

When the Emperor Was Divine: Discussion Guide / Questions

Introductions (5 to 10 minutes)

Introduce yourself by stating your name, your role (if you are a student, what is your major), and state one thing that struck you as particularly memorable about the book.

Go around the room and have everyone do the same. Later, if you run out of things to say, you can return to what people stated as most memorable, and have them talk more about those.

Define Principles of Conversation (5 minutes)

The Principles of Conversation are intended to help ensure that the dialogue remains positive, engaging, and productive for everyone. Then, read through the principles below and ask for confirmation, revision, or additions to this list.

- Acknowledge one another as equals
- Try to stay curious about each other
- Slow down so we have time to think and reflect
- Expect it to be messy at times

Regarding the *spirit* of our speaking and listening:

1. We will speak for ourselves and from our own experience.
2. We will not criticize the view of other participants or attempt to persuade them.
3. We will listen with resilience, “hanging in” when what is said is hard to hear.

Regarding the *form* of our speaking and listening:

1. We will participate within the time frames suggested by the facilitator.
2. We will not interrupt except to indicate that we cannot hear a speaker.
3. We will “pass” if we don’t wish to speak.

“So, everyone agrees to follow these guidelines and will allow me to remind you if you forget?”

(Look for verbal and non-verbal responses)

“OK these will serve as our agreements. If at any time you feel like these aren’t serving our purposes well, speak up and we’ll talk about revising them.”

When the Emperor Was Divine Discussion Questions (40+ minutes)

1. Each but the final chapter of *Emperor* begins with an image. Otsuka has said that her idea for the novel actually began with one: the image of the mother standing in front of the evacuation order. What do you imagine was going through the woman's mind when she read this evacuation order?
2. What possible reasons might Otsuka have had in depicting in such detail the images of Americana (Woolworths, the YMCA, Lundy's Hardware, etc.) in the first chapter?
3. What do you think about the United States government's choice of words like "evacuated," "assembly center," or "relocation center" to describe the internment camps? What about the use of the word "camp" instead of "prison?"
4. "*Shikata ga nai*" is a phrase in Japanese that means "it cannot be helped now." Does this phrase influence the mother's or father's behavior in the novel? What other factors might explain their behavior?
5. The boy inscribes on his pet tortoise's shell his family's identification number. In another place, we learn that the girl "[p]inned to her collar...an identification number." What might Otsuka be suggesting about the experience of internment for these children?
6. Discuss the symbolism of the scarf. The girl denies its importance but wears it all the time. What does this suggest about the girl's experience of internment?
7. In an interview, Otsuka said that she "wanted [the novel] to be a universal story, although it happened to a particular group of people." What universalities did you find present in the story or the characters' experiences?
8. Compare the views of the family's neighbors from before the internment and after. Do you notice any differences in the family's interactions with their neighbors? In what ways does the family itself act differently?
9. At one point in the fourth chapter, the narrator states, "we tried to avoid our own reflections wherever we could. We turned away from shiny surfaces and storefront windows. We ignored the passing glances of strangers." How does this reflect one of the principal psychological effects of the internment on the family?
10. The final chapter of the novel is told in a much different voice than the preceding chapters. What purpose might Otsuka have wanted to serve by constructing the father's voice in this way?
11. What do you think the title means? How do you see it related to the experience of internment?

12. The word "name" is used 25 times in the novel, often in thematically important contexts. What importance does the idea of a name have relative to how the characters define themselves? At what points in the novel do the characters' names seem to mean the most? At what times do they seem to disappear? What do you learn from the differences there?
13. What do you make of the title of the final chapter? Is it a confession? Is it an appropriate choice of words? Or is Otsuka making a different point?
14. The author Jose Saramago in his novel *Blindness* offers that in writing about terrible acts it "would be better to state [the act] openly, directly, and to trust that the horror of the act, in itself, is so shocking that there is no need for us to say it was horrible." Do you notice any similarities between Otsuka's style and Saramago's prescription? What are the implications for the reader?
15. Look closely at the descriptions of the home, both before the family leaves and after they return. In what ways has the post-war home become a symbol for the effects of the internment on the family?
16. Consider the treatment of Japanese Americans following the attack on Pearl Harbor and the treatment of Muslim Americans following the attacks of September 11, 2001. What are some similarities in the reaction of the American government or the American population to these ethnic groups at these points in history?
17. In an interview with Kelley Kawano, Otsuka has said that she believes that Japanese Americans have been quiet about the internment "because of the shame" they felt by being labeled as disloyal. What role does shame play in the behavior of the characters in this novel?
18. Consider the symbolism of White Dog's character and death. Why doesn't the mother tell her children what happened to him?
19. Reflect on the concept of identity. Have you ever been in a situation where you've felt it necessary to deny any part of your identity (could provide a list of suggestions)? How did this make you feel about others? About yourself? If you had the opportunity to do it again, would you make the same choice? How do people unknowingly/unintentionally put others in this situation?

Closing: Thanks to everyone for participating! Julie Otsuka will be speaking on campus on Wednesday, October 19th at 7 p.m. in the CSU Ballroom.

Resources used in creating this guide include:

<http://www.neabigread.org/books/whentheemperorwasdivine/>