

No history, only biography and rhyme

Lessons to be learned from this year's Waukesha Reads book

(EDITOR'S NOTE: The following column was written as part of *Waukesha Reads*, a community reading initiative, which has events throughout the month. Due to the political nature of this column it has been placed on the Commentary page.)

By Chris Beck

"There is properly no history, only biography."

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

Julie Otsuka illuminates a dark time in our history through her story of one family's ordeal that begins when the father is arrested on Dec. 7, 1941. His children are haunted by the image. It is shortly after midnight and he is removed from his home, wearing a white flannel robe, tattered slippers, and hatless. After the war, he returns, distant, distracted, defeated, a shadow of the man who had left.

When the "Emperor was Divine" is semi-autobiographical. Otsuka's grandparents, mother and uncle were sent to an internment camp for Japanese-Americans during WWII. Otsuka reveals the impact through the eyes of individual family members, but she does not give names to her characters, making their experience universal and more powerful.

It was war and Americans were afraid. That fear fostered a draconian policy. Forced to leave their homes, abandon or bury their possessions, "dispose" of their pets, these Japanese-American citizens obediently packed one suitcase per individual and boarded a train for Utah where they would be



Beck

confined to tar-paper barracks, surrounded by barbed-wire fences and armed guards. Otsuka does not "preach." She paints pictures.

The mother is "forty-one and tired." She ties White Dog, the aged family pet to a tree, tells him to "play dead" and "picks up the large shovel that was leaning against the trunk of the tree. She lifts it high in the air with both hands and brings the blade down swiftly on his head." It's a horrifying scene, but also, an act of love, mercy.

The children are so normal, typical. The 10-year-old girl "knew what she liked. Boys and black licorice and Dorothy Lamour. Her favorite song on the radio was 'Don't Fence Me In.'" The 7-year-old boy had Joe Palooka comic books under his bed, a torn picture of Joe DiMaggio on his barrack wall, and a pet tortoise that he scratched his family's identification number into its shell. Daily, both the boy and the girl place their hands over their hearts, recite the Pledge of Allegiance and sing "Oh, beautiful for spacious skies" and "My country, tis of thee." The children do not speak Japanese. Otsuka is clear: They are Americans.

"The past does not repeat itself, but it rhymes."

— Mark Twain

It is 2020. The rhyme is audible.

Fort Sill, an Oklahoma military base used as a World War II internment camp for Japanese American people, now shelters undocumented immi-

WAUKESHA
Reads

grant children apprehended at the border without an adult.

Worried about crowding and the rampant spread of COVID-19 in their family detention centers in Texas, and Pennsylvania, U.S. officials deliver an ultimatum to detained immigrant parents — allow your children to be released from detention without you or face indefinite detention together.

To reduce stigma, the World Health Organization avoids naming diseases after geographical locations. In accordance with this policy, the WHO recommends the official name "COVID-19". Throughout America, racial slurs, pushing, spitting, and other hateful acts toward Americans of Asian descent increase exponentially. On May 12, 2020, a 57-year-old white man is arrested at a grocery store in Stevens Point for yelling racial slurs at Hmong shoppers wearing masks.

Think of the biographies these events represent! Julie Otsuka illustrates that our collective history is really a collection of our individual stories. When "The Emperor was Divine" is an excellent book. Once again, Waukesha Reads provides a thought-provoking, well-written novel that fosters introspection and begs for discussion.

(Chris Beck is a retired educator and the former executive director of Healing Hearts.)