

When the Emperor Was Divine

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Injustice

Julie Otsuka's debut novel, When the Emperor Was Divine, takes on the range of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Otsuka captures the sadness, separation, alienation, loneliness and injustice of the time with a poetic voice and the creation of images that are lasting. Each of the five chapters presents a different point of view from the same family: the mother's response to the order to evacuate; the daughter's experience of the train ride to the internment camp; the son's impressions of life in the desert; the family's reaction upon returning home; and the father's release from captivity. Otsuka's precision and care make reading this novel a delight.

Here's an excerpt from the boy's life in the desert (pp. 64-5):

Always, he would remember the dust. It was soft and white and chalky, like talcum powder. Only the alkaline made your skin burn. It made your nose bleed. It made your eyes sting. It took your voice away. The dust got into your shoes. Your hair. Your pants. Your mouth. Your bed.

Your dreams.

It seeped under doors and around the edges of windows and through the cracks in the walls.

And all day long, It seemed, his mother was always sweeping. Once in a while she would put down the broom and look at him "What I wouldn't give," she'd say, 'for my Electrolux."

One evening, before he went to bed, he wrote his name in the dust across the top of the table. All through the night, while he slept, more dust blew through the walls.

By morning his name was gone.

His fathers used to call him Little Guy. He called him Gum Drop, and Peanut, and Plum. "You're my absolute numero uno," he would say to him, and whenever the boy had woken up screaming from dark scary dreams his father had come into his room and sat down on the edge of his bed and smoothed down the boy's short black hair. "Hush. Puppy." he whispered. "it's all right. Here I am."

At dusk the sky turned blood red and his sister took him out walking along the outer edge of the barracks to watch the sun go down over the mountains. "Look. Look away. Look. Look away." That, she told him, was the proper way to look at the sun. If you stared at it straight on for too long, you'd go blind.

In the darkening red twilight they would point out to each other the things that they saw: a dog chasing a porcupine, a tiny pink seashell, the husk of a beetle, a column of fire ants marching across the sand. If they were lucky they might see the Portuguese lady strolling along the fence with her husband, Sakamoto, or the lady with the white turban—she'd lost all her hair, they'd heard overnight on the train—or the man with the withered arm who lived In Block 7. If they were very lucky, the man with the withered arm might even raise it – the arm – and wave to them.

Otsuka captures the emotions of family relationships and the sadness and suffering of wartime injustice in [When the Emperor Was Divine](#).
