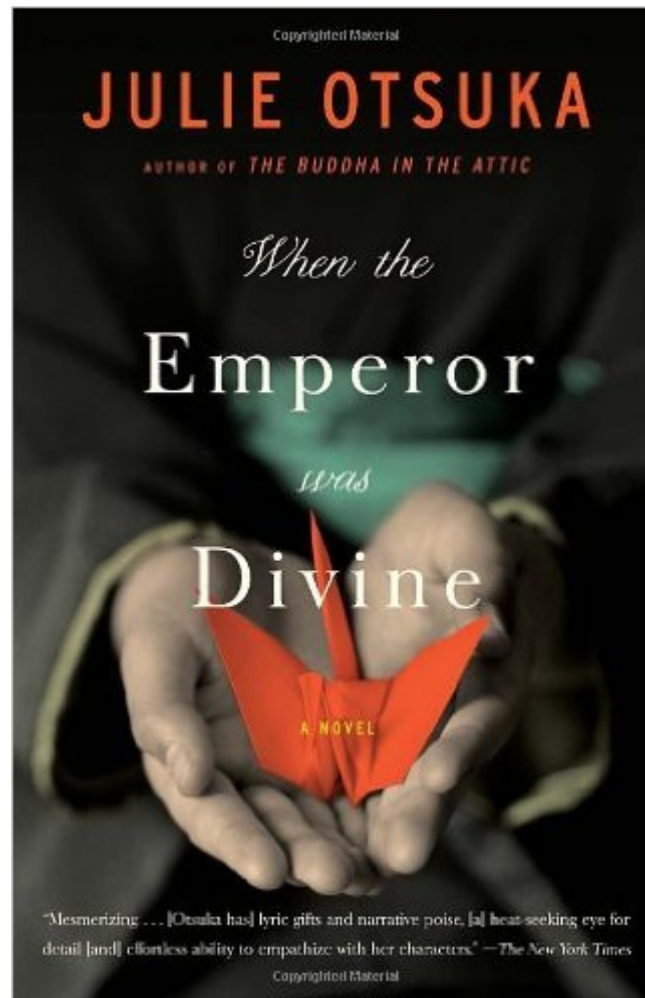


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When The Emperor Was Divine



Synopsis

The debut novel from the PEN/Faulkner Award Winning Author of *The Buddha in the Attic*. On a sunny day in Berkeley, California, in 1942, a woman sees a sign in a post office window, returns to her home, and matter-of-factly begins to pack her family's possessions. Like thousands of other Japanese Americans they have been reclassified, virtually overnight, as enemy aliens and are about to be uprooted from their home and sent to a dusty internment camp in the Utah desert. In this lean and devastatingly evocative first novel, Julie Otsuka tells their story from five flawlessly realized points of view and conveys the exact emotional texture of their experience: the thin-walled barracks and barbed-wire fences, the omnipresent fear and loneliness, the unheralded feats of heroism. *When the Emperor Was Divine* is a work of enormous power that makes a shameful episode of our history as immediate as today's headlines.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I had mixed feelings about this book before I read it. The title is NOT how most JA immigrants felt about the emperor of Japan. There was generally no love lost. Most, like my grandparents, left because of poverty, conscription, alienation, and to look for better oportunites in America, lika a lot of other immigrants. While reading the book, I give her kudos for her ability to describe events visually well. BUT...there are many problems with this book. There is this sterility in the manner in which she describes events. She can manage to paint a visually stunning picture with her words but there is no substance. Her characters seem as if she studied them from a textbook. A Nisei (second generation) young girl would NEVER talk in the manner in which she writes, to an elder!!! Its almost

like she had Dakota Fanning in mind for this character. And the father character, an Issei (first generation)....Issei's used to swallow their pain. The Issei are known for their stoic strength and "gaman", quiet strength amidst adversity. I felt insulted by his mental confession in the book. I went to see the author at a local library and she did confess she NEVER interviewed ANY living internees. My god...they are dying off and she doesn't interview them? She said she wanted a more "pure" viewpoint. She said she did study books for her historical references. Indeed, there are some references in the book which I'm not quite sure if it is plagiarism, like in the description of the flies bothering her characters and then when they put up screens, it gets better. See Mine Okubo's book Citizen 13660, which Otsuka does reference. That scene is in there. I can see where the sterility feeling I got came from---if she only studied books and didn't get a feel for the emotional aspect that is buried in a lot of internment...

I wanted and expected to like this book, although I am leery of the superlatives you always find on book jackets: "incantatory prose" and "stunning debut"--that sort of thing. I find the praise undeserved. Otsuka seems to be trying to use prose in a spare, poetic style, which I see other readers do find moving. I am left cold, and it's only when I read the reviews by other Japanese Americans that I think I understand why. Otsuka has not done her homework. The prose is simple, but the images are not the least bit evocative for me. In an early scene when the mother goes out and has to kill the dog, I thought I was in for a good book. It turns out that was the only scene that stirred me--not because of its violence so much as for what goes unsaid, the emotional currents beneath the spare lines. It's an effect she tries for elsewhere, but I never feel anything for the characters throughout the rest of the book. Is that because they don't have names? I don't think so. It's because Otsuka doesn't take us below their surface. She is trying to be suggestive, evocative, and stark. But the lines have no resonance. It's difficult to render depth of emotion in people who are required to keep themselves contained due to their situation, but that's where skill comes in. Think of the great actors whose faces reveal everything their character is feeling vs. Hollywood celebrities who are in the movie because their face is pretty but not expressive. In the same way, some writers can suggest those depths with a well-chosen detail or image. Otsuka is not one of them. Although I don't think that the nameless characters are an automatic drawback, I do wonder why in both of this author's novels, we are offered nameless characters.

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