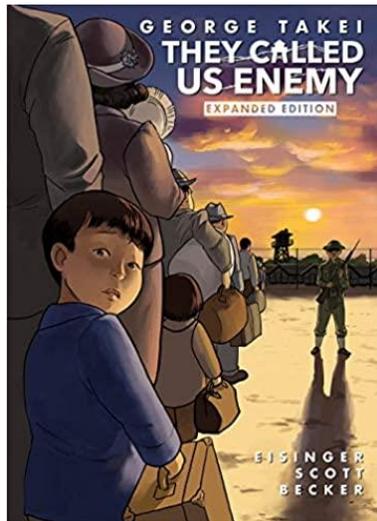


First Opinion: Who They Were Didn't Matter, Only What They Looked Like Mattered

George Takei, Justin Eisinger, Steven Scott. *They Called Us Enemy*. Illustrated by Harmony Becker. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions, 2019. Print.

Jill and Fuji Scott



They Called Us Enemy is the graphic memoir of George Takei, specifically known for his role in *Star Trek*. In this story, readers will experience his heart wrenching life story that starts when he and his family were abruptly ripped from their home and imprisoned in an internment camp. The book details Takei's life in internment through adulthood and documents the hardships George and his family encountered along the way. He writes poignantly about grappling to understand his role as an American, his life behind fences, legalized racism, ideals of democracy, and the conducts of others. His narrative is shared through searing images and words that show/tell his story through graphic flashbacks.

George was born in California, the child of a Japanese father who immigrated to America as a child and an American born mother. In the book, his family is portrayed as an established

family in California. George's parents ran a dry-cleaning business and were busy with their three young children including George, his brother, and baby sister.

On December 7th, 1941, the family was preparing for Christmas when the news interrupted *Silent Night* on the radio. The *alert* notified them that Japan had invaded Pearl Harbor. Within thirty minutes of that announcement, talk of *alien enemies* began to cascade from politicians' mouths, which marked a turning point in George's existence—life as he knew it would never be the same.

After the invasion of Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt signed a proclamation declaring that every adult Japanese citizen inside the United States was to be considered an *alien enemy* and would need to adhere to strict regulations. Due to the negative rhetoric circulating, George's neighbors and friends began to fear his family. Fear spread across America quickly. The images in the book depict how white people turned on George's family and destroyed their cars, property, and business. It didn't matter that George's dad had been a U.S. resident and business owner for over twenty-five years, or that his mother was born in California. What mattered was their ethnicity.

In California, hopeful politicians, like Earl Warren, ran on campaign rhetoric like, "Lock up the Japs." Finally on February 19, 1942, the President issued Executive Order 9066. This sealed the fate of George, his family, and 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry living in the US. They were forcibly removed from their homes, stripped of all belongings, businesses, and wealth, and placed in internment camps.

Reading this book, we see the potential it has to inform young people and adults about these atrocities that were committed right here on American soil to people of Japanese descent during World War II. While reading this book, I, Jill and mother to Fuji, realized that when I learned about World War II it was primarily about the horrors committed abroad, America's problems were glossed over. Therefore, this graphic novel has potential for upper elementary aged children, middle schoolers, high schoolers *and* adults to learn more about the history of America.

My seventeen-year-old daughter, Fuji, read *They Called Us Enemy*. As her mother, I wondered about her background knowledge of American internment camps. She explained that her sixth-grade teacher taught them about WWII, he was a storyteller and brought in images to accompany his stories. Through this experience with her sixth-grade teacher, she knew about the

internment camps. However, she acknowledged that most of the time in class was devoted to covering the Holocaust in Germany. While reading this book she made the connection that the creation of the internment camps in America was based on similar fears that supported the creation of concentration camps in Germany. A discussion ensued between the two of us about the current political climate and how certain groups feed on people's emotions and attempt to incite fear. She concluded that this book is an example of what can happen when fear divides people.

Fuji explained that she appreciated that most of the story was told in first person and from a child's perspective. Something that really impacted her was how the internment camps became *home* to the children. She noted that when George discussed moving to a new internment camp that he referred to the old one as his *home*. A cage being home was hard for her to imagine. She felt the weight of George and his siblings not knowing anything other than incarceration as children. Fuji noted that she "realized that everything was based on their nationality." She explained that "who they were didn't matter, only what they looked like mattered. They didn't get any credit for being Americans born in the U.S. or for being hardworking or kind people." Fuji observed that the author may have been teaching that we shouldn't judge a book by the cover. She continued to explain that it's what you do with your life that matters, not what you look like. It troubled her to see that the Japanese were all lumped in together. She warned that we can't just lump people together and label them in hurtful ways. I was inspired by her understanding.

Fuji and I agreed that the author's purpose was to remind readers that we must visit our past, no matter how difficult it is, so that we don't repeat it. The power of this book is that it creates space to talk about injustices in current day America. After reading the book, Fuji brought up the fact that there are still laws being passed like Florida's 'Don't Say Gay' Law that will work to *other* people within the LGBTQ community. We chatted throughout the night about societal problems and instances where America excludes some people. We also talked through ways that we can attempt to encourage more unity, compassion, and justice in our own community.

This book contributes to and encourages conversations like this about division, the constitution, resiliency, and the ideals of democracy. Takei's book leaves the reader contemplating ideals like liberty, equality, justice, and questioning who gets to experience

them. *They Called Us Enemy* provides a natural segway to discussion around these topics and more.

While the overall book was a great piece of learning, there are areas of critique. Specifically, parts of the book focused on *Star Trek* and TED-X. These portions seemed to disrupt the flow of the story. Furthermore, students who are around Fuji's age (17) probably don't know the series *Star Trek*, so it became a source of confusion while she read it. I suspect this might be the case for most young people.

Fuji said that this book left her feeling a sense of disappointment in our country, but it also left her with a sense of hope because George was a strong person. She was inspired by the way that he overcame terrible circumstances and continued to fight to help make America more just, equitable, safe, and fair for all. Personally, I was inspired by the helpers who chose more humanizing ways to make America safe. Like Herbert Nicholson who delivered books to the camps despite being threatened. Or, like Wayne Collins and the ACLU who went to fight for Japanese families and fought against the imprisonment of American citizens. These people are great role models for our young people. If I was using this book and others like it in my classroom, I would choose to focus on people like Wayne and Herbert who followed their moral compass, did the right thing, and questioned injustices.

About the Authors

Jill Scott is a mom, and a former kindergarten teacher and reading specialist. She is currently a PhD candidate in Literacy, Culture, and Language Education at Indiana University.

Fuji Scott is a sophomore in high school at Bloomington High School North in Bloomington, Indiana. She is active in Habitat for Humanity, Riley Dance Marathon, Cougar Leaders, Hoosiers Outrun Cancer, and varsity track, dance, and cheerleading. She hopes to make the world a better place.