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Nisei Daughter (Classics Of Asian American Literature)



Synopsis

With charm, humor, and deep understanding, Monica Sone tells what it was like to grow up Japanese American on Seattle's waterfront in the 1930s and to be subjected to "relocation" during World War II. Along with over one hundred thousand other persons of Japanese ancestry • most of whom were U.S. citizens • Sone and her family were uprooted from their home and imprisoned in a camp. Her unique and personal account is a true classic of Asian American literature. Replaces ISBN 9780295956886

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Part of Nisei Daughter's charm is the way Sone is able to weave entertaining anecdotes throughout her tale, a story which is essentially about what being Japanese American in the time around wartime America meant to her. Specifically, her position as a Nisei daughter -- child of first generation Japanese Americans -- is the focus of this tale. The disappointing thing about this book is how obviously self-censored the book is. Sone very briefly reveals deeply felt rage and resentment at intervals during the book, only to shake them off and quickly change to a more light-hearted topic. Granted, there is an ironic tone to many of her comments and situations, and again granted, she is writing for a post-war audience that probably would not be receptive to outspoken criticism of the Internment, but still Sone seems to sugar coat the experience just a bit too much for my tastes. By the end, with the patriotic speeches that make it sound like the Internment was as much the fault of

the Japanese Americans as it was the government, I was getting a little tired of Sone's carefree and apologetic tone, especially after the highly charged preface. In the book, Sone all but thanks the government for interning her and her family and giving them this character-building experience. If you are truly interested in the internment and the impact it had on the Japanese Americans, try a book like Joy Kogawa's "Obasan." It's written about the Japanese Canadian experience, which was even more extreme than the Japanese American one. Kogawa also experienced internment first hand, but "Obasan" is written far enough after the fact that Kogawa is able to give the story more perspective and is able to put a more honest face on what really happened.

This is the story told by a daughter of Japanese immigrants growing up in pre-World War II Seattle. She was in college when Pearl Harbor struck. I think the best parts of this memoir deal with the description of Japanese culture and the conflict between the Americanism of the Nisei and their Issei parents most of whom heavily maintained Japanese customs. Perhaps the funniest part of the latter in the book takes place during the wedding reception held for her brother Henry and his bride in their camp in Idaho during the war. I'd have to say that the best written, the most vivid part of the book is the family trip to visit relatives in Japan where her little brother Kenji fatally contracted dysentery. I'm guessing that this trip must have taken place around 1929. The author gets released from camp mid-way through the war to go live with some former missionaries in Chicago who are very nice. She works for a dentist who is, however, a real pain in the butt and she eventually quits. She then gets the opportunity to go attend Wendell college in Indiana where she lives with a nice old widow and she says that this college was full of a lot of diverse foreign students. She made many close friends. During her post-camp period, her faith in American democracy was largely restored because she met so many nice white Americans who weren't racist louts. The book ends on a sort of patriotic note which I can't follow completely. In Chicago she was often mistaken for Chinese and people told her how much they respected the Chinese people, America's ally and she was sometimes mistaken for various Chinese celebrities. It's obvious, that the author, who at the time of this 1979 edition, was still a clinical psychologist, knows how to write.

Monica Sone grew up in a hotel on Seattle's Skid Row just before World War II. And she didn't know she was Japanese until her mother told her at dinner one night while she was still in elementary school. That night she also learned she would have to attend "Nihon Gakko" (Japanese language school). We accompany Monica as she learns how to sit quietly, obey the strict school teachers, and experience the Japanese culture her Issei parents could provide her there in Seattle. They went to

undokai (sports festival) and did three-legged races and zany relays while eating yellow pickled radish, fried chicken, and rice balls. Monica takes you along as her family travels to Japan, and she experiences the culture of her parents for the first time, where she is too big, too loud, and the baths are too hot. The narrative is presented simply, without judgement, just the experience of a girl figuring out who she is and who she is not in each of the changing situations: public school, Nihon Gakko, and Japan. Until Pearl Harbor. As her family's experience of waiting for the FBI to take away her father (as so many other Japanese males in and around Skid Row), being sent to Pullayup with just one seabag and her mother's jug of shoyu, and then on to Idaho's internment Camp Minidoka, a little of the adult author's broader knowledge of the government-legislated racism creeps into the narrative. And yet, the privations of Camp Minidoka- the latrines, the terrible food, the cramped quarters- are described simply, without anger or bitterness. And this somehow made it all the more terrible for me to read.

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