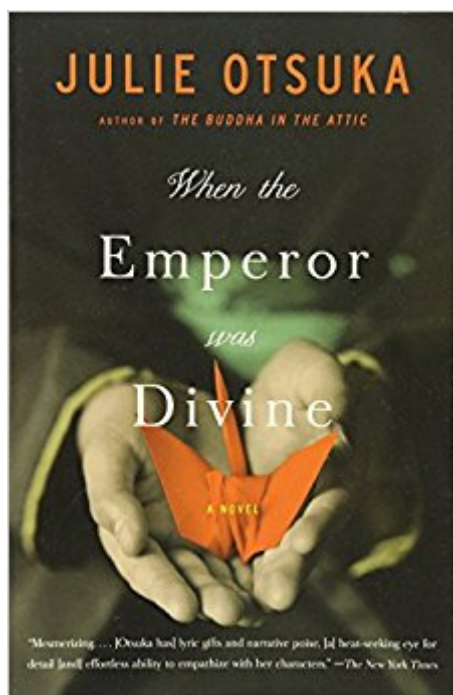


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When The Emperor Was Divine



Synopsis

The debut novel from the PEN/Faulkner Award Winning Author of *The Buddha in the Attic* On a sunny day in Berkeley, California, in 1942, a woman sees a sign in a post office window, returns to her home, and matter-of-factly begins to pack her family's possessions. Like thousands of other Japanese Americans they have been reclassified, virtually overnight, as enemy aliens and are about to be uprooted from their home and sent to a dusty internment camp in the Utah desert. In this lean and devastatingly evocative first novel, Julie Otsuka tells their story from five flawlessly realized points of view and conveys the exact emotional texture of their experience: the thin-walled barracks and barbed-wire fences, the omnipresent fear and loneliness, the unheralded feats of heroism. *When the Emperor Was Divine* is a work of enormous power that makes a shameful episode of our history as immediate as today's headlines.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A precise, understated gem of a first novel, Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine* tells one Japanese American family's story of internment in a Utah enemy alien camp during World War II. We never learn the names of the young boy and girl who were forced to leave their Berkeley home in 1942 and spend over three years in a dusty, barren desert camp with their mother. Occasional, heavily censored letters arrive from their father, who had been taken from their house in his slippers by the FBI one night and was being held in New Mexico, his fate uncertain. But even after the war, when they have been reunited and are putting their stripped, vandalized house back together, the

family can never regain its pre-war happiness. Broken by circumstance and prejudice, they will continue to pay, in large and small ways, for the shape of their eyes. *When the Emperor Was Divine* is written in deceptively tranquil prose, a distillation of injustice, anger, and poetry; a notable debut.

--Regina Marler --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This heartbreaking, bracingly unsentimental debut describes in poetic detail the travails of a Japanese family living in an internment camp during World War II, raising the specter of wartime injustice in bone-chilling fashion. After a woman whose husband was arrested on suspicion of conspiracy sees notices posted around her neighborhood in Berkeley instructing Japanese residents to evacuate, she moves with her son and daughter to an internment camp, abruptly severing her ties with her community. The next three years are spent in filthy, cramped and impersonal lodgings as the family is shuttled from one camp to another. They return to Berkeley after the war to a home that has been ravaged by vandals; it takes time for them to adjust to life outside the camps and to come to terms with the hostility they face. When the children's father re-enters the book, he is more of a symbol than a character, reduced to a husk by interrogation and abuse. The novel never strays into melodrama-Otsuka describes the family's everyday life in Berkeley and the pitiful objects that define their world in the camp with admirable restraint and modesty. Events are viewed from numerous characters' points of view, and the different perspectives are defined by distinctive, lyrically simple observations. The novel's honesty and matter-of-fact tone in the face of inconceivable injustice are the source of its power. Anger only comes to the fore during the last segment, when the father is allowed to tell his story-but even here, Otsuka keeps rage neatly bound up, luminous beneath the dazzling surface of her novel.

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I found the way Otsuka tells this story, through the experience of each member of this family, very engaging and effective. I identified with her characters and understood that any family so banished and powerless to resist internment would feel shame as well as anguish. The experience of isolation and imprisonment without any specific knowledge about when they would again be free and what that freedom would look like, created a level of desperation we can only imagine. Around the world, the refugee experience mirrors that of Otsuka's families. We want to believe it is uncommon or rare, but it isn't. I grew up in America when Japanese Americans were restarting their lives and coming to grips with painful memories and realities of all they had lost during this dreadful time. Like most

Americans, I learned about this painful history only in college. No one should wait so long when the story is so accessible and well told. No American should study history without understanding American tragedies as well as American triumphs. It is a perspective we need to understand how the world sees us and how easy it is to assume our morality is somehow better than others'.

Julie Otsuka has a very direct and clean style of writing, and that is what I enjoy most about her two books that I've read. "When the Emperor Was Divine" did not disappoint me as I read and it held my attention from the very beginning. It's a very sad story of one Japanese-American family that is representative of thousands of others that were put in internment camps during World War II out of fear. If the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor, then no Japanese person could be trusted. It was an embarrassing moment in America's history. The two children in the family remain nameless and rightly so, because the people who were put in the camps remained nameless and something less than human. The dusty, hot desert of Utah became home until the war was over and freedom was theirs once more. I questioned how quickly the mother and wife in the story started packing and preparing to go after she saw the sign announcing the removal of the Japanese-American families. She was very methodical about the way in which she went about packing up their goods, and perhaps some people, especially very disciplined people, would behave in that manner, but she seemed too stoic about it to me. The fact that the husband and father in the family was already removed to New Mexico and she had to deal with everything by herself, including two children, complicated her life because she had no help, no support. In reading some of the other reviews that address more negative feelings toward the book, I can understand completely why those reviewers feel the way they do, and especially those who are Japanese-Americans themselves and know a lot more than I do about that whole experience. I judged the book on my own enjoyment of it and my feelings about it. The style of writing is very attractive to me; that sparse, poetic voice that tells the story. The book doesn't take long to read, but it does leave a lot to think about, and I consider that a good thing.

There is no doubt that the internment camps are a stain on the history of the United States. I grew up during the war in Canada, where the Japanese were transferred inland, but not interred. They became a valuable part of our community, and our friends. They were hard working and kind and gentle, but never did I hear bitterness from them, although their losses were large. I felt the suffering of the whole family in Julie Otsuka's book about the experience of her mother, and I was made more aware of the injustices they felt. The hardest to bear seemed to be the separation from their father.

Hopefully, this book will help us not ever repeat solutions like the internment of innocent Americans of any descent.

This was one of the most beautifully sorrowful books I've ever read. I can't even imagine what it was like for thousands of Japanese-Americans during WWII. Families who had made this their home, who were neighbors and friends, forced to leave their homes for years and never know if it would still be there when they came back. Or if they would even come back. No apologies, and things were lost that could never be given back. Vivid emotions of joy and sorrow dance across the pages of this book and an exquisite warning to not repeat the mistakes we've already made.

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