

Study Guide: *When The Emperor Was Divine* by Julie Otsuka
Developed by Library Services, Santa Clara County Office of Education.

The Santa Clara County Office of Education has developed this curriculum guide for use by teachers. We hope you will find it a useful tool in planning your discussion and lesson plans for this book.

Should you have any comments or suggestions please contact [Library Services](#) at (408) 453-6800.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- About the Writer
- About the Book
- Before Reading the Book (Motivating Activities)
- Discussion Starters
- Writing Prompts
- Words to Know/Vocabulary
- Places to Know/History & Social Science
- Characterization/Literary Concept
- Essay Topics
- Assessment Options
- Related Topics/Additional Resources
- Standards Correlations

ABOUT THE WRITER



Photo by Jerry Bauer

Julie Otsuka was born in Palo Alto and studied art at Yale University. After pursuing a career as a painter, she turned to fiction at age 30. One of her short stories was included in Scribner's Best of the Fiction Workshops 1998, edited by Carol Shields. *When The Emperor Was Divine* is her first novel. She lives in New York.

Author's website: www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/0902/otsuka/

ABOUT THE BOOK

Julia Otsuka's quietly disturbing novel opens with a woman reading a sign in a post office window. It is Berkeley, California, the spring of 1942. Pearl Harbor has been attacked, the war is on, and though the precise message on the sign is not revealed, its impact on

the woman who reads it is immediate and profound. It is, in many ways she cannot yet foresee, a sign of things to come. She readies herself and her two young children for a journey that will take them to the high desert plains of Utah and into a world that will shatter their illusions forever. They travel by train and gradually the reader discovers that all on board are Japanese American, that the shades must be pulled down at night so as not to invite rock-throwing, and that their destination is an internment camp where they will be imprisoned "for their own safety" until the war is over. With stark clarity and an unflinching gaze, Otsuka explores the inner lives of her main characters – the mother, daughter, and son – as they struggle to understand their fate and long for the father whom they have not seen since he was whisked away, in slippers and handcuffs, on the evening of Pearl Harbor.

Moving between dreams, memories, and sharply emblematic moments, *When the Emperor Was Divine* reveals the dark underside of a period in American history that, until now, has been left largely unexplored in American fiction.

BEFORE READING THE BOOK (MOTIVATING ACTIVITIES)

Packing List

Ask students to imagine that the government is removing them from their homes for an indeterminate length of time allowing each person to take along only one suitcase. They are not told what living conditions will be like where they are going. Have them make lists showing which of their possessions they would pack. Encourage them to share how they would feel in such a situation. Explain that *When The Emperor Was Divine* is a novel about an American family in this situation during World War II.

Tapping Prior Knowledge: World War II

Invite students to share what they know about relations between the United States and Japan during World War II. Ask if they know how these relations affected the lives of Japanese Americans during the war. Have students record their responses and elaborate or revise them as they read *When The Emperor Was Divine*.

Justice and Rights

Lead a class discussion focusing on justice and rights. You might pose questions such as the following:

- Which rights should be protected by law?
- Under what conditions, if any, might it be justifiable to violate a citizen's legal rights?
- Can you give an example(s) of recent legal decisions that might be considered unjust and of current situations in which government is mistreating people?

- What should people do if they feel their rights are being violated? What should they do if they feel others' rights are being violated?

DISCUSSION STARTERS

1. *When The Emperor Was Divine* gives readers an intimate view of the fate of Japanese Americans during World War II. In what ways does the novel deepen our existing knowledge of this historical period? What does it give readers that a straightforward historical investigation cannot?
2. Why does Otsuka choose to reveal the family's reason for moving – and the father's arrest – so indirectly and so gradually? What is the effect when the reason becomes apparent?
3. Otsuka skillfully places subtle but significant details in her narrative.

When the mother goes to Lundy's hardware store, she notices a "dark stain" on the register "that would not go away" [p. 5]. The dog she has to kill is called "White Dog" [see pp. 9-12]. Her daughter's favorite song on the radio is "Don't Fence Me In." How do these details, and others like them, point to larger meanings in the novel?

4. Why does Otsuka refer to her characters as "the woman," "the girl," "the boy," and "the father," rather than giving them names? How does this lack of specific identities affect the reader's relationship to the characters?
5. When they arrive at the camp in the Utah desert – "a city of tar-paper barracks behind a barbed-wire fence on a dusty alkaline plain" – the boy thinks he sees his father everywhere: "wherever the boy looked he saw him: Daddy, Papa, Father, Oto-san" [p. 49]. Why is the father's absence such a powerful presence in the novel? How do the mother and daughter think of him? How would their story have been different had the family remained together?
6. When the boy wonders why he's in the camp, he worries that "he'd done something horribly, terribly wrong. . . . It could be anything. Something he'd done yesterday – chewing the eraser off his sister's pencil before putting it back in the pencil jar – or something he'd done a long time ago that was just now catching up with him" [p. 57]. What does this passage reveal about the damaging effects of racism on children? What does it reveal about the way children try to make sense of their experience?

7. In the camp, the prisoners are told they've been brought there for their "own protection," and that "it was all in the interest of national security. It was a matter of military necessity. It was an opportunity for them to prove their loyalty" [p. 70]. Why, and in what ways, are these justifications problematic? What do they reveal about the attitude of the American government toward Japanese Americans? How would these justifications appear to those who were taken from their homes and placed behind fences for the duration of the war?
8. What parallels does the novel reveal between the American treatment of citizens of Japanese descent and the treatment of Jews in Nazi Germany?
9. Much of *When the Emperor Was Divine* is told in short, episodic, loosely connected scenes – images, conversations, memories, dreams, and so on – that move between past and present and alternate points of view between the mother, daughter, and son. Why has Otsuka chosen to structure her narrative in this way? What effects does it allow her to achieve?
10. After the family is released from the camp, what instructions are they given? How do they regard themselves? How does America regard them? In what ways have they been damaged by their internment?
11. When they are at last reunited with their father, the family doesn't know how to react. "Because the man who stood there before us was not our father. He was somebody else, a stranger who had been sent back in our father's place" [p. 132]. Why do they regard him as a stranger? How has he been changed by his experience? In what ways does this reunion underscore the tragedy of America's decision to imprison Japanese Americans during the war?
12. After the father returns home, he never once discusses the years he'd been away, and his children don't ask. "We didn't want to know. . . . All we wanted to do, now that we were back in the world, was forget" [p. 133]. Why do the children feel this way? Why would their father remain silent about such an important experience? In what ways does the novel fight against this desire to forget?
13. The mother is denied work because being a Japanese American might "upset the other employees" or offend the customers. She turns down a job working in a dark back room of a department store because she is afraid she "might accidentally remember who I was and . . . offend myself" [pp. 128-129]. What does this statement reveal about her character? What strengths does she exhibit throughout her ordeal?
14. Flowers appear throughout the novel. When one of the prisoners is shot by a guard, a witness believes the man had been reaching through the fence to pluck a flower [see p. 101]. And the penultimate chapter ends with the following sentence: "But we never stopped believing that somewhere out there, in some stranger's backyard, our mother's rosebush was blossoming madly, wildly,

pressing one perfect red flower after another out into the late afternoon light" [p. 139]. What symbolic value do the flowers have in this final passage? What does this open-ended conclusion suggest about the relationship between the family and the "strangers" they live among?

15. *When The Emperor Was Divine* concludes with a chapter titled "Confession." Who is speaking in this final chapter? Is the speech ironic? Why has Otsuka chosen to end the novel in this way? What does the confession imply about our ability to separate out the "enemy," the "other," in our midst?

Used with the permission of Anchor Books, a division of the Knopf Group, Random House, Inc., New York, NY.

Writing Prompts:

1. When I began reading this book, I thought . . .
2. I predict that . . .
3. Imagine you are a friend of the family in *When The Emperor Was Divine*. You have just learned of their relocation to a Utah internment camp. Write a short, persuasive letter objecting to the internment of Japanese-Americans that could be submitted to your local newspaper or elected officials.
4. How might other Americans have prevented the damage done by the order to move Japanese-Americans to internment camps? Imagine yourself as the editor-in-chief of a nationally distributed newspaper in 1942. Write a memo to your employees, giving instructions for the topics and placement of a series of articles that might do the trick.
5. This book made me think about . . .
6. I like the way the writer . . .
7. I'd like to ask the writer . . .

LITERARY CONCEPT: CHARACTERIZATION

Characterization refers to the methods writers use to develop characters. Writers may use any of all of the following methods of characterization:

- Description of a character's physical appearance
- A character's speech, thoughts, feelings, or actions
- What other characters think and say about this character
- The narrator's direct comments about a character

Use a chart like the one below to note the characterization methods used in *When The Emperor Was Divine*.

CHARACTER:

Quote From Book/Page #	Method of Characterization	What It Tells Me About The Character

ESSAY TOPICS

1. Details regarding setting, characters, plot, and conflict bring a story to life. Select three quotes from the section, chapter, book that demonstrate this use of detail. Explain how your selections contribute to overall character development or plot.
2. Do you believe that history would ever repeat itself; could American citizens ever suffer internment? Why or why not?
3. Describe the aftermath of the family's internment. How have they changed? How does America regard them?
4. Setting is defined as the time and place of the action in a literary work. An understanding of the setting of *When The Emperor Was Divine* is necessary to an understanding of the book. Important factors to consider include:
 - The historical period
 - Western locations
 - Social political climate (decades of anti-Asian sentiment)
5. Select one of the characters and write about how the book's setting affects and changes the character as the story progresses. Use quotes, descriptions, and examples to elaborate your ideas. In your paper, discuss the techniques/writing style the Julie Otsuka uses to make the setting vivid and real.
6. When the boy wonders why he's in camp, he worries that "he'd done something horribly, terribly wrong. . ." Write about what this passage reveals about the effects of racism on children. What does it reveal about the way children try to make sense of their experiences?
7. When the family is reunited with their father, they don't know how to react. "Because the man who stood there before us was not our father. He was somebody else, a stranger who had been sent back in our father's place." Explain how the father has been changed by his experiences and how his changes his family forever.
8. After the father returns home, he never once discusses the years he'd been away, and his children don't ask. "We didn't want to know. . . . All we wanted to do, now that we were back in the world, was forget" [p. 133]. Explain why the children feel this way. In what ways does the novel fight against this desire to forget?

ASSESSMENT OPTIONS

Perhaps the most important goal of assessment is to inform instruction. As you monitor the degree to which your students understand and engage with the novel, you will naturally modify your instructional plan. The frequency and balance of class and small-group discussion, the time allowed for activities, and the extent to which direct teaching of reading skills and strategies, literary elements, or vocabulary can all be planned on the basis of your ongoing assessment of your students' needs.

Several forms of assessment are particularly appropriate for work with the novel:

Observing and note taking

Anecdotal records that reflect both the degree and the quality of students' participation in class and small-group discussions and activities will help you target areas in which coaching or intervention is appropriate. Because communication skills are such an integral part of working with the novel in a classroom setting, it is appropriate to evaluate the process of making meaning in this social context.

Observing yourself with dialogue journals and letters

You may want to exchange notes with students instead of, or in addition to, encouraging them to keep reader's logs. A powerful advantage of this strategy is that at the same time you have the opportunity to evaluate students' responses; you can make a significant difference in the quality of the response. When students are aware that their comments are valued (and addressed to a real audience - an audience that writes back), they often wake up to the significance of what they are reading and begin to make stronger connections between the text and their own lives.

Agreeing on criteria for evaluation

If evaluation is to be fair, it must be predictable. As students propose and plan an activity or project, collaborate with them to set up the criteria by which their work will be evaluated, and be consistent in applying only those criteria.

Encouraging self-evaluation and goal setting

When students are partners with you in creating criteria for evaluation, they can apply those criteria to their own work. You might ask them to rate themselves on a simple scale of 1, 2, or 3 for each of the criteria and to arrive at an overall score. Students can then set goals based on self-evaluation.

Peer evaluation

Students can participate in evaluating one another's demonstrations and presentations, basing their evaluations upon a previously established set of standards. Modeling a peer-evaluation session will help students learn this method, and a chart or checklist can guide peer discussion. Encourage students to be objective, sensitive, courteous, and constructive in their comments.

RELATED TOPICS/ADDITIONAL RESOURCES/LESSON PLANS:

Japanese-American Internment

Return

- **Web Quest: Japanese Internment**
<http://www.webquestdirect.com.au/japaneseinternment/wq.html>
- **Return to the Valley**
<http://www.returntothevalley.org/>

A documentary by KTEH about Japanese-Americans who went to relocation camps and their return to the San Jose area after the war.

- **Life Interrupted**

<http://www.lifeinterrupted.org/>

A project sponsored by a Teaching American History Grant from the Department of Education. Focuses on the experiences of Japanese-Americans in Jerome, Arkansas. SCCOE has elementary and high school materials created by scholars and teachers involved in the project. These materials may be checked out from David Walters, History/Social Science Coordinator (Email david_walters@sccoe.org or phone (408) 453-6859).

- **Japanese Relocation and Internment During World War II**

<http://www.archives.gov/research/alic/reference/military/japanese-internment.html>

The National Archives and Records Administration has material including primary resources such as photos, executive orders and other historical documents. This page is a link page in the National Archive portal. One link of special interest relative to *When the Emperor Was Divine* is the link to the San Francisco Museum at <http://www.sfmuseum.org/war/evactxt.html>.

Additional Lesson Plans: <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/japanese-relocation/activities.html>

- **Japanese American Museum San Jose**

<http://www.jamsj.org/>

The Japanese American Museum of San Jose (JAMsj) preserves and disseminates the culture and history of Japanese Americans, with a special focus on the Santa Clara Valley.

Related Lesson Plans

STANDARDS CORRELATION

The following is a list of some of the English-Language Arts Content Standards for grades 9 and 10, which could be addressed through the activities in this guide:

Reading 1.1 - Identify and use the literal and figurative meanings of words and understand word derivations.

Reading 2.5 - Extend ideas presented in primary or secondary sources through original analysis, evaluation, and elaboration.

Reading 3.3 - Analyze interactions between main and subordinate characters in a literary text and explain the way those interactions affect plot...

Reading 3.4 - Determine characters' traits by what the characters say about themselves in narration, dialogue, dramatic monologue, and soliloquy.

Reading 3.12 - Analyze the way in which a work of literature is related to the themes and issues of its historical period.

Writing 1.1 - Establish a controlling impression or coherent thesis that conveys a clear and distinctive perspective on the subject and maintain a consistent tone and focus throughout the piece of writing.

Writing 2.2 - Writes responses to literature

- (a) Demonstrate a comprehensive grasp of the significant ideas of a work of literature
- (b) Support important ideas and viewpoints through accurate and detailed references to the text or other works.

