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Book Talk: *We Are Not Free* by Traci Chee



<http://www.tracichee.com/bio.html>

Traci Chee's family experienced internment camps during WWII, where her grandparents were detained in Tanforan. Chee learned about her family history at twelve years old when her grandfather was quoted as saying, "where were the bleeding hearts in 1942?" It was her motivation to write and get published.

We Are Not Free by Traci Chee follows the narrative of fourteen Japanese American teenagers during WWII when many Japanese Americans were incarcerated in concentration camps throughout the United States.

Three quotes and their significance and comment:

1. Hiromi “Bette” 17 “As for me, after four months of the same dusty racetrack, I am looking forward to another adventure... missed a boy this handsome!”(75-76).
 - a. Hiromi Bette’s narrative focuses on the hopefulness of the situation being fruitful of new opportunities. The novel emphasizes the alienation of Japanese Americans into internment camps, but Bette’s narrative emphasizes the assimilation into the anglo American culture. Bette focuses on her appearance as an “American girl.” The novel captures the way an adolescent teen might cope with displacement, and Bette chooses to see the brighter side of this moment in history by enjoying her high school experiences. Bette looks forward to potential romances, dances, and friendships.
2. Frankie 19 “I glare down at the red double-A of Pop’s “All-American” patch... I’m so mad”(108-109).
 - a. Frankie’s narrative emphasizes one of many emotional impacts of displacement on young men, and the novel expresses that impact through Frankie’s “white” rage. Frankie’s character experiences displacement twice: once from the east coast, being sent to live with his uncle in San Francisco, then again displaced into the internment camps. The novel emphasizes the character’s intense and destructive rage to explain the reasoning behind Japanese Americans enlisting. The Novel emphasizes Frankie’s relationships with other characters to highlight his desire to belong. Frankie enlists to fight against the unjust treatment of Japanese Americans in the United States, and he wants to be there for his other friends who enlist.

3. Stan 18 “They hold us for interrogation... no one’s seen the dog.”(134-135).
 - a. Stan’s narrative showcases the escalation of displacement where people feel confused, followed by anger which in turn leads to violence. Stan’s story begins with him applying to colleges so that he can have some sense of normalcy. The novel expresses Stan’s dilemma of having to enlist and swear allegiance to the U.S. government, and he contemplates the issue for a while. Eventually, the displacement of Japanese Americans gets worse when Stan watches as his neighbor is shot dead for playing fetch with his dog. The novel emphasizes the sudden shock and confusion that the character feels, and the book showcases the lack of care felt by the government officials, anglo Americans, and soldiers. The novel focuses on the character’s attempt to grasp some semblance of hope by asking, “what happened to his dog?”

The book in my classroom:

I would use the book within my classroom to emphasize the importance of community and a sense of belonging. The text conveys many different narratives that encapsulate relatable emotions, and I believe the students will take away invaluable knowledge from this book. I would use a combination of context and textual evidence to emphasize the moments in history that traumatically impact Japanese Americans today. I believe sophomores and higher would receive the text’s ideas of emotion, resilience, and community the best. The young adults in high school would gain perspective on the different environments students thrive in, and they can maybe connect these experiences to their own. The book falls into the fictionalized realism category.

The book can be introduced in many different capacities, such as character development, textual analysis, and critical thinking. The structure of the book showcases many narratives that interconnect through interpersonal relationships, and a lesson plan about character development can help students identify characteristics that bring characters to life. The book's different perspectives utilize different types of language that convey and communicate individualized ideas, and analyzing the language can help students identify the different ways characters interpret and react to events and conflicts. The book will help students develop critical thinking skills by identifying the different character types and their roles in relation to the events and other characters.

Text Complexity:

ATOS suggests scoring the text as 2.75, but I recommend the text be presented to high schoolers.

Dale-Chall scores the text as 5.4.

I believe the text's complexity comes into question in the shifts of perspective. The fourteen different stories identify many different implicit language and ideas. The event alone should invoke intense emotions from students in the United States. The grading might be interpreting the conversational and first-person narrative style of events.