

Lesson Plans and Resources for *The Buddha in the Attic* Table of Contents

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These resources are all available, both separately and together, at www.freelibrary.org/onebook

Please send any comments or feedback about these resources to Larissa.Pahomov@gmail.com.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

The materials in this unit plan are meant to be flexible and easy to adapt to your own classroom. Each chapter has discussion questions provided in a later section. However, for students reading the entire book, there are several themes that connect the stories. Through reading the book and completing any of the suggested activities, students can achieve any number of the following understandings:

*To understand a culture, you must see the daily life of many – not just the experiences of a few.
Despite being a nation of immigration, America has a long tradition of keeping newcomers on the outside.
Fiction can bring history to life.*

Students should be introduced to the following key questions as they begin reading, and keep them in mind as they work through the book. For this novel, the essential questions can be presented with a literary or a historical focus. Teachers are welcome to follow one thread, or combine these approaches.

Literary

*How do you tell the story of a people?
What defines a person's culture?
What do outsiders bring to a culture? What do they reveal about that culture?*

Historical

*How do we learn the history of a people?
What makes a person American?
What role did Japanese immigrants play in America? What did they reveal about America?*

Many of the reader response questions and suggested projects relate to these essential questions. Students are encouraged to ask these questions not only of the characters of the book, but of themselves.

IN-CLASS INTRODUCTION

This lesson is designed to provide students with a one-class introduction to the book. The lesson can be used to start off a class reading of the text, or to encourage them to read it independently.

As a recipient of One Book resources, the Free Library requires that you devote one class period to introducing *The Buddha in the Attic* to students, either using this lesson or your own plan.

Like the essential questions, these activities emphasize both the literary and historical aspects of the book – feel free to use one or both sets of activities.

Literary Intro

1. Ask students: what groups are you a part of? Brainstorm these ideas on the board. Try to get students to think of as many angles as possible: sports teams, friend circles, and other groups they chose might be obvious to them. What groups are they a part of without choosing to be?
2. On paper, give students 5-10 minutes to describe that group, starting with the word “we” – and without just telling us who “we” are. What do “we” do? What do “we” represent? What do “we” sound like? (Remind them, if necessary, that this is the first person plural.)
3. Give students a chance to trade papers with a partner and/or read their works to the class. Can students correctly identify which group is being described? How do they know?
4. Without handing out books to the group, read them the first paragraph from *The Buddha in the Attic*. (“On the boat, we were mostly virgins.”) Do they know who the “we” is in this story? How? Key connections include kimonos, rice, hair color, and the sea.
5. Hand out or project the picture of the “Picture Brides” (included on the next pages.) When do they think this photo was taken? How do they know?
6. Distribute books and continue reading the first chapter. Many, many questions are posed in this section; feel free to try and answer them. See the discussion questions in this packet for more prompts.

Historical Info

1. Ask students: What do you know about Japan? Brainstorm these ideas – if students need help separating fact from fiction, put ideas up on the board; if not, have them work in pairs or small groups, and then share out their lists.

2. Distribute or project the two images of the “Picture Brides.” Ask them to theorize: when were these pictures taken? And what’s going on here?
3. Keep the pictures visible, and read students the first paragraph of *The Buddha in the Attic* (“On the boat, we were mostly virgins.”) What do they think about them women now? This activity can be repeated for the first few paragraphs of the book, until students are getting their minds around the situation.
4. Distribute books as well as maps of Japan (included on the next pages). As students get to the section naming different places in Japan, ask them to locate them on the map. Which have they heard of, and which are new?
5. Give extra time to discussing the view of Americans on page 7. Why do the Japanese women think this way? In what ways are their beliefs accurate, and in what ways not? Are they right to believe that their lives will be better in America?
6. See the discussion questions section of this packet for more prompts.



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For the “Traitors” and “Last Day” chapter, students can look at this photograph of a Japanese family checking into an internment camp in California. The boy in the photo is author Julie Otsuka’s uncle; behind him is her mother, and the couple on the left are her grandparents.



Timeline of Japanese Immigration – Adapted from Densho.org

<http://www.densho.org/assets/sharedpages/timeline.asp?section=resources>

March 26, 1790 - The U.S. Congress, in the Act of March 26, 1790, states that "any alien, being a free white person who shall have resided within the limits and under the jurisdiction of the United States for a term of two years, may be admitted to become a citizen thereof."

1891 - Japanese immigrants arrive on the mainland U.S. for work primarily as agricultural laborers.

June 27, 1894 - A U.S. district court rules that Japanese immigrants cannot become citizens because they are not "a free white person" as the Naturalization Act of 1790 requires.

May 7, 1900 - The first large-scale anti-Japanese protest in California is held, organized by various labor groups.

October 11, 1906 - The San Francisco Board of Education passes a resolution to segregate children of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean ancestry from the majority population.

1908 - Japan and the U.S. agree (Gentlemen's Agreement) to halt the migration of Japanese laborers in the United States. Japanese women are allowed to immigrate if they are wives of U.S. residents. Using this loophole, "Picture Brides" begin to arrive in the United States.

1913 - California passes the Alien Land Law, forbidding "all aliens ineligible for citizenship" from owning land. This later grew to include prohibition on leasing land as well, and 12 other states adopted similar laws.

1920 - Japanese American farmers produce \$67 million dollars worth of crops, more than ten percent of California's total crop value. There are 111,000 Japanese Americans in the U.S., 82,000 are immigrants and 29,000 were born in the U.S.

July 19, 1921 - White vigilantes deport 58 Japanese laborers from Turlock, California, driving them out by truck at gunpoint. Other incidents occur across California and in Oregon and Arizona.

November 13, 1922 - The United States Supreme Court rules on the *Ozawa* case, reaffirming the ban on Japanese immigrants from becoming naturalized U.S. citizens. This ban would last until 1952.

1924 - Congress passes the Immigration Act of 1924 effectively ending all Japanese immigration to the U.S.

November 1941 - A U.S. Intelligence report known as the "Munson Report" commissioned by President Roosevelt concludes that the great majority of Japanese Americans are loyal to the U.S. and do not pose a threat to national security in the event of war with Japan.

December 7, 1941 - Japan bombs U.S. ships and planes at the Pearl Harbor military base in Hawaii. Over 3,500 servicemen are wounded or killed. Martial law is declared in Hawaii.

The FBI begins arresting Japanese immigrants identified as community leaders: priests, Japanese language teachers, newspaper publishers, and heads of organizations. Within 48 hours, 1,291 are arrested. Most of these men would be incarcerated for the duration of the war, separated from their families.

February 19, 1942 - President Roosevelt signs Executive Order 9066 authorizing military authorities to exclude civilians from any area without trial or hearing. The order did not specify Japanese Americans--but they were the only group to be imprisoned as a result of it.

March 1942 - The Wartime Civil Control Administration opens 16 "Assembly Centers" to detain approximately 92,000 men, women, and children until the permanent incarceration camps are completed.

January 1944 - The War Department imposes the draft on Japanese American men, including those incarcerated in the camps. The vast majority comply, a few hundred resist and are brought up on federal charges. Most of the resisters are imprisoned in a federal penitentiary.

August 6, 1945 - The U.S. drops the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Three days later, a second bomb is dropped on Nagasaki. Japan surrenders on August 14.

August 1945 - Some 44,000 people still remain in the camps. Many have nowhere to go, having lost their homes and jobs. Many are afraid of anti-Japanese hostility and refuse to leave.

1948 - President Truman signs the Japanese American Evacuation Claims Act. Approximately \$38 million was paid from this act, only a small fraction of the estimated loss in income and property.

1983 - The Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians issues its report, *Personal Justice Denied*, on February 24 and its *Recommendations*, on June 16. The *Recommendations* call for a presidential apology and a \$20,000 payment to each of the approximately 60,000 surviving persons excluded from their places of residence pursuant to Executive Order 9066.

1983 - 1988 - The wartime convictions of Gordon Hirabayashi, Minoru Yasui, and Fred Korematsu (the three men who protested the curfew and/or incarceration orders) are vacated ("nullified") on the basis of newly discovered evidence that the U.S. military lied to the Supreme Court in the original proceedings.

August 10, 1988 - President Ronald Reagan signs HR 442 into law. It acknowledges that the incarceration of more than 110,000 individuals of Japanese descent was unjust, and offers an apology and reparation payments of \$20,000 to each person incarcerated.

October 9, 1990 - In a Washington D.C. ceremony, the first nine redress payments are made.

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Correlation to Common Core Standards for Grades 11-12

INTRODUCTION LESSON + DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Reading Standards for Literature

1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
2. Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.
10. By the end of grade 11, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 11–CCR text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.
By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 11–CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently

Speaking and Listening Standards

1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
2. Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

VOCABULARY

Reading Standards for Literature

4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.

Language Standards

4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grades 11–12 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.
6. Acquire and use accurately general academic and domain-specific words and phrases, sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

ANALYTICAL + CREATIVE ASSESSMENTS

Writing Standards

1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences

4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1–3 above.)
5. Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience. (Editing for conventions should demonstrate command of Language standards 1–3 up to and including grades 11–12 on page 54.)
9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

READER RESPONSE QUESTIONS

Come, Japanese!

Who are the “we” in the chapter? Why are they asking so many questions?

On page 7, the women describe their limited understanding of America – and they worry about how they will be treated. Do you think they are right to worry? Why or why not?

On page 9, the women list items that they brought on the trip. Why those items? And what would you choose to bring if you were emigrating to a foreign land?

Why end the chapter with such a negative statement? What effect does this have on the reader?

First Night

Many different sexual experiences are shared in this chapter. How do you think their experiences compare to those of newly married couples today?

Whites

On page 25, the women give a long list of things that confuse them about white people. What do these items reveal about Japanese culture? (You may need to do some research to find out how some Japanese traditions are different.)

At the bottom of page 25, some stern advice is given to the women. Do you think this is the right way to deal with outsiders? Are they right to “say nothing at all” and “belong to the invisible world?”

Why can’t the Japanese get better jobs? Why are they stuck doing the work “that no self-respecting American would do?” (29)

On page 33, the women describe being propositioned by different men. Are they right to assume that “in America, you got nothing for free?”

On page 37, the women describe being harassed and attacked by Americans. Answer their question: “Is there any tribe more savage than the Americans?”

What is the relationship between Japanese and American women like? Can these groups trust each other, or not?

Why do the Americans give the women different names? Would you accept a name like this?

How do the women find an escape from their lives, full of work and their husbands? Which do you think are better off – those who escape forever, or those who escape for just a short time?

At the end of the chapter, the women provide a long list of services they perform for white people. Who does this work for you in your life? What would it be like if those people disappeared?

Babies

What is the story of your own birth? Does your story have anything in common with the many stories told in this chapter?

Only a few of the births take place in a hospital. How does the setting of each birth influence the mother?

As the chapter continues, the women face more difficult and unwanted births. Why does the author shift from positive to negative? What effect does this have on the reader?

For names in Japanese and descriptions of meanings, visit <http://www.behindthename.com/names/usage/japanese>

The Children

On page 61, the women describe how they cared for their infant children. Do you think they made the right choices?

Why do the women have favorite children?

Many of the children struggle with work; one wishes that she had never been born – and the women lament that they could never buy their children toys.

What kind of world were you born into? How did you play pretend? What worlds did you create?

What lessons do the women teach their children? Who do they teach them to trust and distrust? Why?

Why do the children forget Japanese as they grow older? How does this help the women, and how does this hurt them? What did you leave behind or forget as you grew up?

What do the Japanese children do to fit in? Does it work? Why or why not? By the end of the chapter, do the grown children seem “American” to you?

On page 78, it says that, “some people are born luckier than others and that things in the world do not always go as you plan.” Do you agree?

At the very end of the chapter, the children are dreaming of their futures. How do their dreams compare to the dreams of their mothers? And why do the mothers let them keep dreaming?

Traitors

What “war” is being referred to in the first sentence of the chapter? What event started this war for America?

What are the rumors about? Why do the women spread them even if they don’t believe them?

On page 84, dozens of rumors about “the list” are put together in a paragraph. Does this paragraph make “the list” seem more or less real? What does it reflect about the women and their feelings?

Why do their American neighbors stop trusting the Japanese?

Why do the women burn all of their old belongings?

Which country is “the enemy” referred to on page 89? Is it just the radio that is referring to “our battleships,” or do the women now consider themselves American as well?

Sometimes the women say they will be better off if their husbands are taken, but on page 96 they give a long list of tasks that their husbands help with. How do they feel about their husbands now that they might be separated from them?

Why do the women rely on chores and order to keep their mind off of the disappearing men?

On page 99, information about their evacuation is finally made public – and this is the first time that we see dialogue with quotation marks around it. Why did the author choose this moment to give individual women a voice in the story?

Why do the Japanese families sell off their possessions? Do you think this was the right choice?

Last Day

What physical objects do the Japanese choose to take with them? What does this show about their states of mind?

Why leave the Buddha in the Attic? Why is it “still laughing to this day?”

Why do the younger children leave “without looking back?” Do you think this is a good way to leave?

A Disappearance

Who narrates this chapter? What effect does that have on your understanding of the end of the book?

When do they start to forget about the Japanese? Why?

What makes them miss their Japanese neighbors?

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The last line of the book states, "we shall probably not meet them again in this world." Do you agree with this statement? Do you think the Japanese are gone forever?

Japanese Culture *The Buddha in the Attic*

Name: _____

The book gives the reader a window into Japanese immigrant culture of 100 years ago, but does not always explain the cultural references that are being made. When you encounter an idea, record it here and then do some quick research online about the topic. Record what you find out on the right.

Japanese name, practice, or idea

Information on this topic found through research

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Asking Questions in *The Buddha in the Attic*

Name: _____

The women ask many, many questions throughout the book. Some of them have simple answers – but the reasons behind the questions are much deeper. In this chart, record some of the more interesting questions the women ask, and then analyze why those questions are what they worry about.

Questions that the women ask

Analysis – why do the women ask these questions?

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SUGGESTED ANALYTICAL ASSESSMENTS

1. Read one or both reviews of *The Buddha in the Attic* (included in Print Resources). One review very positive; the other one mixed. Respond to the review(s) – do you agree or disagree with their statements? Use support from the text to back up your position.
2. Variation on #1 – Elizabeth Day’s review describes *The Buddha in the Attic* as “half poetry, half narration – short phrases, sparse description, so that the current of emotion running through each chapter is made more resonant by her restraint.” Do you agree or disagree with Day’s praise? Conduct your own literary critique of the book and use support from the text.
3. Read the article by Bhira Backus, “A Sikh Temple’s Century” (included in Print Resources). Backus’ article looks at another minority’s time in California, and is also written in response to a mass killing of American Sikhs living in Wisconsin. Compare and contrast Backus’ observations to Otsuka’s in *The Buddha in the Attic*. Has America’s approach towards immigrant culture changed in the last 100 years? Why or why not?
4. Variation on #3 – Backus’ article relies on her personal experience with her family, while Otsuka fictionalizes the larger events of an era--her family experienced that time, but she does not mention them specifically in her novel. Analyze their different styles of writing and the strengths and weaknesses of each. In the end, which do you find more effective?
5. Otsuka includes two Epigrams for the novel – one from the book of Ecclesiasticus, a Judeo-Christian text, and the other from Masahide, a seventeenth-century Japanese poet. How does each quote connect to the text, and how do they relate to each other?
6. *The Buddha in the Attic* gives the reader a window into Japanese immigrant culture of 100 years ago, but does not always explain the cultural references that are being made. Pick out a set number of places, names, ideas, or practices that are mentioned in the book and research their meanings. Share your findings to the class via an audio-visual presentation.

SUGGESTED CREATIVE ASSESSMENTS

1. Return to the “we” writing you did on the first day of reading *The Buddha in the Attic*. Expand this piece into a longer work, telling the story of a group *you* belong to. Make sure to include the thoughts and words of specific people in italics, along with descriptions of their actions.
2. Alternate version of #1: Read the article “Tragedy of the Picture Brides,” which includes an interview with Julia Otsuka about writing the book. She did an incredible amount of research for the novel. Plan your *own* research project for a similar book. Pick a group of people whose lives you would like to share. What information will you need to make your book real?
3. The women “speak” in this book in italics – write a “found poem” by picking these phrases and organizing them as you see fit. Some themes you could write about: worry, pain, a mother’s love, curiosity...
4. The book gives brief scenes of many different women. Pick one of them and, starting with the details provided in the book, extend her tale into a longer personal story. What happened to her before and after the scene in *The Buddha in the Attic*?
5. Japanese internment ended at the end of WWII. Extend the book for one more chapter – what can be said when the Japanese return to their own homes? This could be written from either the perspective of the Japanese or their old neighbors (like the last chapter of the book.)

ONLINE RESOURCES

HISTORY

Japanese Picture Brides in Central Valley

An 8-minute video featuring photos from the era, translated interviews with actual picture brides, and a brief historical overview of their lives, social structures, and the situation for their children.

<http://video.answers.com/japanese-picture-bride-phenomena-in-central-valley-300995146>

Japanese Picture Brides: Building a Family Through Photographs

A thoughtful article discussing the traditions, hopes, and pitfalls around Japanese marriages arranged through photographs. Includes several photos of bachelors, newlyweds, newly-arrived picture brides, and families.

<http://www.kcet.org/socal/departures/little-tokyo/japanese-picture-brides-building-a-family-through-photographs.html>

Voices of Japanese-American Internees

A 3-part lesson plan produced by the Anti-Defamation league. Includes a link to the short film "We Are Americans."

http://www.adl.org/education/curriculum_connections/summer_2008/default.asp

Densho – The Japanese American Legacy Project

A comprehensive independent archive, including extensive video interviews, downloadable curriculum, and other documents.

<http://www.densho.org/densho.asp>

JARDA – Japanese American Relocation Digital Archives

A comprehensive archive from the University of California, with primary resources and a variety of lesson plans.

Photos, audio recordings, timelines, and more. <http://www.calisphere.universityofcalifornia.edu/jarda/>

JARDA – Links and resources

The University of California's own collection of resource links.

<http://www.calisphere.universityofcalifornia.edu/jarda/related-resources.html#curricula>

Japanese Picture Marriage and the Image of Immigrant Women in Early Twentieth-Century California

A scholarly article with a thorough discussion of the topic in the title. Could be used for advanced historical research, or excerpted.

<http://www.soc.nii.ac.jp/jaas/periodicals/JJAS/PDF/2004/No.15-115.pdf>

PRIMARY RESOURCES

Japanese American Internment: The Library at Vanderbilt University

A small collection of pamphlets and art from the era, including paintings and drawings of internment camps.

<http://www.library.vanderbilt.edu/speccol/exhibits/WW2/internment.shtml>

The Art Of Gaman: Arts and Crafts from the Japanese Internment Camps

A slideshow of works that were displayed by the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

<http://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/online/gaman/index.cfm>

PRINT RESOURCES

The Buddha in the Attic by Julie Otsuka – Review

By Elizabeth Day – The Observer – Sunday, April 8, 2012

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/apr/08/buddha-in-attic-julie-otsuka-review>

This is a small jewel of a book, its planes cut precisely to catch the light so that the sentences shimmer in your mind long after turning the final page. With *The Buddha in the Attic*, Julie Otsuka has developed a literary style that is half poetry, half narration – short phrases, sparse description, so that the current of emotion running through each chapter is made more resonant by her restraint.

She takes as her subject the Japanese women brought over in the hundreds to San Francisco as mail-order brides in the interwar period. Instead of a single, named protagonist, Otsuka writes in the first personal plural through a series of thematic chapters. Such a device shouldn't work but does. Although there are no dominant characters, Otsuka's brilliance is that she is able to make us care about the crowd precisely because we can glimpse individual stories through the delicate layering of collective experience.

The opening chapter sets the scene on the boat as the women make their crossing to America, clutching photos of the handsome young men they believe to be their new husbands. When they arrive, they are disillusioned by "the crowd of men in knit caps and shabby black coats waiting for us down below on the dock... the photographs we had been sent were 20 years old."

The reality that confronts the women deals a blow from which they never fully recover. In a devastating chapter entitled "First Night", Otsuka recounts the physical consummation of these new relationships. Some of the women's experiences are harrowing, some stilted, some humorous. Otsuka makes no distinction between them, relying on the rhythm of her words to pull the reader along. Occasionally a single voice will break through and the effect is startlingly good. "They took us by the elbows and said quietly, 'It's time.' They took us before we were ready and the bleeding did not stop for three days. They took us with our white silk kimonos twisted up high over our heads and we were sure we were about to die. I thought I was being smothered."

Each subsequent chapter charts some aspect of immigrant life – getting jobs, giving birth and dealing with the casual racism of pre-war America ("They learned that they should always call the restaurant first. Do you serve Japanese?"). Their children grow up to be more comfortable with their adopted land than their parents: changing their names to sound American and making fun of their mothers' accents. Some of the marriages survive and some don't.

And then, after Pearl Harbor, the order comes for the Japanese to be interned. Entire communities are uprooted, forced to give up their houses and livelihoods. It is here that Otsuka finally gives her women their names: "Iyo left

with an alarm clock ringing from somewhere deep inside her suitcase but did not stop to turn it off. Kimiko left her purse behind on the kitchen table but would not remember until it was too late. Haruko left a tiny laughing brass Buddha up high, in a corner of the attic, where he is still laughing to this day."

This sudden individualisation is extremely poignant, especially when, in the final chapter, Otsuka's collective voice shifts from the Japanese to the Americans: "The Japanese have disappeared from our town. Their houses are boarded up and empty now."

Lyrical and empathetic, *The Buddha in the Attic* is a slender book of real, haunting power.

Julie Otsuka's 'The Buddha in the Attic,' reviewed by Ron Charles

By [Ron Charles](#), Published: November 15, 2011 | Updated: Wednesday, November 16, 12:35 PM

http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/julie-otsukas-the-buddha-in-the-attic-reviewed-by-ron-charles/2011/11/08/gIQAHxqhPN_print.html

A year after the attacks of Sept. 11, Julie Otsuka published her spare first novel about a family of Japanese Americans consigned to an internment camp in Utah. "When the Emperor Was Divine" hit a lot of notes just right in our newly paranoid country: Its lyrical style, emotional poignancy and historical content appealed to book clubs; its brevity, chastity and diversity appealed to schools. While splashy books like "Lovely Bones," "Middlesex" and "Life of Pi" soaked up attention, Otsuka's quiet debut lay the foundations for paperback immortality.

Her follow-up novel, a kind of prequel that's just as slim, starts off with a louder critical boost: It's one of the five finalists for the National Book Award in fiction to be handed out Wednesday. Every year the shortlist makes an easy target for complaints: The finalists are too commercial, too obscure, too not the books I happened to like. Otsuka's "The Buddha in the Attic" can't be dismissed on any of those grounds, but the National Book Award judges have burdened this delicate novel with expectations it can't comfortably carry.

Writing in the first person plural ("we"), Otsuka begins with a group of Japanese "picture brides" — some as young as 12 — sailing to San Francisco, thrilled to be marrying successful, good-looking men. Each carries what she thinks is a photo of her fiancée. "Most of us on the boat were accomplished, and were sure we would make good wives," they say. "We knew how to serve tea and arrange flowers and sit quietly on our flat wide feet for hours." Those will be less useful skills than they imagine in their new California lives.

The dramatic irony gets laid on thick in this anxious opening section, "Come, Japanese!" when these naive immigrants reassure themselves that "it was better to marry a stranger in America than grow old with a farmer from the village." But the book's plural voice is particularly effective at capturing their long, giddy conversations on the ship as they wonder if American men really grow hair on their chests, put pianos in their front parlors and dance "cheek to cheek all night long" with their lucky wives.

It turns out that guys have been larding their personal ads with exaggerations long before Match.com. Enticing letters to Japan had claimed, "I own a farm. I operate a hotel. I am president of a large bank" and my favorite new

pick-up line: “I am 179 centimeters tall and do not suffer from leprosy.” In fact, as their young brides discover upon arrival, most of these men don’t own anything at all. They’re poor, old and coarse. Still, “there was no going back.” What follows is a chorus of muted laments and complaints, beginning with a bracing short chapter called “First Night” that details scores of — mostly — painful consummations.

But no story in the conventional sense ever develops, and no individuals emerge for more than a paragraph. Whereas each chapter of “When the Emperor Was Divine” presented the family’s experience from a different point of view, in this new novel, each chapter focuses on some general aspect of Japanese immigrant life — sex, employment, children — and the great variety of their experiences is blended, often sentence by sentence: “Home was a bed of straw in John Lyman’s barn alongside his prize horses and cows. Home was a corner of the washhouse at Stockton’s Cannery Ranch. Home was a bunk in a rusty boxcar in Lompoc. Home was an old chicken coop in Willows that the Chinese had lived in before us. Home was a flea-ridden mattress in a corner of a packing shed in Dixon. Home was a bed of hay atop three apple crates beneath an apple tree.”

Though they’re often lovely, harrowing or surprising, these lists will have limited appeal to readers pining for more extended narratives and more emotional investment in individual characters. The very best sections of the novel reminded me of the poetic catalogues in Walt Whitman’s “Leaves of Grass,” but periodically the rhythm turns flat and the lists betray a kind of pedestrian pattern, as when the Japanese women recite everything they learned from their white employers: “How to light a stove. How to make a bed. How to answer a door. How to shake a hand. How to operate a faucet, which many of us had never seen in our lives. How to dial a telephone. How to sound cheerful on a telephone even when you were angry or sad. How to fry an egg. How to peel a potato. How to set a table.” How to hide my impatience?

Unfortunately, we learn the strategy of Otsuka’s variations on a theme too quickly: Many poignant experiences, interspersed with rare joyous ones, all presented in parallel sentences, leading to an emotional punch line that’s witty, forlorn or tragic. A chapter titled “Babies,” for instance, contains more than 60 sentences that begin “We gave birth . . .”: “We gave birth under oak trees, in summer, in 113-degree heat. We gave birth beside woodstoves in one-room shacks on the coldest nights of the year. We gave birth on windy islands in the Delta.” Etc., etc. And then this devastating last line: “We gave birth but the baby had already died in the womb and we buried her, naked, in the fields, beside a stream, but have moved so many times since we can no longer remember where she is.” But our over-anticipation of that finale taxes its impact, as though we’re hearing a comic who sets up every joke the

same way. Aware of the author's effort to manipulate our sympathies, we gradually become inured to the story's emotional power.

As the internment demanded by Executive Order 9066 approaches, the book's communal voice again becomes more appropriate to the paranoia and confusion these women feel. Their voices mingle, and isolated images, so precisely captured by Otsuka, deliver an explosion far beyond their size. And yet I'm troubled by the friction between this novel's theme and its style. These are, after all, people who were cruelly stripped of their individuality and regarded as a monolithic peril in the heightened anxiety of the war years. Why, then, describe that injustice by reducing them all again to lists — albeit beautiful lists — of fragmented concerns, manners and moments? The plural voice is necessarily blurring and distancing. It can make us feel appropriately sad about how these Americans were treated, but it never really challenges the prejudice that made their internment possible. Had we known them as full individuals — as real and diverse and distinct — we couldn't have whisked them away to concentration camps in the desert. A great novel should shatter our preconceptions, not just lacquer them with sorrow.

Tragedy of the Picture Brides

By Jane Ciabattari – September 16, 2011

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/09/16/julie-otsuka-talks-about-new-novel-the-buddha-in-the-attic.html>

Novelist Julie Otsuka is an Upper West Sider, with a regular spot at her neighborhood café, the Hungarian Pastry Shop. “No internet access, no music, no outlets, and the coffee refills are endless and free. I have a favorite table in the back, which is where I wrote both my books,” she says.

But the material for Otsuka’s first two novels is rooted in the West Coast. She was born in Palo Alto, California, and moved to Palos Verdes when she was nine. Her father was an electronic engineer in the aerospace industry; her mother worked as a lab technician in a hospital before having Julie and her two younger brothers.

Otsuka came east to study art at Yale, and some years later ended up in the MFA program at Columbia, where she began writing her first novel. [*When the Emperor Was Divine*](#), published in 2002, captures the experience of a Berkeley family evacuated from the West Coast to a Japanese internment camp in 1942 with breathtaking restraint. It draws from family history. Her grandfather was arrested as a suspected Japanese spy the day after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and Otsuka’s mother, uncle, and grandmother spent three years in an internment camp in Topaz, Utah.

Her exquisitely crafted and resonant new novel is much less autobiographical, she says. [*The Buddha in the Attic*](#) follows a group of Japanese “picture brides” who sail to San Francisco in 1919 to marry men they only know through exchanging photographs. “There were no picture brides in my family, but it’s a very common first generation story. It’s how thousands of Japanese women came to this country before Asians were excluded altogether in 1924.”

This second novel, she says, entailed “tons of research.”

“I read a lot of oral histories and history books, and old newspapers. I had to learn about two worlds: the old Japan from which the picture brides came, and the America of the 1920s and 1930s which they immigrated to. I kept many notebooks filled with detailed notes about *everything*.”

Many of the picture brides end up doing agricultural work. “I made these crazy crop charts, showing when things ripened, and where, geographically, certain crops were grown. Also, as a child I spent some time in Oakdale (Central Valley, east of Modesto), where our neighbors’ grandparents had an almond ranch. As a kid, we’d go out there in the summer, it was great fun: lizards, frogs, snakes, irrigation ditches, bugs...”

Otsuka says she struggled for months to find the right voice to tell the story. “I had run across so many interesting stories during my research—stories of women whose husbands had sent photographs of themselves taken 20 years earlier, of women who had sailed to America expecting to live lives of leisure only to find themselves working as field hands and laundresses within days of their arrival, of women who had run away from their husbands and drifted into lives of prostitution, of women who had always wanted to come to America and were willing to marry a man, any man, to get there—that I wanted to tell them all.

“One day, while reading over my notes for the book, I found, buried in the middle of a paragraph several pages in, a sentence I had written months earlier: ‘On the boat we were mostly virgins.’ I knew at once that this would be the first line of my novel. There would be no main character. I would tell the story from the point of view of a group of young picture brides who sail together from Japan to America.”

Over time, many Japanese immigrants were so effective as farmers that they encountered a backlash in some communities. “The Japanese were extremely successful farmers,” says Otsuka. “They came from a very small island, remember, where you had to make use of every inch of space, and they knew how to make things grow. So when they arrived in California and saw this vast expanse of unplanted land, it was like catching a glimpse of paradise. They basically took wasteland that no one else would touch—rocky soil, hardpan, swamps, desert land—and turned it into fertile farmland. And their produce was better than anyone else’s, and their success was much envied.”

A Sikh Temple's Century

By BHIRA BACKHAUS – August 7, 2012

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/08/opinion/a-sikh-temples-proud-history.html>

THE [Stockton Gurdwara](#) in California — the first Sikh temple in the United States — is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year. Immigrants from Punjab, India, purchased the lot on Grant Street in early 1912.

Once in a while, I bring out a black and white photograph of the gurdwara taken a few decades later. The members of the early families fan out on the steps leading up to its main entrance. I scan the faces, picking out my mother, my sister, brothers, cousins, aunts and finally, myself. In the front row, the girls stand in their fancy dresses. Boys in buttoned shirts look restlessly away from the camera. Behind us loom those who had the brave vision to build this temple, to cross the vast Pacific in the first place.

They settled in a place that looked much like their beloved but impoverished homeland, planting the broad sun-drenched valleys with the same crops they had grown in Punjab. The community was small in those years. When immigration laws loosened, many of the men brought brides from India. Those young families, my own among them, attended services at the gurdwara for ordinary and major celebrations, like the births of the gurus who established Sikhism beginning in the 15th century. Whenever we arrived, I would stand at the entrance, just inside the wall that surrounded the complex, looking up at the arch that soared above the doors. Looking back now, I imagine that wall must have made our comings and goings even more mysterious to the white residents along Grant Street.

In Oak Creek, Wis., this past Sunday, a gunman with ties to the white power movement entered a gurdwara and shot to death six Sikh worshipers. We know little about his motives, but presumably he saw the temple as a frightening symbol of otherness. But as I watched the images of the shooting on television, I saw the faces of my own brothers and sisters, aunties and uncles, contorted with terror. It was the children who first spread the word of the attack, running into the kitchen, where women were preparing langar — the communal vegetarian meal of dal, yogurt and roti that is a staple of Sikh services.

At the Stockton Gurdwara, services began in the morning and resumed after a break for langar. The meal always made us children groggy and impatient, and soon we'd head outside, down the steps to the small playground amid the chinaberry trees. When it was time to head home, it was the children who tugged at the kameezes of our mothers, who were reluctant to leave the lively company of friends.

In the mid-60s, when America's immigration quotas were raised, a new wave of Punjabi immigrants flooded into California. My family had moved to a small town north of Sacramento by then. We traveled in caravans to the San Francisco airport to collect relatives weary from the long flight, bewildered by this fast new world. I gave up my bed

for weeks at a time to cousins whom I'd never met. And new gurdwaras were built, their onion domes floating improbably in the skyline.

On Saturday nights, when my white girlfriends were off to the movies on dates, I drove my mother to the nearby gurdwara for quiet evening services. I would roll my eyes as I changed out of my jeans into a salwar kameez outfit that I prayed no one but my Indian friends would witness me wearing. But I can recall very clearly the comfort of having my mother sitting beside me during the service, her bowed head draped in a white veil, the feeling of peace that washed over me when the hymns and chanting began.

Eventually I left, in pursuit of an education and in hopes of shoring up my sense of who I was and wanted to be. I dove eagerly into an outside world that told me my possibilities were limitless. And I married outside the Sikh community, causing a painful breach with my parents that had just begun to heal when they passed away. But when they reached out to me at last, I understood that I still belonged to the community, always had.

The Sikh communities in California have flourished over the years. When I visit home now I am impressed by how comfortable the new generation seems in this country, whether they are developing advanced medical therapies for patients or dancing late into the night to bhangra beats. They have chosen to preserve their heritage while moving forward in the world.

But people still sometimes ask me, why can't they assimilate more? Dress like us. Talk like us. Perhaps, some seem to believe, that would prevent the sort of tragedy that happened in Wisconsin. I never have an easy answer. But I do know this: to wipe away what has come before, who we have been over the centuries, also means to forget who our own mothers and fathers were. It means that how they conducted their lives — the families they raised, the homes they built — didn't matter. It denies us that basic human impulse, to remember their stories, the unique timbre of their voices. It would be as if they had never existed at all.

[Bhira Backhaus](#) is the author of the novel "Under the Lemon Trees."

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