

Book Review— Looking Like the Enemy: My Story of Imprisonment in Japanese American Internment Camps. By Mary Matsuda Gruenewald. NewSage Press, 2005. xi-227 pp.

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Abstract

A review of *Looking Like the Enemy: My Story of Imprisonment in Japanese American Internment Camps* by Mary Matsuda Gruenewald. The review briefly places the book in historical and intertextual context, and makes the case that Gruenewald's special contribution is in its depiction of the psychological experience of the internment in an effective way.

Keywords

Japanese American Internment, Autobiography

After the closing of the ten internment camps, where nearly 120,000 Japanese Americans were imprisoned during World War II, most of those affected chose not to talk about, much less publish accounts of, their experience (Mine Okubo's *Citizen 13660*, published in 1946, is a rare exception). The reasons for this silence were at least threefold. First, even though no internee was ever charged with treason or sabotage, many felt a shame about their experience that they certainly did not deserve and few wanted to discuss. Second, Japanese American cultural ideals advocated stoicism in the face of that which cannot be changed. *Shikata ga nai*—it cannot be helped—was the mantra that expressed one such an ideal. And third, according to Emiko Omori, when news of Nazi concentration camps arrived in the U.S., some former internees silently admitted to themselves that while

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their experience was “bad”, it seemed not “bad enough” to merit open complaint. The atmosphere began to shift during the 1960s, as a new generation of Japanese Americans came of age, asking questions of their parents and grandparents. Published in 1973, Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston’s *Farewell to Manzanar* (co-written with her husband) became one of the first personal accounts of the internment camp experience. Houston’s memoir, as well as the testimony of many others, reached a broad audience. By telling their stories and working through both legal and political channels, former internees and their allies educated the public and eventually won a measure of redress through the Civil Liberties Act of 1988. Books published about the internment after the passage of the Act generally have moved away from providing a personal account and towards investigating culpability (e.g., Greg Robinson’s *By Order of the President: FDR and the Internment of Japanese Americans*), studying the effects of the experience on subsequent generations (e.g., Donna Nagata’s *Legacy of Injustice*), and providing a history of the Redress Movement (e.g., Robert Shimabukuro’s *Born in Seattle: The Campaign for Japanese American Redress*).

Mary Matsuda Gruenewald’s book, published in 2005, deviates from this trend. After a brief introduction in which she explains her reasons for breaking out of “self-imposed barbed-wire fences” by breaking her own silence, she recounts her parents’ arrival in the U.S.; their family’s farming experience on Vashon Island, Washington; their imprisonment in Pinedale Assembly Center and Tule Lake, Heart Mountain, and Minidoka Relocation Centers; her brother’s service on the 442nd Regimental Combat Team; her own training as a nurse; and her family’s eventual return to Vashon Island. Gruenewald’s personal account deftly incorporates relevant historical information and cultural references, though her penchant for translating *Shitaka ga nai* every time it occurs is unnecessarily repetitive, especially since she includes a glossary of Japanese terms. Dialogue, which one doubts Gruenewald remembers so accurately after sixty years, nevertheless aids in readability, as does the narrative suspense spurred by questions regarding whether the Matsuda family will be able to recover their farm and whether her brother will survive his tour of duty. Compelling and well-placed photographs and maps also increase the book’s allure and usefulness. Finally, even though Gruenewald’s family recovers their farm and even though her brother fights in the 442nd, she is careful to acknowledge those who are not able to recover their property and to appreciate the motives of those who chose to resist the draft. Regarding the latter, she writes, these “people fought for our rights in a very different way that many traditional Japanese families did not understand at the time” (p. 133). Hence, those looking for an up-to-date, easy to read, and fairly balanced introduction to the internment could do much worse than consulting *Looking Like the Enemy*.

What makes Gruenewald’s book special, however, is its acute account of her psychological experience of the internment. While Okubo’s book excels at description of the physical conditions and Houston’s at the social conditions of camp life, Gruenewald’s provides particular insight into the psychological aspects of camp life. With immediacy and unsentimental clarity, she narrates, for instance, her anxieties about not knowing where their train with blacked-out windows was headed, not knowing what would happen to her family’s farm, and not knowing the government’s motives in administering a loyalty oath in the middle of the camp experience. She recounts her fears, periods of religious doubt, and depressive episodes. Gruenewald even tells us of her recurring nightmares, one of which featured her “running from someone whose face I couldn’t identify” (p. 119). Eventually, Gruenewald realizes that in spite of the stoic exterior that many of her fellow internees exhibit, they, too, suffer from inner turmoil. Once, she happened upon an older woman “leaning against the side of a building, her head resting in her arms” (p. 124). When Gruenewald asked after her, the woman unburdened her particular anxieties and burst into tears. “We”, Gruenewald reflects on her community, “were all people with black hair, slanted eyes, and troubled thoughts” (p. 122). Other books have described and railed against the fact that Japanese Americans were imprisoned for having black hair and slanted eyes—i.e., looking like the enemy, but few offer such a deeply felt record of the troubled thoughts that internees suffered through every stage of this ignoble event in American history as Gruenewald’s book.

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