

YA Book Review

IN A FREE COUNTRY, WE ARE NOT FREE

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In *We Are Not Free* (2020) by Traci Chee, fourteen Japanese-American teenagers struggle to adapt to a world without freedom as they are forced from their homes in urban California to internment camps in the deserts of the western United States. Throughout their years in internment, we see the teens' changes as they band together in spite of the violent racism that they both witness and experience, but we also see them grow apart as they try to find success in the world outside the camps.

Each chapter centers around a new teen. The first chapter introduces us to Minoru "Minnow" Ito, the youngest of a trio of brothers. Minnow introduces the neighborhood that most of the teens are from, and he introduces some of the first of the violent acts committed on them. We are introduced to even more characters as the teens move through the internment camps, where another problem surfaces as the teens have to decide where their loyalties lie through an accusatory questionnaire that asks them to renounce whatever loyalties they may have had with Japan. We finally witness the death of one of the teens in a later chapter, as David "Twitchy" Hashimoto joins the military to prove his loyalty and is subsequently killed in battle.

Both history and English teachers could benefit from using this novel in class discussions about World War II and the effects it had on teenagers, as this novel was inspired by true events that Traci Chee's grandparents and other Japanese-American people experienced during the war. While this book may touch on an older subject, it can also be tied into more recent events, such as the attacks on Asian-Americans during the COVID pandemic. The casual language will appeal to students, as well as the pictures of the actual internment camp and other regalia from the time. Along with this, there are still moments within the story that will appeal to young adults such as when the teens go to a movie together, or when they describe crushes and first loves.

While there are many good reasons to use this book in a classroom setting, it may be confusing for some readers as each chapter is from a different point of view. Sometimes it can be harder to keep up with who is who, especially because many of the characters are known by nicknames rather than their given birth names. There are also a few Japanese-American slang words; however, these are defined shortly after they are first used. To help keep track of characters, there is an illustration in the beginning of the book that lists each of the characters' full names, nicknames, ages, and where they are from.

For students who need more help visualizing the Japanese internment, this book would work really well in tandem with some of the graphic novels created about Japanese internment, such as *Citizen 13660* by Mine Okubo or *They Called Us Enemy* by George Takei.

Author Biography

Celesa B. Arnold earned her Bachelor's of Secondary English Education at Wichita State University in spring 2022. While at WSU, Celesa participated in programs such as the International Buddy Program and the Study Abroad Program, through which she studied in South Korea. She was recognized as a Study Abroad Ambassador, and has worked with students from Japan and Korea. Celesa is also a member of the Kansas Association of Teachers of English and presented this book at the Fall 2021 Conference. Celesa plans to teach English as a Second Language in South Korea. She can be reached at celesearnold@yahoo.com.



Wichita State University English teacher interns present at the 2021 KATE Conference in Wichita, KS.

From left to right: Celesa Arnold, Kalie Dudeck, Claudia Esparza, Dr. Katie Cramer, David Hole, Rosie Marino, Kiara Suarez-Sosa

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