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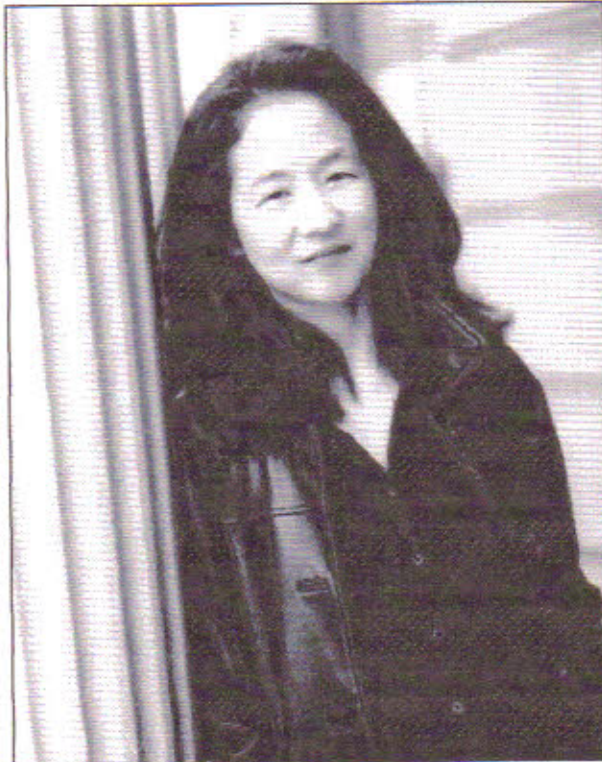


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Arts & Entertainment Section

Looking Back at a Family's Internment

Julie Otsuka's novel debuts in paperback



By Terry Hong, Special to AsianWeek, Oct 24, 2003

OK, I'm going to go out on a limb and say that for me, Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine*, just out in paperback this week, is the best book on the internment that I have ever read. Spare and streamlined, *Emperor* is a shockingly brilliant debut novel. Historically accurate, this slim volume has no surprises or plot twists — but it will make you gasp as it exposes the truth.

The title is an indirect reference to life before World War II, a time when the Japanese still believed that their emperor was descended from the gods.

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When the very human voice of the defeated emperor announced the Japanese surrender, the illusion of divinity was shattered forever. For the Japanese American family in *Emperor*, pre-WWII was a time of relative normalcy, of freedom.

Divided into five tense chapters, Otsuka's novel gives voice to each of the four members of an unnamed family who survive the incarceration, only to return to a hostile home. Otsuka's decision not to name her imprisoned family underscores the dehumanization that Executive Order 9066 wreaked upon citizens' lives.

Reliving the internment today, Otsuka's prose captures an urgency that is profoundly ironic, given life post-Sept. 11 when, again, the innocent continue to be punished, even killed, because of a mistaken resemblance to a so-called enemy. The California-born and raised Otsuka, whose mother's family was interned in Topaz, Utah, is a remarkable witness — read her testimony and help ensure that the mistakes of our past are not repeated again.

AsianWeek: *I understand you came to writing somewhat circuitously ...*

Julie Otsuka: I was a painter when I was younger, and I did my undergraduate degree [at Yale] in art. I went to the Midwest to do a graduate program in painting, but dropped out after three months. I think I was too young — I found the experience of having to produce art under pressure fairly traumatic, and left there thinking I'd never paint again. I moved to New York City and began temping. After a few months, I wanted to paint again, so I enrolled at an art school downtown — a non-degree program. After another two years, I hit a wall — I was overwhelmed with doubt, couldn't put down even one mark on the canvas without being sure it was "wrong" — and this time I gave up painting for good.

AW: *So then what happened?*

Otsuka: I was working evenings in midtown as a word processor, so I had a whole day to fill up. I didn't know what to do with myself, so I began going for long walks every morning and in the afternoon I'd go to my neighborhood café and just sit there and read for hours. I found stories terribly consoling. After reading in the café for about three years, I began to think that I might want to write, so I signed up for a creative writing class. Because I felt like a failure — a failed painter — I felt I had nothing to lose, and writing was something I did just for fun. I didn't take it too seriously, which was probably a good thing. After a couple of years, I applied to Columbia and got an MFA in creative writing [in 1999]. Half of my novel appeared in my thesis. Before Columbia, I had only written comic stories; I had never written about the war.

AW: *What prompted you to write what would become Emperor?*

Otsuka: It started as a visual image of a woman standing on a street, looking at a sign on a telephone pole — that sign being [Executive Order] 9066. The image gripped me, although I don't know why. In my mind, I followed her home to see what she might do after that. I had no idea that what I was writing might be the beginning of a novel — I would have been terrified to think it was something that big.

AW: *Why terrified?*

Otsuka: Because of the responsibilities you take on when you decide to address something like the internment of a people. I had to do a lot of research. I didn't know a lot about the internment, even though my mother and her family were interned. It was weighty, heavy material. At times, I wondered if I could get the story right, if I could pull it off. The first and second chapters I wrote as stand-alone stories ... that's why they're told from different points of view. After I wrote those two stories, I

realized I had the beginnings of a novel on my hands. So by the time I realized I was writing a novel, I was already well into it.

AW: *How did you finally finish it?*

Otsuka: After I graduated from Columbia, I continued to work on [what became the novel], although it took another two years to finish. I was working as a freelance desktop publisher, and I continued going to the same café every day. I have a favorite corner, way in the back where the lighting is good. There's no music, the owners are great, they let me sit for as long as I like, and I'm surrounded by students, academics and other writers. I know all the regular faces there, we look out for each other and I find it a very comforting place to work. On one of the walls, the owners have framed the covers of books written by some of the regulars. When my novel was first published, they saw my review in the [New York] Times and taped it behind the glass of the sandwich counter.

I wrote a good part of the book at that café. My perfect day is to start writing at home, go for a midday swim and then go to the café in the late afternoon. I'm very attached to the place, and am fanatic about my routine. In my writing, I can really let loose, but I need to keep everything else in my life very predictable in order to feel safe enough to write.

AW: *Did you ever visit any of the camps?*

Otsuka: I had seen photos of Topaz, where my mother was, but I didn't go there until after I had finished writing the novel. I was in Utah for a conference at Sundance, and a high school teacher in Delta, near Topaz, drove me out to the site of the camp. It was eerie — you could see the foundations of the barracks, shards of plates, rusty nails, broken glass. And the original barbed wire fence was still there. It wasn't as high as I'd thought it would be — you could have

easily stepped over it, but then again, the guards were right there and there was nowhere to run. The camp was out in the middle of nowhere, utterly desolate, with nothing growing. I think that after I'd finished writing the novel was the right time for me to see the camp. I needed to imagine it first in my head.

AW: *Have your parents read the book?*

Otsuka: Yes, my parents and two younger brothers. They're very supportive and excited for me. My grandmother never saw it, although the book is actually about her and dedicated to her. She lived to be almost 101. I think she would have been very happy to know that her story was finally being told.

Terry Hong is a freelance writer based in the Washington D.C. area.

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