

Teaching American History

Snow Falling On Cedars

By David Guterson

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World War II had a dramatic effect on the culture of America. This time period shattered the legacy of American Isolationism and brought us to forefront of international affairs. For the first time America was the most powerful country in the world and attempted to export it's ideals abroad at a level never seen before. This new position brought with it new fears; communism became the enemy after the fall of Nazi Germany and Imperialist Japan. America was involved in a variety of conflicts following World War II because of this newfound authority and the fear of communism spreading. In many ways the cultural landscape of America has been shaped most dramatically by our conflicts. One such event that had a lasting cultural impact during the years of World War II is the internment of Japanese Americans.

David Guterson's Snow Falling On Cedars offers a poignant look at Northwestern American life in the aftermath of World War II. In this fictitious novel, Guterson tells the story of a small Island in Puget Sound called San Pedro that is touched in many ways by the war. Some of its residents left to fight the nations' enemies while others were relocated and interred in camps by federal mandate. Also, through the course of the story, a former American soldier is tried and ultimately found innocent of murder. At its core, however, Snow Falling on Cedars is the story of two people, Ishmael Chambers and Hastue Mayamoto, and their struggle to make sense of a complex and uncompromising world.

Hatsue and Ishmael were childhood lovers who were ripped apart by the time and place they lived. The world changed both of them deeply; Hatsue experienced the harsh realities of the internment camp and Ishmael the horrors of war on the tiny island of Tarawa in the Pacific. They would be forever changed by these events.

Hatsue Mayamoto was a beautiful Japanese American woman who loved the island of her birth. The strawberry fields of San Pedro were her first and constant passion. As a girl, she had diligently worked the in the fields with her family as a picker. Her greatest desire was to own her own strawberry farm, a goal which she eventually shared with her husband. As a child she had befriended and fell in love with Ishmael Chambers. Ishmael was a local boy who knew the Island well and taught Hatsue many things, such as how and where to dig for clams. They kindled a secret love in the hallowed out base of a cedar tree. She was a thoughtful and serious girl but could not quite come to terms with her place in the world. There was nothing easy about being an American of Japanese decent and she knew that a relationship between her and a local Caucasian boy would cause dishonor to her family. The tragic uprooting of the Islands' Japanese community in 1942 took her from her beloved home and forced her to mature beyond her years. She wrote Ishmael a letter while she was in the internment camp and put an end to their relationship:

I don't love you Ishmael. I can think of no more honest way to say it. From the very beginning, when we were little children, it seemed to me something was wrong. Whenever we were together I knew it. I felt I loved you and didn't love you at the very same moment, and felt troubled and confused. (Guterson 354)

I am not sure if Hatsue was reacting to pressures from her family or society, or if she sincerely felt in her heart that she did not love Ishmael. In the end it did not matter, her experience of forced internment ended their relationship. She was a strong and determined woman who had come to terms with the environment she was forced into and thought it best to move on with her life. She married a Japanese man named Kabuo, who her family approved of. Unfortunately, Ishmael would never find a way to move on.

Ishmael Chambers' story is in some ways even more tragic than Hatsue's. He was the son of a well-respected and scrupulously honest newspaperman. He was an optimistic and hopeful boy who was beat down by a harsh and cruel world. After Hatsue was taken away to the internment camp, Ishmael was drafted into the Marines. He lost his arm during the brutal amphibious assault on Tarawa. Ishmael was never able to move past his experiences on the Pacific Front or his failed relationship with Hatsue. His life was consumed with loss in every way. Even his mother was concerned about his well-being. One night she suddenly told Ishmael that his "father fought at Belleau Wood . . . it took him

years to get over it. He had nightmares and suffered just as [Ishmael did]. But it didn't stop him from living" (Guterson 348). To Ishmael, "getting over it [wasn't] possible", nor was it for his father, he was just able to not "let self-pity overwhelm him—he just kept on with things" (Guterson 348). Unlike his father, Ishmael was never able to find peace after the war and instead felt disdain for most human beings. Losing Hatsue and her marriage to another man only served to further embitter him. The death of his father prompted him to take over the family newspaper business, which he ran diligently, albeit dispassionately.

After the war Hatsue and Kabuo returned to San Piedro to find his family's land had been sold and any claim of ownership he had to it had been lost. Kabuo worked on a gill netting boat to support his family but never let the dream of owning his family's farmland fade away. Carl Hiene returned home from the war to find that his mom had sold the family farm and the Mayamoto's farm as well. He also supported his family as a gill net fisherman and dreamed of one day owning the strawberry fields of his youth. The opportunity arose for Carl to buy back the land and he took it; Kabuo upon hearing this negotiated to buy back his family's land from Carl while assisting Carl when he became stranded at sea. Carl had died from falling off the mast of his boat during an attempt to retrieve a lantern he used to signal for help. The unusual circumstances of his death lead the police to question and ultimately suspect Kabuo of murder.

The hatred toward Japanese Americans left a legacy within people's hearts that survived long after the United States' victory was achieved. Kabuo Mayomota fought for the United States Army on the European front and did so out of his own free will. The residents on San Pedro however, saw in him everything they were taught to hate and fear in the Japanese soldier. Government propaganda films had taught Americans that the Japanese soldier was a fearless, ruthless and pitiless being. So, when Carl Hiene was found dead in the net of his own Salmon fishing boat, the first clear suspect in everyone's minds was the proud and quiet Japanese man named Kabuo Mayamoto. He was, for the second time in his life, thought to be guilty because he was of Japanese decent.

The murder trial of Hatsue's husband Kabuo, brought many issues, both past and present, to the forefront of San Pedro's consciousness. For Ishmael it became an opportunity to exonerate an innocent man, and, more importantly, earn the respect of Hatsue and live up to the potential she had seen in him so many years before. Ishmael had not felt he had done enough with his life and for once he thought he could show Hatsue his worth. Many other issues came to light as well: the injustices perpetrated against Kabuo and his family in a land dispute; the prejudices created by war; the memory of Japanese American internment; and the power of guilt by association. All these issues are touched upon with such clarity and insight that it seems to encapsulate the true emotions of the time.

The way in which the Mayamoto's family land was taken from them was deplorable. It is quite sad to think that stories like this were probably not uncommon for Asian immigrants along the west coast throughout American history. David Guterson crafts the story so well it is hard to feel anything but utter rage when Mrs. Hiene addresses the jury and attempts to justify her actions in selling Kabuo's family land. I think there are few characters in fiction who are as easy to hate as she and it is hard to imagine a world where a viewpoint such as hers was prevalent. The intestinal strength and perseverance demonstrated by the Japanese Americans in this story, particularly Kabuo, is remarkable.

Guterson impressively captures the emotions of veterans throughout the novel. Ishmael's outlook was very compelling and moving to me. There is an innocence lost in war that is difficult to comprehend or explain but Guterson manages admirably as is demonstrated in the following excerpt:

His cynicism—a veteran's cynicism—was a thing that disturbed him all the time. It seemed to him after the war that the world was thoroughly altered. It was not even a thing you could explain to anybody, why it was everything was folly. People appeared enormously foolish to him. He understood that they were only animated cavities full of jelly and strings and liquids. He had seen the insides of jaggedly ripped open dead people. He knew, for

instance, what brains looked like spilling out of somebody's head. In the context of this, much what went on in normal life seemed wholly and disturbingly ridiculous. (Guterson 35)

It is probable that Ishmael's outlook is shared by many veterans and allows provides the reader with this unique perspective in a society mostly unaccustomed to violence. What makes the story so compelling is the accuracy with which it is told. It almost feels truer than if it had actually happened, a testament to how well the story was crafted. Ishmael is also not the only character in this story who was touched by the war. Carl Hiene and Kabuo Mayomoto also expressed great emotions in coming to terms with their combat experiences. Kabuo seemed to feel the most guilt for the men he killed in battle. A part of Kabuo wanted to be convicted of murder because he felt like that is what he had done in the forests of Europe. Carl Hiene on the other hand felt a lasting hatred that he could bring himself to forget.

The internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, unfortunately, has left its stain on American culture. The Red Scare in the 1950s and the ridiculous paranoia espoused by Senator McCarthy and his hearings were conducted in the same vein as the internment camps. They were both attempts to rid society of supposed enemies with little justice or prudence. Lists were compiled of people who were suspected of partaking in Anti-American behavior and hearings were conducted that made a mockery of the United States Judicial

System. The reactions of the residents of San Pedro to the internment camps demonstrate how such ideologies can play out on a small scale. Even though they had lived with the Japanese residents for generations, the majority opinion of the Islanders was that the government's actions towards their Japanese American neighbors were completely justified. The Islanders were quick to believe the worst in the Japanese Americans because they were different from themselves and were associated, if only in ancestry, with Imperial Japan.

The internment of the Japanese Americans during World War II was cruel and unfair. The story depicts the conduct of the United States government in this matter as shameful. It lays the foundation for many classroom discussions such as why weren't Italian and German Americans forced to relocate. Was the German or Italian risk to national security any less? Nazi Germany was, at the very least, an equal threat to the security of the United States, yet no Americans of German decent were targeted in the same way. It is clear the camps were products of fear and discrimination toward Americans of Japanese decent and little more. Our country was founded on the ideals of liberty and personal freedom; as stated by Benjamin Franklin: "those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety." These ideals were clearly forgotten or disregarded when it came to the internment of one segment of our citizens.

The story evokes great sympathy for the residents who were forced off San Pedro and admiration for Kabuo because he enlisted in the Army to fight, despite the conditions imposed on him. It reminds us that the internment of Japanese Americans can not adequately be justified. There are important compromises to be reached between personal freedoms and national security in times of war, but with the wisdom gained from hindsight, clearly the relocation went to far. Through this historic fiction, the author draws the reader into events that significantly defined a period in history that students need to understand. It would be a compelling novel for any high school humanities class relating directly to US History studies. That being said, the reading level may be above some middle school students, but it could be an option for higher level students.