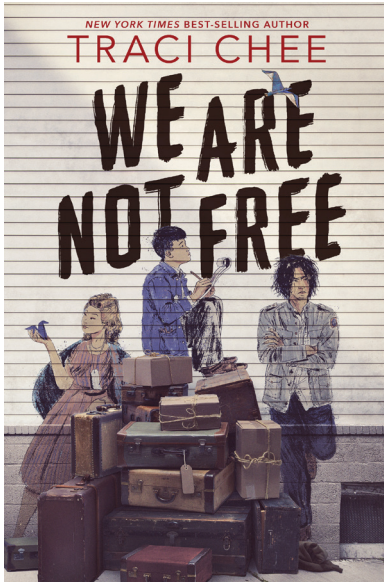


We Are Not Free

by Traci Chee



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About the Book

We Are Not Free is a powerful, emotionally gripping book based on historical events, taking readers back to World War II, when over 100,000 people of Japanese heritage were incarcerated by the U.S. government.

Traci Chee captures the experience of the Japanese American community from the early months of 1942 through early 1945. She tells the story through the perspectives of fourteen young Japanese Americans who are taken from Japantown in San Francisco, first to a temporary detention center, then on to two separate camps, Topaz in Utah, and later, Tule Lake in Northern California, where Japanese Americans were sent if they were deemed disloyal.

The different voices represented by this tight-knit group of friends, and the way their relationships evolve over time, connect in a compelling narrative. Some of the relationships are tested by their families' differing political views and by distance as families are sent to Tule Lake and some of the young men go off to war to prove their patriotism.

This young adult novel captures historical details with sharp, unblinking accuracy, and Chee's deep research vividly brings to life the day-to-day existence of the characters. The author's writing is taut, clean, evocative, and often poetic, and should be required reading for anyone, teen or adult, interested in issues of history and social justice.

About the Author

Traci Chee is the *New York Times* best-selling author of *The Reader* trilogy. She studied literature and creative writing at UC Santa Cruz and earned a master of arts degree from San Francisco State University. She is Japanese American and was inspired to write *We Are Not Free* by her family's experience during World War II. Some of the events she includes in the book are loosely inspired by their stories. She loves books, poetry and paper crafts, as well as bonsai gardening and games. She lives in California.

Pre-reading Activities

Watch these videos (and many more available) and discuss your reactions to them.

"Japanese Americans Visit A WW2 Incarceration Camp" (BuzzFeed video of young people visiting Manzanar in California, 8:19)
youtu.be/WrK1j4BNmHE

"Japanese American Internment During WWII | 1942 | Internment Camps in the USA | Japanese Relocation" (U.S. Film Archives propaganda footage of life in incarceration camps, 18:05)
youtu.be/OgkNaK6fviA

"AVC Tribute Videos: 442nd Regimental Combat Team" (American Veterans Center, 4:19)
youtu.be/j8buFZR52wY

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“Go For Broke: Story of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team” (Short documentary, 4:27)
youtu.be/QUnsW0opLnM

Go For Broke (1951 feature film starring Van Johnson and featuring many real-life 442nd veterans, 1:30:30) youtu.be/T9LFT_IX-Z8

Discussion Questions

Why do you think the author chose to write each chapter from a different character’s first-person perspective?

How is each character’s “voice” different from the others? Some use swear words, while others are more refined, for starters.

Which character did you identify with the most, and why?

Keiko’s chapter when she is eighteen years old is the only one that’s written in the second person: “This is the last night you’ll be together. This is not the first time you’ve thought that.” Why do you think the author switched from first to second person just for this chapter? How does the change in perspective affect the impact of this chapter?

What did you think about Tommy’s chapter toward the end of the book, which is written in pairs of poems labeled “Japanese” and “American”? How do the two styles of verses differ from each other?

The story in eighteen-year-old Stan’s chapter about the man who was shot and killed by a guard while walking his dog is based on an incident that happened at the Topaz camp. How would you react if you witnessed the shooting?

Do words matter? There are subtle word choices in *We Are Not Free* that show how language evolves over time. Traci Chee explains in her author’s note that she uses the then-accepted euphemisms “internment” and “evacuation” in the book even though today, the more accurate terms are “incarceration” and “forced removal.” She also notes that she uses a term for African American (black) in the book that is acceptable today, but was not then. What do you think of her choices with these terms?

How would you feel if you and your family and friends were told that you would need to leave your homes and businesses and be taken somewhere else to live without knowing where or for how long? If you were forced to leave your home and business or farm behind and had to throw away or sell at low prices most of your belongings, how would your family adapt?

After the war, when Japanese Americans were released, some returned to the West Coast but many went to cities such as Chicago. They still faced racism, and at first it was difficult to even find a place to live. How would you react if you were told you couldn’t live or shop someplace because of your identity?

How much did you know about the Japanese American incarceration before reading *We Are Not Free*?

Has what happened to Japanese Americans during WWII happened to other people in the United States, either before or since?

Can what happened to Japanese Americans happen again to another group?

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Writing Activities

Write a letter (or an email, but pretend you're hand-writing a letter—don't make it a short text) to a friend who is far away. Maybe their family moved, or they're in college or the military. Explain something that happened to you that made you angry, or sad, or happy. How do you express emotion?

Write two short scenes from someone else's perspective: first as someone you know, like a friend or family member, and then as someone you don't know but see, like a store clerk or restaurant owner. How do you change your point of view? What do you need to know about someone to "become" them?

Put yourself in the shoes of a young Japanese American who was born and raised in the United States and now is imprisoned in a camp like Topaz in Utah. How do you think you would answer the two controversial questions in the "loyalty questionnaire" that everyone over the age of seventeen was required to take? One asked if you'd be willing to serve in the U.S. military, and the next question asked if you would "for-swear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor." Could you understand why the Japanese and Japanese Americans were so passionately split over these questions?

Imagine if you were told you had to leave in two weeks, and you could only take what could fit into two bags per person or a trunk for your family. (You couldn't take any pets by the way!) You weren't told where you'd be going, or for how long, so you don't know whether to take warm- or cold-weather clothes. Write a paragraph about the things you would take with you, and why you chose them.

Music plays an important role in these young peoples' lives throughout the book. Songs serve as vivid memories of happier times, or distractions from current circumstances through dancing and singing along. It's notable that the friends' music isn't comprised of traditional Japanese songs, but the pop songs and big-band swing music that were popular with all Americans during that time. Name some of the music that you associate with vivid memories of your past, and share what that music means to you.

Gil Asakawa is a journalist, cultural consultant and author of *Being Japanese American* (Stone Bridge Press). He is working on *Tabemasho*, a book about the history of Japanese food in America. He's a columnist for and the former editorial board chair of the *Pacific Citizen*, the national newspaper of the JACL; a commission for the Denver Asian American Pacific Islander Commission; and a member of the U.S.-Japan Council. His website is at www.nikkeiview.com.