identity. How does her Japanese identity conflict with her American identity? How does her experience with prejudice help her to reconcile the two?
3. One of Jeanne's sisters asks, "Why do they hate us?" This is a question that Americans today ask about other nations. What is the source of such animosity and how do you think it should be handled both socially and personally?
4. What is the role of non-Japanese characters in Wakatsuki's memoir?
5. "One of the amazing things about America is the way it can both undermine you and keep you believing in your own possibilities, pumping you with hope" (p. 133). This statement implies there is a character to living in America that makes it unique. Can you relate any stories or experiences that illustrate this view of life in America? Do you think the author meant it as a positive or a negative statement?
6. "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent." Eleanor Roosevelt said. However, Jeanne asserts that a feeling of nonentity is easy for "nonwhites to acquire in America" (p. 138). Do you think this is a fair statement?
7. Upon returning from Manzanar, Jeanne finds that the hatred she must face is very different from the "dark cloud" she imagined would descend on her. What are the different forms of hatred depicted in *farewell to manzanar*, and how do they manifest themselves?
8. What does this book teach us about the difficulty that governments have in making decision in wartime? How is this a parallel to what is happening in America today?

(<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/manzanar/study.html> & KPL ReadMOre Guide)