

[Book Review]

John Okada's No-No Boy

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No-no boy, a novel,

Rutland, Vt., C. E. Tuttle Co., 1957. Pp. 308

John Okada's *No No Boy* is the story of two Japanese friends who make very different life decisions in the aftermath of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The novel's cover shows a young adult male with a Japanese flag in half of one eye and an American flag in half of the other. He is neither Japanese nor American, which explains his nickname and the book's title. The power of the story rests in what the reader finds in those spaces that are not covered by either flag.

Okada was a first-generation Japanese American whose parents immigrated to the United States (US) in the 1930s. His stories were published at a time when young Asian American college students were energetically looking for works by writers who could give Asian American perspectives on life in the US prior to World War Two (WWII). Fortunately, Okada's manuscripts were discovered after his death and young Asian Americans—especially those aspiring to be writers themselves—were accepting not only the importance of stories and experiences told by members of preceding generations, but also their strong social, political, and economic connections with their predecessors. Many young readers and writers appreciate Okada's interest in how Japanese Americans coped with the racist attitudes they encountered upon their arrival, as well as their motivations for moving to the US.

The primary focus of the *No No Boy* story is the sense of psychological and social isolation from the mainstream felt by the main character, a young Japanese American male named Ichiro. Responding to his Japanese heritage and identity, Ichiro refuses to enlist in the American military, and instead follows his parents to a federal detention camp. However, many of his friends enlist in the armed services—along with 33,000 other Americans of Japanese ancestry—to fight in both Asia and Europe. Okada uses Ichiro to describe the internal struggle of many Japanese to balance their ties with two societies, and the psychological pressure associated with their minority status during wartime.

Ichiro is acutely aware of his Japanese heritage, yet he carries with him a sense of self-contempt, self-pity, and uselessness because of it. He has a strong desire to be considered a good American, but the dominant white society that he moves within fails to offer any sense of acceptance—primarily the result of his physical appearance, but also for political reasons:

One could not fight an enemy who looked upon him as much to say: this is America, which is for Americans. You have spent two years in prison to prove that you are Japanese—go back to Japan. These unspoken words were not to be denied. (p. 51)

Ichiro frequently dwells on the reasons why he refused to serve in the American armed forces, and contrasts that decision with his pre-war memories as a happy engineering student with a bright future ahead of him. As he interacts with other characters in the novel, his sensitivity to who he is and the culture he belongs to becomes more visible. This explains why, when he re-visits his old university campus in an attempt to find his center, he feels threatened in the presence of his former professor:

He was nice enough. Shook hands, talked, smiled. Still, it was all wrong. It was like meeting someone you knew in a revolving door. . . . Brown is still Brown. It is I who reduces conversation to the inconsequential because Brown is of that

which I have forfeited, and forfeiting it, have lost the right to see and hear and get excited over things that are of that wonderful past. (p. 57)

The absence of genuine human warmth during his visit with Professor Brown reminds Ichiro of all the other people who never cared about who he was or what happened to him. This includes members of the Japanese *issei* (the first generation of Japanese immigrants) community, as well as mainstream Americans. This explains the resentment and lack of joy that colors Ichiro's relationship with his family. Even though he feels a strong sense of being Japanese, he also feels a sense of resentment toward that heritage, based on his perception of uselessness in America.

Ichiro's strong desire to be accepted as an American explains why one eye of the cover character contains half of an American flag. I believe that the empty space needs to be viewed in the context of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, after which all Japanese living in the US were required to show their loyalty, or else be sent to detention camps for the war's duration. As a young adult he must face the idea that he is part of a "yellow race," the son of parents who immigrated into America from Japan, part of a category separate from white Americans. Okada succinctly describes Ichiro's complex inner feelings:

When one is born in America and learns to love it more and more every day without thinking, it is not an easy thing to discover that being American is a terribly incomplete thing if one's face is not white and one's parents are Japanese, from Japan, the country that attacked America. (p. 54)

As the story progresses, Ichiro's simmering dislike of Japan and all things Japanese intensifies. He blames his ancestral homeland for everything that is wrong in his life and in the larger world. As his confusion grows, so does his desire to become a complete American, physically and emotionally. This makes it more difficult for him to accept that he has Japanese blood, features, skin, and color—all of which he views as inferior. The empty space in the

cover character's eye thus represents the American viewpoint that Ichiro is not good enough to be treated as an American.

Ichiro's friend, Kenji, faces the same issues, but does so as a wounded soldier. Perhaps for this reason, he is more positive than Ichiro toward his life. His decision to become an American through military service allows him to step back, look at, and understand Ichiro's feelings, but Ichiro is incapable of understanding the differences that separate them. Even though Kenji has been severely wounded in battle, Ichiro still expresses jealousy over his friend's position. In fact, when his friend, Kenji, came back to America from the war, he had one leg:

He envied Kenji with his Oldsmobile, which was fixed to be driven without a right leg that wasn't there any more, since it had been amputated in a field hospital. This meant that Kenji was a veteran of the army of America and had every right to laugh and love and hope, because one could do that even if one of his legs was gone. But a leg that was eating itself away until it would consume the man himself in a matter of a few years was something else, for hobbling toward death on a cane and one good leg seemed far more disastrous than having both legs and an emptiness that might conceivably still be filled.

In the same manner that Ichiro's internment camp experience shows that he is essentially Japanese, Kenji's military experience makes him more of a complete American—despite his incomplete body. Ichiro believes that it is Kenji's loyalty to the US that makes him an American, and that allows Kenji to feel pride in himself despite the loss of his leg. In contrast, Kenji is confused about what he understands to be Ichiro's feelings of inferiority rooted in his perception of Kenji as a complete American. During his battle experience (in Europe), Kenji grew to view family support as a central factor determining his—and Ichiro's—sense of identity. Kenji wants to talk openly with his friend about these feelings and about their contrasting anxieties and fears, but Ichiro is reluctant, believing that he cannot understand Kenji's inner feelings because of his own self-perception as being more Japanese, or

less American, than his soldier friend.

Okada further addresses the issues represented by the half-clear eye/half-Japanese flag image in the book's third chapter. The Japanese flag represents the country and the people that Ichiro's ancestors belong to, yet he is at the point in his life where he hates everything Japanese. Great tension exists between Ichiro and his parents; his mother pressures her son to act in a more Japanese-appropriate manner and to respect his cultural heritage. But Ichiro fails to acknowledge or assimilate his mother's pride in things Japanese, which represents all that is important to her:

He did not understand what it was about his mother that haunted him day and night, tore up his insides into meaningless bits, and was slowly destroying him. And it was because of these things and because he was seriously mixed up that he had to cut himself free and spare himself the anguish of his friend, which he knew must be there even if he was a stranger to him. Maybe that was another reason why he was leaving his home.

Because of the complexities of Japanese family life that his mother adheres to, Ichiro is convinced that she is deliberately trying to destroy his individual life. At the beginning of the war, he felt a sense of obligation to fight against Japan, but based on his mother's advice (given to protect her son from harm), he instead moved with his family to a detention camp. His mother advises him to not resist the decision made by the American government. Following Japanese tradition, she believes that she must ultimately depend on her sons (and not her husband or relatives still living in Japan) for security. She loves both her sons deeply, but in a Japanese way that is interpreted by Ichiro as excessively conservative. Having spent so much time in American schools, Ichiro resents and resists his mother's attempts to make him "more Japanese." In his effort to become more American, he rejects her love as part of his rejection of Japanese culture.

Ichiro's father refuses to make any effort to regain the family authority that

he lost after moving to the internment camp. As Okada points out, many male Japanese *issei* felt useless in their traditional roles as Japanese fathers when they returned home after the war:

Ichiro looked at his father, who did not look like a father who had just lost a son, but like a scared man. His face paled perceptibly as the mother came into the kitchen.

The father knows that he is losing both of his sons. He believes it is impossible for them to understand the cultural norms of Japan, and therefore impossible for them to understand their parents' feelings and wishes. Yet he has a better understanding than his wife of what Ichiro is experiencing, and so he serves as a buffer between the son and his mother. In the novel, the father makes one attempt to communicate with Ichiro about their respective situations, but the son is already too distant and defensive; despite being treated so poorly, the father does not feel blame toward his son. Eventually, the mother returns to her husband to give and receive support, while the father spends increasingly larger amounts of time drinking sake by himself.

Thus, the empty space in the cover character's other eye represent a lack of understanding of the feelings, emotions, and cultural beliefs of Japanese. Ichiro blames himself and other *issei* for their failures—even though he has yet to gain any understanding of what is most important in his own life, let alone the feelings of pain, self-contempt, fear, or anxiety in others. Like an adolescent, he believes he has the most difficult situation in the world. As shown in the dialogue between Ichiro and Kenji in the book's third chapter, Ichiro refuses to believe that a Japanese-born American can ever have the same status as a white American from European ancestry. Kenji seems more capable of accepting his own ethnic identity and the racial discrimination he must endure. This is the primary theme of *No No Boy*: the anger, anxiety, depression, and self-hatred that marked the lives of Japanese Americans and Japanese *issei* following the destruction of their communities, family ties,

and cultural values in the 1940s.

Author's Notes: background

How any individual reader interprets the *No No Boy* story depends on their knowledge of pre-World War II Japanese history and the motivations for many Japanese to immigrate during that period. The Japanese government, influenced strongly by the country's military elite, made a concentrated effort to catch up with western powers in terms of arms and technology, and started on a program of building a Japanese empire by establishing colonies throughout Asia. The primary goal of Japanese foreign policy had been to achieve a successful revision of the unequal treaties. In 1921, for example, attempts to negotiate unequal Naval Limitation Treaty with the US, Great Britain and other countries failed, as did western attempts to limit the size of Japan's navy (5-US: 5-Great Britain: 3-Japan). Recognizing the imminence of war, many Japanese left the country in search of a better life elsewhere.

In “War Without Mercy”, Professor John Dower describes the fate of almost 120,000 Japanese immigrants—many of them naturalized American citizens—who were sent to interment camps as a result of Executive Order 9066, signed by President Franklin Roosevelt in February, 1942. Many of the internees were moved from their communities on the West Coast to camps further inland. Dower notes that the Japanese who had assimilated into American society were not aggressive in establishing their own political base, and therefore lacked the power required to resist or overturn the executive order. He also describes how Japanese stereotypes were created by the mass media, especially in government-produced propaganda films and Hollywood productions. Those Japanese who did succeed in entering the US found themselves the target of prejudice and racial discrimination that can be traced to anti-Asian immigrant and labor laws passed in the 1800s and early 1900s. Claiming that it was trying to protect its overseas citizens, the

Japanese government tried to control the numbers of out-migrants, and lodged official protests with the US government over anti-Japanese laws and discriminatory practices—protests that were all but completely ignored by an American government that refused to give its own citizens of color equal rights. Professor Dower asserts that Japanese Americans' experiences in 1940's could happen to anyone today. From this background, it seems that Okada wanted to elicit sympathy for Ichiro, who can be viewed as a symbolic victim of racial discrimination.

Furthermore, the behavior of the older Japanese immigrant characters in the book take on a different meaning in light of the traditional Japanese norms of *gaman* (“endurance”), *enryo* (“humbleness”), and *chu* (“loyalty”)—all considered fundamental precepts for Japanese farmers. Because of these values, displaced Japanese farmers in America tended to simply follow the dictates of any official authority (whether it be local or national), and therefore did not resist the executive order to place them in detention camps. It is this passivity that Ichiro and others of his generation had to struggle with, because they were trained in American schools to be aggressive and to challenge old ideas. The internal conflict that Ichiro faced was a source of anger, sadness, and consternation for many second-generation Japanese Americans.

References

Okada, J. 1957 *No-No Boy, A Novel*. Rutland, Vt., C. E. Tuttle Co.,

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