

TO THE DISCUSSION LEADER

Japan bombs Pearl Harbor. The United States declares war on Japan. Over 100,000 men, women, and children of Japanese ancestry living in America are sent to incarceration camps set up in this country. Whether you came here from Japan or were a Japanese American citizen, your assets were confiscated. You were allowed to take only what you could carry.

Imagine being a typical American child one day and a few days later you are being treated as a terrorist. One incarcerated, who actually lived in the camps, recalls the horror this way: "I remember the soldiers marching us...and I looked at their rifles and I was just terrified because I could see this long knife at the end...I thought I was imagining it as an adult much later...I thought it couldn't have been bayonets because we were just little kids."

Newbery Honor winner Kirby Larson transports Dear America readers inside the Minidoka War Relocation Center in Eden, Idaho. Through the diary entries of thirteen-year-old Piper Davis, youngsters can taste the ever present volcanic ash dust, smell the fetid sewage, yearn for running water, and watch as families try to make homes out of recently vacated horse stables. *The Fences Between Us* illuminates a part of our history where Americans were denied their civil liberties and constitutional rights.

The Fences Between Us

The Diary of Piper Davis, Seattle, Washington, 1941

BY KIRBY LARSON

Ages 8-14 • 352 pages

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SUMMARY

"Ten days since the attack. I feel like we are a shadow family. Our bodies are moving around to all the places we're supposed to go—Margie to college, me to school, Pop to church.... But our real family is in the shadows, frozen in time and hanging on to every scrap of hope, while we wait, wait, wait, to hear about Hank," writes thirteen-year-old Piper Davis in her diary. It is December, 1941.

Pearl Harbor has been attacked by the Japanese, and the United States is at war. No word has come about Piper's older brother Hank, a sailor on the USS *Arizona*, one of the ships reportedly sunk in Pearl Harbor.

Finally, a letter comes from Hank telling the family he is all right. However, things become tense on the home front for Piper's father, the pastor for the Japanese Baptist Church in Seattle, as the members of his congregation, now viewed as the enemy, are attacked, banned from public places, and even arrested. Piper, too, sees this discrimination firsthand, as her friend Betty Sato is called names and spat upon at school.

Soon, all the people of Japantown are forced to move to an incarceration camp. Piper writes, "Japantown is still as a cemetery. I know this relocation plan is because of the war and it's meant to help us feel safe, but when I look around, I don't feel safe; I feel sad."

Piper's father, now without a church, makes many trips to Camp Harmony with much needed food and supplies for the *incarcerees*, as the Japanese are now called. When the *incarcerees* are moved to a more permanent camp, the

Minidoka War Relocation Center in Eden, Idaho, Pastor Davis decides to move near them and to bring Piper along. Piper is outraged at the prospect of leaving her school, friends, and home. "I hate you," she shouts at her father. "You don't care about me. Not one bit. All you care about is the Japanese."

Piper does make the move and is reunited with her friend Betty Sato and other members of the church. Life at the camp is harsh. The winter is bitterly cold, and tragedy strikes with the deaths of a beloved elderly couple, the Matsuis. Still, Piper and Betty begin attending school at the camp, preparations are made for a Christmas celebration, and letters come from Hank revealing he's still safe.

In the spring, Betty's older brother Jim enlists in the military, and Hank writes that he is coming home. For Piper, the time is bittersweet, as she counts the days until Hank's arrival and the days before Jim's departure. The camp community all turn out to see Jim off. Betty gives her brother a *senninbari*, a thousand-person belt, for good luck, and Piper gives Jim a special photo album she has created for him.

Piper realizes she's learned a lot in a year, and she credits her father with teaching her that "even if we can't do much about the fences that get built around people, when fences get built between people, it's our job to tear them down."

THINKING ABOUT THE BOOK

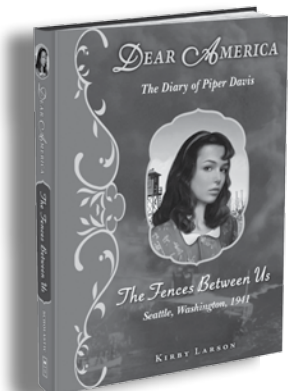
1. Who gives Piper her diary? Why does that make it especially meaningful for her? Why does Piper call her diary Dee Dee?
2. Why didn't Piper stop to help Betty Sato when Betty was confronted and spat on by the boys at school? What would you have done?
3. When Piper tells her father about the origami crane project, he tells her, "A tree is known by its fruit." What does Pop mean?
4. Do you think Piper's father made the right decision when he chose to take her to Idaho with him so they could be near the Minidoka War Relocation Center?
5. Explain why Japanese living in the United States were forced to give up their possessions and many of their freedoms to live in incarceration camps like Minidoka? Were both Issei and Nisei treated in the same way?
6. What are some of the worst things about life at Minidoka? What are some activities the incarcerated developed to make life more bearable there?
7. During World War II, there was a popular poster that read, "Loose Lips Might Sink Ships." What do you think that means?
8. Why does Betty Sato's brother, Jim, decide to enlist in the United States Army's all-Japanese unit—the 442nd Regimental Combat Team?

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

1. When the Japanese must leave for Camp Harmony, they are only permitted to take what they can carry. If you were forced to leave your home and could only take what you could carry, what would you choose, and why?
2. For good luck, Betty Sato makes an origami crane to give to the wounded soldier, John. Try your hand at Japanese paper folding with the pattern found at the following website: www.origami.org.uk/origamicrane.htm
3. Choose one of the following quotes from Piper's diary and explain what you think it means:
"Every time we make something beautiful out of something ugly, we will keep Mr. Matsui's memory alive." (page 226)
"Sometimes, you just have to have someone to blame. Even if it's the wrong person." (page 39)
"Jim was living in a Friday—mistaken for the enemy, sent away to a camp—but he was choosing to live as if Sunday was coming, as if his actions could change people's ideas and feelings." (page 278)
"Pop made me realize that even if we can't do much about the fences that get built around people, when fences get built between people, it's our job to tear them down." (page 284)
4. See what you can discover about the Civil Liberties Act of 1988. What does this have to do with the events described in Piper's diary?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KIRBY LARSON is the acclaimed author of the 2007 Newbery Honor Book *Hattie Big Sky*. She is also the author of *Two Bobbies: A True Story of Hurricane Katrina, Friendship, and Survival*, as well as the award-winning picture book *Nubs: The True Story of a Mutt, a Marine & a Miracle*. She lives in Kenmore, Washington, with her husband, Neil. Visit her website at www.kirbylarson.com.



AN INTERVIEW WITH KIRBY LARSON

You have called the historical research you do for your books “detective work.” Could you tell us about the detective work you did for Piper Davis’s diary? What did you discover that surprised you most?

I should send you a photo of the stack of books I bought to dig into this story! Because I am a book person, that’s where I start. Children’s books are perfect launching pads as they often distill events down to an essence, allowing me to get my footing in a time period without locking me into any particular themes or conflicts. Though the texts themselves are important, the bibliographies are what I pore over. It’s important for me to track down primary sources (journals, diaries, newspaper articles, oral histories, etc.) and bibliographies often point the way. Since writing *Hattie Big Sky*, so much more information has been posted to the Internet—materials from the Library of Congress, for example. I love digging around in archives! For this book, I spent many hours in the University of Washington Special Collections room and at the Seattle Public Library’s Seattle Room. I also make every effort to interview “experts”—in the case of Piper’s story, that ranged from history experts to WWII veterans to people who had actually lived at Minidoka (for example, Tom Light, the son of the camp’s high school principal). I even was able to interview Brooks Andrews, the son of Pastor Emery “Andy” Andrews, whose courageous efforts inspired this story.

Research is studded with surprises! The first thing that always happens to me is that I generally find great ideas while I’m working on something else. That’s how I came to Pastor Andrews’s story—I was doing research on a completely different book and ran across a reference to his papers. Of course I had to know more! What I learned by digging into the story of the Japanese American incarceration didn’t surprise me so much as it reminded me of what I learned while researching *Hattie Big Sky* (which is set against the backdrop of another

war, WWI): people have capabilities for profound greatness, from great kindness to great cruelty.

Piper’s diary is filled with references to food: Sky Bars, Necco wafers, sauerkraut, Vienna sausages, molasses cookies. Why is this important in telling Piper’s story?

What is life without food? I think adding that element helps to establish time period details in a way any reader can relate to. I don’t think you have to have tasted a Vienna sausage to get just as sick of them as Betty and Jim do at Camp Harmony!

You do a wonderful job of showing Japanese living in freedom here in the United States suddenly being rounded up and their possessions and liberty taken from them. Do you think Americans have learned from this misguided policy?

This is such a thought-provoking question and one I’d be interested in hearing my readers’ responses to!

Do you find the role of the media surprising during this period of American history? Piper’s diary shows journalists, if not covering up the stories of the incarcerated, at least putting a positive spin on the camps and life in them.

I’m not a student of journalism history, but it seems that the idea of aiming toward objective reporting is a relatively new concept. I often found that news articles read more like opinion pieces or editorials, rather than “straight” reporting. One thing that I didn’t have time to develop in this book is that, especially on the West Coast, there was already a strong and long-standing prejudice against Asians, and especially against people of Japanese descent. Coming out of the Depression, there were hard feelings that Japanese had taken agriculture jobs away from “Americans.” These existing feelings were only inflamed by the fact that the

Japanese Navy bombed Pearl Harbor, creating an almost unstoppable steamroller of hate and suspicion toward anyone of Japanese ancestry.

On a slightly different note: I was surprised to read to what extent the news media cooperated with President Franklin D. Roosevelt in suppressing news about the U.S. war efforts. The idea, of course, was to keep the enemy from knowing what was happening. Quashing news was deemed patriotic. And while I realize similar choices are being made by the media even today, I think we as news consumers have more options for gathering information and thus for getting a somewhat more accurate picture of current events.

Karen Cushman is another talented writer of historical fiction. You have called Cushman your hero. Why? How has your writing been influenced by her?

Early in my career, I was fortunate to hear Karen speak at a national conference. She is such a confident and authoritative person that when I heard her say that we writers should find our passions and write about those, rather than worrying about what’s in (can you imagine me writing a vampire book?!), I took hope. And I held onto those words all through a very dark period in my writing career when everything I submitted was being rejected. I never would have kept going without her inspiration.

Her work has influenced mine in other ways. Beginning with her first book, *Catherine, Called Birdy*, she focused on ordinary people, people I could relate to even though they lived in times that were quite unfamiliar to me. I love the way she writes about strong young women characters and the way her stories are imbued with hope. Those are factors I have attempted to emulate in my own work.

AN INTERVIEW WITH KIRBY LARSON

If youngsters were interested in reading one or two other books about this period in American history and the people who influenced the times, what titles would you recommend?

I can certainly recommend three books that I read as part of my research: *Looking Like the Enemy*, by Mary Matsuda Gruenewald; *Nisei Daughter*, by Monica Sone; and *Remember Pearl Harbor: American and Japanese Survivors Tell Their Stories*, by Thomas B. Allen. There are also two fabulous websites readers might be interested in: www.densho.org (The Densho Project is working to collect as many video interviews with former Japanese-American incarcerated as possible; it's powerful to hear their stories in their own words); and www.lib.washington.edu/exhibits/harmony (Japanese-American Exhibit & Access Project, created in 1997 to provide access to UW Libraries projects related to the incarceration of Japanese-Americans during World War II).

What is one question you'd like to ask children after they've finished reading the diary?

This story started when I asked myself this question: How would I have reacted if I had been Pastor Andrews's daughter, forced to leave my friends and home because of something—and a very unpopular something, at that—that my father was doing? This might be a question readers of this book would wonder about, too.

What is one thing you hope young readers will take with them after reading *The Fences Between Us*?

Oh, I like to leave room for readers to take away whatever they want from my stories; my job is to tell the story to the best of my ability. Their job is to make their own meaning from it. I can speak for myself, however, and say that writing this particular story has made me think about ways I can help build bridges in this life rather than fences. The readers of *The Fences Between Us* may think about that too—or they may think their own marvelous, original, and important thoughts!

Your early titles were chapter books and picture books. What drew you to historical fiction at this stage in your writing career?

When I studied history in school, we seemed to focus on dates of battles and the lives of the powerful and famous. I couldn't relate to those things very well. So I was pretty much an ignorer of history until I heard a story that my great-grandmother might have homesteaded in eastern Montana all by herself as a young woman. I had no idea if that was true or not but was curious enough to find out more. In the process of "finding out more," I learned that history is just as much about how ordinary people like you and me handled what life threw at them, as it was about wars and kings. Now that I've figured that out, I am passionate about learning as much as I can about history! My goal is to write a book about a completely fascinating historical event or person that no one else has ever written about. Keep reading to see if I ever achieve that goal!

Discussion guide written by Richard F. Abrahamson, Ph.D., Professor of Literature for Children and Young Adults, University of Houston, and Eleanor S. Tyson, Ed.D., Clinical Associate Professor, University of Houston, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Houston, Texas.

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