

**Washington Center for the Book at The Seattle Public Library Presents:  
Seattle Reads "When the Emperor Was Divine" by Julie Otsuka  
A Reading Group Discussion**

**March 22, 2005**

**Moderator Eric Liu, Panelists Margaret Harada, Frank Kitamoto, Hubert Locke, Kip Tokuda and Shigeiko Uno**

EL: Hello, I'm Eric Liu. I'm a member of the Seattle Public Library Board of Trustees and a host for the Seattle Channel, which is taping today's program. We're gathered here today to have a wonderful conversation about a powerful debut novel called *When the Emperor Was Divine*, by Julie Otsuka. *When the Emperor Was Divine* is a book about the Japanese American internment, telling one family's story, and it's also the featured novel this year in the Seattle Reads program. Seattle Reads, as many of you may know, is a program that was pioneered in this city but has spread all around the country, in which communities band together for a period of time using libraries, churches, other community groups, to focus on a single work, and in having conversations about that work, stitching together and creating deeper bonds of community. Seattle Reads is in its seventh year of existence here in this city, and we're just delighted that Julie Otsuka will actually be joining us May 2nd through 5th to make several appearances throughout the community to talk about the book.

Today what we've done is gather together a really distinguished and interesting group of folks from throughout the community to talk about this book and to talk about the ways in which this book connects us to memory, to history, to community, and to obligation. Let me introduce the folks around the table here. Foremost to the right is Frank Kitamoto, who's the president of an organization called the Bainbridge Island Japanese American Community. Frank was a toddler when he was interned, and in spite of that, has some pretty vivid memories that I think will be, we'll be talking about today. To his left is Shigeiko Uno, who was at the time of the internment a mother of a brand-new baby, and retired after a long career in service in the International District where she was, in fact, born and raised. To my immediate right is Maggie Harada, who's a faculty member in the English department at Bellevue Community College. She teaches writing, and is, in fact, teaching this book, *When the Emperor Was Divine*, right now in an online writing course, and so that will be an interesting source of reflection as well. To my left is Hubert Locke, who is the Dean Emeritus at the Evans School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington, and just really one of the leading figures in our community, has taught many courses, particularly ones that are well-known throughout the campus on race and public policy. It's wonderful to have you. And here to the left as well is Kip Tokuda, a longtime friend and mentor of mine, who's the Director of Youth and Family Services for the City of Seattle, a former state legislator representing the 37th District, and himself the son of parents who had been interned as well. Thank you all for joining us today.

I should probably say a word about just the plot summary in a sense. It begins with the story of a woman, a young mother with a son and a daughter, who is, in fact, I think, returning a book to a library in Berkeley, California, one day, when she begins to see posted throughout town notices, the evacuation orders from that period when the internment had begun. And the rest of the story chronicles in vivid detail ways in which she then prepares her family for this journey. And then it

chronicles, over several years, the internment experience in various camps in Utah in particular. The father of the family is present throughout the story mainly by his absence. He'd actually been taken away earlier, and his role and his status are something that are kind of woven throughout as hovering question marks throughout the book. And so Julie Otsuka, the author of this book, it's interesting, she was a painter before she became a writer. She came to writing and fiction writing rather late in her career, and it's somewhat evident, actually, in the way she writes. There's a great deal of painterly detail in the way that she puts things together, and it's a very spare, unsentimental piece of writing and craft. And it covers in pretty brief stories and episodes and snapshots, different aspects of the experience. I'm just wondering, for all of you, and Kip, maybe we'll start with you, just what parts of this book as you were reading it were most either memorable or striking to you?

KT: Well, I think the key word, Eric, that you mentioned is vivid detail. Because certainly in my upbringing, I knew about camp, of course, and I knew about the, the broad issues, the loss of, loss of the possession and the loss of, in my case, my father's business and home, and so on and so forth. But what was never really talked about was the psyche, and how this affected this profound sense of loss, affected people on a very personal level. And this book does that; it takes, takes you through a journey of loss through the eyes of children, nameless children, nameless mother, nameless father, and takes them through a very personal experience in very vivid, personal terms.

EL: It sounds like the namelessness of the characters in this book -- and they are indeed just identified as the boy, the girl, the mother, the father -- struck you in particular. Something about that, that anonymity in the midst of all that little detail.

KT: Well, it was very profound. I thought about this a lot last night; what, why nameless? Why didn't they put a name and a face to these folks? But the lessons learned here are very universal. This sense of loss and this personal sense of trauma and loss of esteem for, for lack of a better term, are universal things that I think the community at large experienced.

EL: Frank, when you think about your own memories of camp, you were a toddler, you were between ages two and six, I believe, an age where oftentimes your memory is going to be precisely the way this book was written, kind of episodic, little random details here and there. It's not like you had a whole sense of narrative. Were there things in this book that just, bam, resonated with you as the kinds of small details and memories that you hold in your own mind?

FK: Oh, yeah. As a kid, you don't realize the whole social impact of what's happening to you, and you remember the things that kids do, and you remember a lot of the things that happened to you. But the story was important to me because my father also had been taken away when we were, Bainbridge Island was the first group in the United States to be rounded up and sent off to Manzanar from the United States. And my father had gone in February, we had been taken away in late March, and had got to Manzanar on April Fool's Day, which was kind of ironic. But her book is just, you know, I think that she doesn't have names in there because it applies to a lot of people. When you first start reading it, if you didn't know it was about the internment, you wouldn't think it was about that until all of a sudden you realize that that's what this was about. And in a lot of ways, too, I think people sometimes look at us, people of color or people that are

different, as being nameless, being all the same and so on and so forth. So I think it was very touching to have her do that, and also she must have been a painter because it's the first time I've ever read a book that you could see scenes by just being, you know, feel like you're right in the middle of a scene by just reading the words. And she was painting scenes with words, which is really interesting to me.

EL: Shigeko, I'm wondering, for you, I mean, the, you yourself were a mother, a young mother at the time of the internment. Did that mean, necessarily that as you read this book, you identified most clearly with the character of the mother, or were you actually reading the book from a very different vantage point and identifying, maybe, with different characters?

SU: Well, I'm, I was glad that they had, there were different characters instead of just the one person for the whole thing. In fact, when I started reading this about two months ago, I couldn't lay it down; I read the whole thing. And especially it was in fine print, I mean, big print. And, but I did identify mostly with the mother, mother with two children. I had, I went to camp with two little babies, too, so what she went through, I went through.

EL: Did your reading of the book awaken memories of that time that you had sort of forgotten or put away over the years?

SU: Well, most of us who went to camp at my age, we would get together after we came back to Seattle, but we never talked about the hardships. We talked about the things that made us laugh. And just recently my friend said the same thing: "We just laugh and talk about the funny things that happened, but not the sad things." In the first place, mothers didn't have time to get sad or angry even, because we're so busy taking care of our children.

EL: Hubert, I, the comment that Frank made, that if you were to read the first number of pages of the book and not know coming in that it was about the Japanese American internment, it would take a while to figure that out. Obviously we're a self-selected group that did know what the book was about, but I'm curious for you as you read it, what parts struck you, what parts spoke to you as dimensions of a universal kind of experience, and what struck you as extremely specific to this moment in history and this experience in history?

HL: Well, I read this book, Eric, as an outsider, of course, as one outside the Japanese American experience and the, particularly the experience of internment, but what struck me at the very outset and throughout the book is how assimilated this family felt. How much they felt a part of the whole scene, situation in Berkeley where the story unfolds, and thus how cheated they were in the final analysis by what occurred. This was a family that believed intensely in the American experience, and it turned on them and turned on them in a terribly vicious way, even after they returned from the camp. Neighbors who had spoken to them before now didn't speak to them; children who had played with the youngsters now didn't play with them. It's a horribly grim reminder, I think, to every so-called minority group in this country of just how rapidly the American dream can go sour under certain circumstances.

EL: Maggie, with your students who are working on this book, have their reactions been along the lines of what Hubert was talking about, which is the, the deeper lessons of the American

experience and just the human experience, or have you been focused much more on, again, the painterly craft of the actual writing of the book?

MH: It's interesting, I think, that the craft of the book is so much connected to the experience that the students have, you can't really separate that so much. Because she's so spare in terms of emotional detail, that there's a lot of emotional detail that the students fill in themselves. And many students bring up the parallel of what happened shortly after 9/11, when so many people were rounded up and stuck in prisons without due cause, and they see the same sorts of danger inherent any time we single out a particular ethnic group for this kind of paranoia and fear and hysteria.

EL: One of the scenes that struck me as very memorable -- and it speaks to just what you were talking about, Shigeko, about the urgency and the burdens of not just motherhood, but of being the adult in that situation, if you had kids there -- and that's the scene in the book where as they're getting, as the mother is getting the kids ready to leave, she kills their dog; she kills and buries their dog. And there is this complete absence of sentimentality both in her action but also in how the action is depicted. And at first, you can read that and think, "Wow, that's pretty cold," but then you can read that in a different way and realize that again, precisely to your point, that it's written in a spare way so that we fill in for ourselves our own horror. We don't have to be told that this is horror, we don't have to be told that this is a jarring thing and how to feel about it. And Kip, when you think about the stories that you grew up with, that you were told, to the extent that you were told anything about your parents' experience in camp, I would gather -- if your story's fairly typical -- that there was a certain sparseness to those stories as well, focusing maybe on the happy parts and on the fun things that happened, and on the camaraderie and the community experience that emerged in camp, but maybe not talking so much about the pain, the trauma, the shame involved, all those things. And I'm wondering for you whether that was the case, and if so, how did you fill in the blanks? How did you fill in the emotional space in the stories that you were getting told?

KT: Well, of course, part of my enjoyment in reading this book is, is kind of a filling in the spaces for myself. And so for me, it's kind of an evolutionary journey myself. My experience is very different than Frank's and Shigeko's. I can relate to the father in various ways because we kind of shut down; it was something that just wasn't talked about. I mean, I knew very little about the camps, quite frankly. And I inquired a lot, but it was usually at the time when something would happen that would evoke a response, like from my father. And he would just, something would happen, and it would strike a memory or an emotion, and he would just get angry or whatever. And one particular example is very vivid in my mind, I keep going back to this because it has clearly shaped the way that I think and feel about war and bigotry and such, but he, he was a businessperson, a small businessperson, and he did own a couple of drugstores at the time that camp happened. Of course, he lost these drugstores, he had to pack up everything and, or lock things up, basically, and in effect, lost the stores, and he came back --

EL: Where was the store?

KT: This particular one was on Seventeenth and Yesler, and he was there for close to forty years. But he came back and, of course, another individual had purchased the store for practically

nothing at the time that he was gone, and he came back and just wanted to shake this fellow's hand and say, "Hello, I used be here, it's great to meet you," fellow pharmacist. And, of course, he came to the door, and the sign: "No Japs Allowed" was on the door. So the irony there is that - - and that's what this book talks about -- it's a shattering of dreams and a break in trust, as Dr. Locke has mentioned. But that's vivid; that gets right to the heart of what this book is about. So there were many such stories as that, but that's one.

EL: Has the reading of the book actually led you to want to strike up conversations with people in your parents' generation about the experience and ask questions that maybe you hadn't asked before?

KT: It gives me a venue and an opportunity to do that. That's the gift of this book is I can actually go now and talk about stories with my mother, relatives and others who really don't know but have that, that need to really pursue this for the greater lesson.

EL: Frank or Shigeiko, I'm wondering for you, how long after the experience it took you to be able to talk about the darker sides of the experience, the pain, the anguish, the uncertainty? Was it nearly immediately after the experience that you felt in some way -- particularly in your case as an adult at the time -- some way equipped, or was it many, many years later before you were able to come to that?

SU: No, I came back to Seattle in 1947. In the meantime, I had, we had lived in Boston. When I came back to Seattle, I was asked to meet with a group of women at the University of Washington, I don't know what department. And so we were talking, there's a big group, and I was telling them these, well, my experience. And towards the end, I noticed everybody's crying, the womenfolks, and I just burst out and that was the first time of ever showing emotion in front of other people. But at that time, I thought -- going back to camp now -- it was easy for women, I think, to cry about things, or the tears would come, but I thought afterwards it must have been very hard for men. They, they can't show their emotions. But one bad thing that I must bring up about camp, is that the parents lost control of their family, especially parents who had teenage children. And we were supposed to eat all together, if Block so-and-so had our own dining room. But these teenage people would be scattered all over, and they would eat wherever they wanted to. They had, so quite a few people have said that there was, the father lost control, or mother.

HL: And, you know, that's anticipated in a sense in the book. When, when the mother kills the dog, it's a chilling moment, but at the same time, it's one of the most tender moments in the book, because you know she is thinking to herself, "This dog is old, no one will take care if it. My children I can take care of, but I can't assure the future and the comfort for this dog," so she decides to kill it. Yet when she gets to the camp, one sees, I think with the daughter, one begins to see some signs of rebelliousness on the child's part. She isn't quite handling this experience as, as the younger son is. So it must have been an absolutely despairing experience for parents to -- especially who hoped to be able to maintain some semblance of family authority and control, but just to see that sort of disappearing before their eyes.

EL: Well, you get the sense, and Maggie, I would imagine you, when you study the way this was, this book was written, it's written in different chapters, in a sense, in different people's

voices. And what Hubert was saying is that you get this sense of people, even though the mother, the son and the daughter are all in camp together, that there are three different orbits that are only kind of intermittently intersecting. The mother's just trying to get by, the son, the boy, the younger, is sort of lost in this semi-dream world where he keeps envisioning and imagining his father, the daughter, as you say, is beginning, I mean, she's older, she's in this kind of rebellion phase, or any kind of adolescent expression. You just, there's a certain sadness to that, too, the way in which, under these circumstances, that the orbits of the family don't quite connect as well as you might want them to. From a writerly perspective, as you're, as you're teaching your students, what do you teach them about how to shift their mindset as a reader when they go from character to character, chapter to chapter? Do you ask them explicitly to kind of shift gears, or do you, do you ask them to be the ones who kind of pull people together in closer orbit, or how do you work with that?

MH: I think the students themselves are able to sort of piece things together as they go along. Many of them begin the book without this awareness of what actually occurred during World War II, so it's a kind of an awakening for them, too, and each chapter brings in a new perspective and sort of adds to their complete picture. And I think the different orbits, while they're painful for most of the students, I think it's really the return home that's the most painful part of the book because there's this constant shadowing of what their life was like before they left. They keep expecting that it's going to be the same when they get back, and of course, it's not. They're shunned and the mother has no work and the house has been destroyed. So for them, I think that's really the most painful part of the book, is the return home of the family.

EL: Frank, what do you remember about the return home?

FK: Well, you know, I, as I get older, I realize that our parents did as much as they could while we were in concentration camp to try to protect us from what was going on, and to make things as best they could for us and as happy for us as they can. And my dad wasn't with us most of the time we were there; he returned back to camp but then he chose to go back to Chicago to go to watch repair school. As people left, either being drafted or going in the service or going off someplace to go work, to leave camp -- they couldn't come back home but they could go to the Midwest or the East Coast -- we lost a lot of our role models. And the thing that really strikes me when I think about it now is that prior to that time, my name was Kazu, and when I went into first grade on Bainbridge Island, my name was changed to Frank and my sister was Yuriko, she became Lilly, Hideko became Francis, and Chiseko became Jane.

EL: Who chose those names?

FK: They were on our birth certificate but we never used them. But we came to realize that our parents wanted us to fit in as best as we could. At the same time, a lot of the adults talk about having to destroy a lot of their family keepsakes when the FBI came to the Island, because they were afraid of what they would think when they, the FBI came. So we lost a lot of our identity. I don't think it was until college that I realized that I had grown up trying to be as "white" as I could be, 'cause I saw that as being an advantage. And after spending a week at a church camp for youth group leaders, this woman came up to me and said, "You know, this is the first time I've spent any time with anybody who was Japanese. You're just like everybody else." And what

really floored me was that I had spent the whole week there as the only person of color there, not remembering once that I was Japanese, and realized all of a sudden that no matter how hard I tried to be white, you just had to look at me and knew that I wasn't, so I wasn't doing very well.

EL: Well, I mean, both of those things that you're talking about, Frank, the way in which a searing experience like camp removed a lot of the role models, particularly male role models, fathers, and I mean, and that's on every level, both on just how to be a boy growing up, or Shigeiko's talking about how to handle the emotions of that. As hard as it was for everybody, it would be harder still for anybody who was male and to have an absence of models there would have only compounded that.

FK: We started an oral history project on the Island in 1983. There were three of us who started it -- I'm an older Sansei, so I'm third generation, but the other two are younger guys, about ten years younger than I am, but we really got blasted. They told us we were angry guys, didn't want to talk about it, refused to talk about it, and just tried to shut us down. And just gradually, as more and more people were willing to talk about it, then it became okay to do, and then the climate changed, too, I think. And it's gradually gotten so it's easier for people to talk about, but we still have people on the Island who are passing away and dying now, and have never talked about it, because they refuse to talk about it.

EL: And the "it" that they don't talk about is more than simply the camp experience. I mean, when Hubert, you were talking about the way in which you were struck by how assimilated this family was, and how deeply they had bought into the American dream. The other side of that, apart from just kind of buying into American expectations of freedom and American expectations of consumerism, is the idea of assimilating into an idea of "whiteness." If you think about this from the perspective of just a person of color generally, say, an African American in particular, these themes of an experience that is out of your control that results in good measure in a cutting-off from heritage, a cutting-off from culture, a sense that you have to kind of start your identity from today onward, but there isn't enough of a pool to draw on from history and heritage that precedes an arrival on these shores. Was that something that was reverberating in your mind as you were reading this?

HL: Well, it was. And even, ironically, for groups who are not people of color... I mean, I've spent most of my time looking not at the experience of Japanese Americans in the United States, but the experiences of Jews in Germany. And here we have almost the same parallel, a group of, a "minority group," quote/unquote, if you will, in Germany, but certainly white for all practical purposes, who thought themselves to be very well-assimilated in German society. The big shock for German Jews was to experience this horrid racism that they encountered at the hands of the Nazis, and they couldn't believe it because they thought themselves to be as, as good Germans as anybody else. And I think that's one of the painful lessons that we get from a novel like this, or get from the entire experience of racism and discrimination. When the group in the majority, for whatever reason, thinks that it's threatened somehow by the, by a particular group in society, it can turn on them in, with a viciousness that just knows no bounds. And that, I think, is the important lesson for this in this country at this present time with respect to the Arab or the Muslim population, in some respects who are going through this -- well, let's say similar kinds of treatment and confronting similar kinds of sentiments.

EL: You know, one of the things that struck me as, while I'm remembering, is there's a part in the book -- and I don't remember the page exactly -- where there's this passing reference to Chinese Americans at that time wearing buttons saying, "Chinese, please." You know, "Chinese, not Japanese," and this very overeager need to kind of distinguish themselves apart from the Japanese Americans, which resonates in a lot of different ways today. I think about the ways in which, ultimately, the question that a book like this raises, or the case of German Jews during the '30s or '40s, is in our situation here, what does define "Americanness?" You can be a Joe Palooka and Dick Tracy aficionado, you can play baseball, you can speak perfect English, you can do all these things that are woven completely. You can be a good, responsible neighbor and landowner and homeowner. You can do all these things and raise a good family and send them to school. Is that enough for Americanness? What actually, ultimately gives you an irrevocable card, an irrevocable identity as American? And you could see, just imagining the Chinese Americans who felt that need to wear those buttons, that they had that same sense of how slippery and shifting those foundations were, how quickly things could turn on them as well. These shades of Americanness, you know, Kip, for you, growing a generation, in a sense, removed from the experience itself, but having it kind of form and saturate your sense of what you could be in this country, you served in politics; you served in elective office, you have given your life to public work in one way or another. It didn't have to be that way, you could imagine a lot of people who grew up as you did, whose parents' lives were turned upside down by the internment, whose livelihood was taken away. What was it about your upbringing that led you, actually, still to say, "No, I'm going to go back out there and claim America as mine. I'm still going to go back out there and claim the public square, something that I belong in"?

KT: Well, I'd like to think that maybe it was me that made some of those choices, and I think the fact of the matter is I was just, I was led to a certain path, and I think the war experience being one removed, in my case, because I was not in camp, but certainly lived vicariously through relatives and friends, kind of led me to think in terms of the dilemma. You know, I, we want to be American. I wanted all the things that everybody else wanted to have. I mean, I had the same dream as everybody else, but the fact of the matter is that there is always something there in the way -- I knew that as a little kid. I knew because of where we lived; I knew because of what people called me. I mean, it was, there were constant reminders there. And so something happened on some level that I think told me, "You need to do something in some way to move us in a direction that will give us all an opportunity to have that dream." And so whether it was human services or politics, I'd like to think I made the righteous choices myself, but I think, the fact of the matter is I think that experience led me into certain directions.

EL: It's a very interesting question about how experience or... the experience of a community led you in a certain direction. Shigeo, I'm wondering, when you think about the camp experience itself, what ways you felt like you were changed during that experience. What were the profound ways in which you were a different person when you came out?

SU: Very definitely, I came out with an idea that when we were put into camp, there were attorneys and quite rich families and all that, some had graduated college and others didn't. But when we got to camp and had to live together, and as we came out of camp, I said to myself, "We're all equal." Before war we didn't think that way -- well, we should have, but then... so it

doesn't matter how much money you had or what a good business you had. We're all in a same circle that way. Came out appreciating a lot of people that were kind to my family.

EL: Whether or not they were from the Japanese community, is that what you mean?

SU: When we were going to leave the camp, we had to ask different people to vouch for our good citizenship. And so the other day, I had received back from Washington, D.C., a pamphlet about this thick with all the different people who had said, "Okay."

EL: Who were these people?

SU: They were strangers -- well, the ones who recommended me were mostly ministers. Dr. Hastings with the Washington, D.C., cathedral, and Reverend Andrews, of course, he was pastor of the Japanese Baptist Church, and Reverend Thompson -- I had gotten to know those people because I've always been active in church work, and that allowed me to leave camp also. We had to have a sponsor, and the sponsor turned out to be a stranger, but he was a Baptist minister who opened up his second-floor house to my family and we lived together for about five, six months in Chicago.

EL: Was faith and church a big part of your camp experience?

SU: Well, it really helped us. My husband even joined the choir -- [laughs] -- which he never did when we were in Seattle. But the choir was able to go to the outlying churches, white churches, to sing. To yourself, you know, "God is looking after you." I would see the Sawtooth Mountains in Idaho, and the verse would come back to me from where I would get my strength would be from the mountains. I don't know the exact words, but it really helped. And then from Chicago suburb we moved to Boston, and so many people were wonderful, especially this one incident when my third daughter was born in Boston. We brought her home, all of a sudden she had all kinds of spots all over so I didn't know what to do. It's a strange town, I had never been there, so I ran down to the drugstore and explained it to the man and he sent a doctor to my house to look at the baby. He turned out, he was a young Jewish man who was doing internship there in Boston area, so I asked him, "Now, how much should I pay you?" and he wouldn't take any money even when he came to the house. So I remember that man. And incidents like that, it's amazing how many strangers are helpful and kind.

EL: Frank, for you, to be, to have created and to be running an organization on Bainbridge for all the Japanese American community, which in part is dedicated to actually restoring a sense of knowledge and respect for a lot of traditions, cultural traditions, that during the period of internment, during the pressures of assimilation had been put to the side, where did you get that impulse to want to... I mean, you were a kid during the internment. Where did you get that impulse to want to restore, retrieve, renew this connection to Japanese cultural traditions and a Japanese identity?

FK: You know, when Kip said what he said, that really sounded familiar to me, too. I really do believe something kind of guides you and something kind of makes things happen in your life to make you, makes you go down a certain path. But when I first started doing this stuff is when I

realized my son was going to go through the same school system that I had gone through, and I didn't want him to experience the things that I had experienced there. And it wasn't really a bad thing, but I realized that just kind of, just left us out. It didn't talk about most of the land on Bainbridge was cleared by Japanese American farms, it didn't talk about all the trees that were planted around the, cherry trees that were planted by the farmers, and so on and so forth. And I really thought I was a foreign person. Whenever we had any multicultural education it was about a foreign country, and they studied Japan, that was multicultural education and just kind of made me feel more foreign than I was. But that's when I initially started, but I really do believe with Kip that there's just, something kind of guides you to do those things, and some things appear in your life that make you do what you do. And I guess it's a passion for me to do this, 'cause I see so many people that are, feel so relieved when they can talk about it, or feel so relieved when they're able to get their stories out. Or we have kids that say, "Well, why didn't you ever tell us about this before?" So it is a passion for me.

EL: Shigeko, did your kids grow up hearing stories from you about camp, and what were the kinds of things that you told them?

SU: Never said anything, and they never asked, either. But my grandchildren are in grammar schools now, and they have their assignments.

EL: With your children, they didn't ask you at the time, did they ask you years later?

SU: Uh-uh.

EL: So these conversations have never really happened?

SU: Never. I've never told them about camp.

EL: Did reading this book and thinking about it prompt in you any desire to start that conversation with them, or was it more, actually, confirming for you that this was the, this was the way you wanted to handle it?

SU: I don't know. My grandchildren are growing up. Now, my grandchildren are the ones who are married, so it's my great-grandchildren, but my actual son and daughters have never asked me.

FK: I think the Washington State Civil Liberties grants have really done a lot to make the schools more aware of what's been going on, and for the schools to become more interested in doing things, and the program on Bainbridge is just really outstanding.

KT: Yeah, there really was an outpouring from various community members that we wanted to learn more, we wanted to experience more about this travesty, injustice as such. And so I did prime sponsor a bill to create the Civil Liberties program, which was based on a program that actually had been funded through the federal government on a national level and had been embraced in California. We basically took that bill and reshaped it here for the state of Washington. It passed, and it funds small programs in local communities as Frank just described.

Some in classrooms, some in various private nonprofits, a couple in churches, and they might be to develop a curriculum for schools -- they're small projects to educate, to enlighten the public on the experience of Japanese Americans during the war, both in camp, their military involvement, those who resisted, and I think it's had quite a profound effect on communities that have never, never heard about this travesty of justice.

EL: When you frame it that way, communities that have never heard about this, I mean, the most striking part of that is that there are people within the Japanese American community who maybe haven't heard details or enough about it, but it's certainly true that people outside either the Japanese or Asian American community, there are great numbers, even here in the Northwest, who know only the sketchiest sense of what the internment was about. And Hubert, I'm curious, when you think about this from the perspective of an educator but also a community hub, as somebody who's really stitched together different groups, how do we get folks to begin to connect the dots between, say, this experience, the experience of German Jews, other experiences of either assimilation gone wrong or proven undone, or other situations from other cultures and backgrounds? Because there's a tendency, if conversations about the experience or even about this book, *When the Emperor was Divine*, focus solely on the Japanese American experience, that people think, "Wow, well, that's part of my multicultural education. This is the Japanese American chapter, and I'll read that and I'll study that, but that doesn't have anything to do with me." How do we get folks from all backgrounds to see the ways in which it does have something to do with them and with us?

HL: You know, I think, Eric, we ultimately come to know and appreciate who we are as a nation, only to the extent that we're willing to look at our past and our present, warts and all. The problem is this rather rose-colored view of American society that's, I think, particularly dangerous now because we've got some people in the other Washington who think that peddling freedom abroad is the great, the great challenge of the hour, and that means in their mind, projecting American society as this ideal place with an ideal history that has always revealed in its freedom for all its people. That's not American history, and every person of color, no matter what their ethnic background, can testify to that as this experience does, which is described in this novel, and as we're discussing around this table. And it's only to the extent that we're willing to step up and admit that, and understand its implications for our own time, that I think we really honor what this nation is about. That's why it's such an important job in the schools, in the churches, in service clubs, in libraries, wherever these conversations go on. We'll be a much stronger nation when we admit our failures than just crowing about our successes.

MH: I think a literary work, too, has a unique power, especially for young people to be able to do that, because it tells a personal story of one family as opposed to perhaps a chapter in a history book or something that might be much more impersonal. But here, they get the opportunity to actually live this experience with the family as they go through it. And so I think literature can really play a unique role in terms of helping people, white people especially, who are not of color, identify with these many different experiences of those who have been on the outside looking in a lot of times in American society.

EL: Well, you know, one of the things that is striking about a book like this if you boil it down, is it's not even about internment or it's not even about World War II, it's about inside/outside and

how at different ways and different times, this country defines inside versus outside. You talked about that sense, Frank, of being foreign, and I think there are plenty of Asian Americans who, just because of our actual features -- and this distinguishes us, say, from the German Jews -- in many people's eyes even today, will be presumed foreign until proven otherwise, right? That's the initial presumption going in. Now, when you think about this question of inside/outside, it's very possible to see how that has been something that many white ethnic groups have experienced as well. I mean, how did -- there's a book that I imagine you're familiar with called *How the Irish Became White*. And it talks about the ways in which in the 1800s, the Irish, who at the time were regarded by the kind of Yankee WASP stock of original America as of another race, and it kind of describes the ways in which they gradually work their way into the inside, which is to say, into "whiteness." Now, part of how they did that, quite frankly, is they said, "At least we're not black," and that was the way that they kind of defined themselves. And that was, that's a dynamic that happens throughout American history. When you're teaching this class online, I'm curious, I don't know whether the fact that it's precisely because it's not, that it's conducted in a way that's not face-to-face, whether your students feel more empowered somehow to express things about identity and about the touchiness of these issues than they might if they were face-to-face? Is there a protective dimension to the anonymity of online, or is it actually harder... yes?

MH: I think absolutely, that people will say things -- although they also have to type it in wait a minute, perhaps, to hit the "submit" button, so it gives them a little time to sort of take something back if they want to. But I think that there is, there is a kind of freedom there because they're anonymous, and also, sometimes it's difficult from someone's name to know what gender they are, to know what race they are, so the other students in the class are maybe not making the kinds of assumptions you would see in a regular classroom when you know this face goes with this particular person of this race. They can't make those kinds of assumptions necessarily based on just a name.

EL: The assumptions that get made there are not just face to race, but face to race to voice, right? And there might have been a time in American history where if you were Japanese American you might be assumed to not be somebody who was going to rock the boat and raise your voice. Right? But today, I mean, Frank, all three of you are evidence of how that has fundamentally changed, particularly here in our part of the country. And Frank, I'm just wondering for you, when along the way you found your voice, you found your sense that, "This is who I am and this is how I'm going to tell stories about it and try to awaken other people into awareness"?

FK: Well, it's been to say -- and I've heard, not my own idea but from other people, that the opposite of love really isn't hate, but it's fear. And when we're afraid, especially for ourselves, it becomes almost impossible to care for or love the other person. And when something happens to us to make us afraid, we tend to want to strike back to protect and make the other person more afraid, of course, which makes this vicious circle happening where fear causes more fear. And when I talk to groups or talk to kids even, I tell them, "Hey, in the year 2050, there'll be more people of color in the United States than there are people that are white, and how is your child gonna feel about that?" And sometimes I have kids of color that jump up and say, "Yeah, yeah." And I have kids that are white saying, "Well, geez, I don't know, that sounds pretty threatening." And I say, "Well, that's what we're here for. We want that to feel like a positive thing. We want

you to feel that diversity and differences is something we can all learn from, because if we were all the same, this would be a very boring place."

EL: Well, you know, one of the things that, when you talk about that willingness to make things uncomfortable, it reminds me, actually, of the last chapter of the book. In contrast to all the preceding chapters which are written in this spare sort of way from different characters' perspectives, the final chapter is the only one in which the father, in a sense, speaks. And he speaks in a voice that is angrier, more defiant, and in a sense, ambiguous, because it's framed as a confession; that he's saying, "Sure, I confess to being all the things that you think I am: a subversive, a traitor, disloyal, all these things," but you, you can read into that that there's a great deal of mockery in that confession; that what he's doing is not confessing, but he's actually requiring the listener, the reader, the country, to confess its own warts and its own failings. And the tone of that last chapter was so jarring, and it struck me that it's sort of a metaphor for how a lot of the conversations go around internment and around this experience, that -- I mean, we've had it here today. There's a lot of solemnness, there's a lot of reckoning with some pain, but there's not always a lot of just pure, raw anger and a willingness to kind of get in the face of the society. I'm not just saying non-Japanese Americans or white people, but just to get in the face of the society and to wake it up out of complacency. And I'm just curious, for all of you, as you read this book, did you feel -- since the book closed that way, when you closed the covers of the book, did you feel more of a stirring inside you to push things that way, to express a voice in a bit more of a edgy or defiant kind of way?

HL: You know, I think one of the temptations of reading this little book is to close it -- were it not for the last chapter -- is to close it and say, "Oh, what nice people those Japanese Americans were, how calmly they took all this, and how benign they were about the experience, and they took care of their children and they didn't cause the soldiers in the concentration camp a lot of, didn't give them a lot of hassle." But the last chapter -- and it's just a brief two or three pages as I recall -- reminds us that this is an angry, bitter, demoralizing, despairing experience, and we should never forget that. Not only Japanese Americans, but Americans in general should never forget what we did to our own citizens for those dreadful four years, and there is no amount of glossing that can erase that fact.

EL: Frank, how do you feel about this question of holding on versus letting go of the anger?

FK: So in a lot of ways, they had to hold this stuff inside, and I think what happened to a lot of men -- not all men, 'cause I think they all reacted differently -- but a lot of 'em had their spirits broken from this happening. I know my dad was just the opposite; he was, he was mad. I mean, it was very unusual for someone to be very mad, but he was mad. He didn't want to sign "yes-yes" to those two questions because he was so mad.

EL: The two questions being...

FK: "Would you bear arms against the United States," and, "Would you forswear all allegiance to the Emperor." And I think Reverend Andrews was the one that finally convinced him to do so, I could grow up here in the United States rather than in Japan, which I'm grateful for. But he was mad, and at the same time, his dream was always to have his own jewelry store, and he ended up

having that, and he worked for the Friedlanders' before the war, and that's where he borrowed his money from to get started on his jewelry store, was from the Friedlanders. So in a lot of ways, he was a self-made person, he only went through sixth grade. But I think a lot of people, their spirits were just broken. They had to have some way to express this anger, but it was hard to, hard to do.

EL: Kip, in our closing minutes here, your thoughts on this question of what generations down the chain should do with this. Because there's a, in the great, wonderful kind of panoply of American multiculturalism, you can say the good news is that this story is now firmly planted in a lot of curricula and a lot of people are being told about this. But the way that they're getting told about it is: this happened, it was a bad episode in American history, and aren't we great, we've learned our lesson and moved on. And there isn't so much space there for expressing either the anger of the experience itself, or challenging our own assumptions today about what's going on today. And for you, Kip, when you closed the covers of this book, *When the Emperor Was Divine*, what did it leave you feeling? Was it more wistful and thinking about the memories and stories that you hadn't had access to, or was it more, "I'm kind of fired up and I need to awaken things"?

KT: Well, Eric, for me personally -- and it affects us all in very different ways -- I've kind of felt for some time, actually, pretty angry about the whole experience, and how, what can I do in my short span of life to kind of affect, affect things in ways that this will never happen again. And I think that's the message that I left after those three pages: this must never, ever happen again. I have to say in closing, too, the one other thing that I was left with was this profound sense of respect for this woman. We talked about gender, of the effects of genders, and I think men were, one of the strategies, of course, of this internment was to kind of emasculate, separate men from their communities, points of strength. But this woman was very wise. She was profound, she was strong, she kept them together. I love that story about the bird, where she let the bird out the window because she knew, I think she fortuitously knew what was going to happen; she wanted to have this bird experience a sense of freedom. So I sound a bit evasive here, but there's a lesson in all of this for me: this must never happen again.

FK: I think a lot of women were, we don't give them credit for that, so I think a lot 'em -- your mom was, you are...

KT: Shigeko.

EL: Well, I get the sense when the cameras go off, we can continue this conversation for another hour, but we are time limited here. And I just want to try to close by stitching this together a little bit. When we talk about, a number of you have talked about your final impressions as you read the book of being, "We cannot let this happen again, we cannot let people forget." But the only way to actually make sure that that begins to ripple out is to do what you all have done today, which is to just to bring yourself fully to a space, share your story, share yourself, and on behalf of the Seattle Public Library and Seattle Channel and KUOW, I just want to thank you all for all that you've given today, and all that you are and represent. It's really been wonderful to have you. Thank you.

Thank you for joining us. We hope that this conversation has really stimulated in you a sense, not only of empathy, but of a desire to get out there and connect with other stories, with other communities, and to search out those universal dimensions of the story that speak to you. The book that we've been discussing today is called *When the Emperor Was Divine* by Julie Otsuka, and it's the featured book of Seattle Reads this year. Julie will be in Seattle May 2-5, and you can find out more about her appearances in the area through the Seattle Public Library's website, [www.spl.org](http://www.spl.org). Thanks for joining us, and tune in again.

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"Seattle Reads" is produced by Chris Higashi, associate director, Washington Center for the Book at The Seattle Public Library.

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