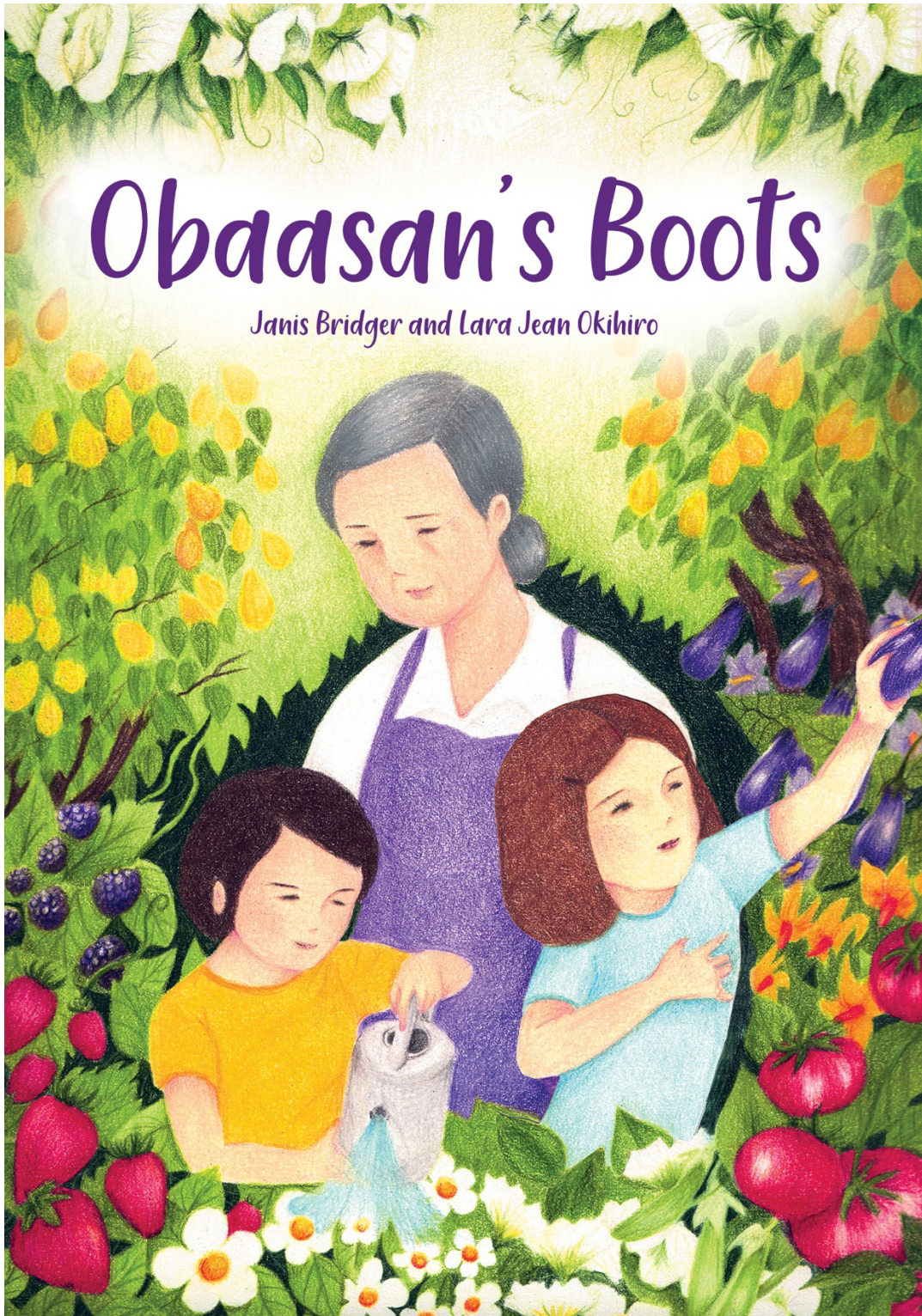


Obaasan's Boots: Reading Guide

Obaasan's Boots

Janis Bridger and Lara Jean Okihiro



About *Obaasan's Boots*:

Written by Lara Jean Okihiro and Janis Bridger | Illustrated by Yuka Yamaguchi
Published by Second Story Press, Distributed by Ampersand/UTP & in the USA by Orca
Ages 9-12 | 160 pages | ISBN 9781772603484 | 5.25 x 7.5

Description:

“They had everything taken from them because they were Japanese”

Cousins Lou and Charlotte don't know a lot about their grandmother's life. When their *obaasan* invites them to spend the day in her garden, she also invites them into their family's secrets. Grandma shares her experience as a Japanese Canadian during WWII, revealing the painful story of Japanese internment. Her family was forced apart. Whole communities were uprooted and moved into camps. Their belongings were stolen.

Lou and Charlotte struggle with the injustice, even as they marvel at their grandmother's strength. They begin to understand how their identities have been shaped by racism and that history is not only about the past.

Background:

Written by cousins Lara Jean Okihiro and Janis Bridger, *Obaasan's Boots* is based on the true story of their Japanese Canadian grandparents who, in 1942, along with 22,000 others, were forced from their homes and sent to an internment camp. Teaching readers about the **Japanese Canadian internment**, the book provides details of the event, and of the **racism** that existed before and beyond it.

The story also explores the impact the experience has had on later generations and is full of **social emotional learning** as the children deal with the mysterious silences that surround their family's past, the strong disagreements between family members, family separation, lost language, and the trauma they've inherited.

The book is **suitable for readers of all ages** who are interested in learning more about Nikkei internment in North America, Canadian history and WWII, anti-Asian racism, intergenerational relationships, and family stories.



Hisa and Koichiro Okihiro, 1940

The book includes:

- An **Historical Timeline** of WWII events for people of Japanese heritage in North America.
- An **Afterword** explaining the story, why it was important for the authors to write, and connections to other events in Canadian history.
- And historical **Photos**.

About the authors:

Lara Jean Okihiro is a writer, researcher, and educator of mixed Japanese Canadian heritage living in Toronto. Intrigued by the power and magic of stories, she earned a MA (Goldsmiths, University of London) and a PhD (University of Toronto) in English. Living abroad inspired her to learn about her family's internment experience. She has lectured and published internationally on literature, the Japanese Canadian internment, issues of racism, memory, trauma, and education. Lara's diverse creative work emphasizes social justice, dispossession, and carrying the lessons of the past into the future. She is currently working on another book inspired by her family's experience called *Lost Objects: Literature and the Dispossession of Incarcerated Nikkei* (McGill-Queens UP).

Janis Bridger is an educator and writer who has many creative outlets and a love for the outdoors. She lives in Vancouver, Canada, close to where her Japanese Canadian grandparents lived before being interned. Janis earned a diploma in Professional Photography (Langara College), and a Master of Education (University of Alberta), specializing in teacher-librarianship. Social justice, diversity, and kindness are paramount in her life and embedded in her everyday teaching.

School / community author visits:

Lara is available for school and community visits, in-person in the Toronto area, and virtually for schools and community groups outside of the Toronto area.

She can apply for funding for such visits through

[The Writers' Union of Canada](#)

If you're interested in having Lara visit your school, contact obaasansboots@laraokihiro.ca.



Janis Bridger and Lara Okihiro

Themes (Curriculum connections and keywords):

- Japanese Canadians
- Ethnic groups – Japanese – in Canada
- Japanese Canadian and American internment
- Canadian history and WWII
- Nikkei history in North America
- Racism, anti-Asian racism
- Intergenerational relationships
- Stories, family stories, and storytelling
- Women’s stories
- Memory and inheritance
- Identity and belonging
- Social Justice, diversity, and equity
- Citizenship and civic responsibility
- Government responses to significant social issues (ON Gr. 5)
- Contributions of Japanese Canadians to Canadian identity (ON Gr. 6)
- Different perspectives of Canadian history (ON Gr. 6)
- A significant event in a community that contributed to the development of the identity of that community and of Canada (ON Gr. 6)



From the Landscapes of Injustice site

Questions for Discussion or Composition encouraging Comprehension and Critical Thinking:

1. *Obaasan's Boots* includes the perspectives of three different characters. Identify whose perspectives and explain a bit about each of them. How does having three different perspectives affect the story? Why might including three different perspectives be important for telling this story? What might using different perspectives tell us about some of the other themes in the book, like about memory and history?
2. Names are very important in the novel. Explain some of the relationships different characters, like Charlotte's mother, Lou's father, and Lou's mother, have to their names. What is the difference between being given a name and choosing a name in the book? In many cases the characters in the book do not get to choose their names. Neither Lou nor her father get to choose their names, but there is a big difference here. What is it? What do you think of Charlotte asking the grandmother for a Japanese name?
3. *Obaasan's Boots* is mostly about women's and girls' stories. Why might that be significant? What aspects of life during WWII and the Japanese Canadian internment does this point of view bring to light?

4. Talk about the trope (the significant recurring theme) of the grandmother's boots in the story. What do the boots represent? Find a couple of moments in the book that describe the boots to help you think about their meaning in the story.



5. The story mentions the Japanese word *mottainai*. What does *mottainai* mean? Why is it important for the grandmother? Why is the word important for Charlotte? Do you think the idea of *mottainai* could also relate to the Japanese Canadian internment in the book? If so, how? (Maybe think here of the ways that the characters lost things, like their heirlooms.)
6. The grandmother tells her story to the girls while they work together in the garden. What is the symbolic significance of gardens in the book? The garden has several meanings in the novel. Choose one or two sections in the book that refer to the garden and explain the importance of the garden in that section or those sections.
7. Think about the water imagery in the novel. Looking at two or three different instances that describe water (rivers, lakes, etc.) in the book, describe the importance of water in the book and for the characters. How might water relate to the characters' experiences of the internment?
8. Racism is a major theme in the book. How is racism experienced differently in the lives of different characters in the story? Do the children and adults experience racism differently? Thinking of some of the stories the grandmother tells of her brothers or husband, did the racism during the 1940s affect woman and men differently? Lou and Charlotte are both of mixed-race. How does racism affect them in their present lives?
9. Charlotte and Lou overhear the adults talking at the table, but don't understand what they are talking about. Have you had an experience like that? Why do you think most of the aunts and uncles in the story don't talk about the internment? Why are the girls not too interested in paying attention to stories of the past?
10. What does the book tell us about identity? What does it tell us about how identity might relate to history? Think, for example, of the significance of names and naming in the book, as well as the importance of the girls learning their family's history, taking up the grandmother's work in the garden, or putting on the grandmother's boots.

Activities encouraging Comprehension of the text and Critical Thinking:

Please be sensitive to the needs and experiences of the students in your classes. Not all these activities will be appropriate for all students; for example, it might be too emotional for some students to think about what they would take with them if they themselves been forced from their homes as recent refugees or immigrants.

1. **What would you pack?** After reading chapter six, have students think about what they would pack if they had 24 hours to decide and could only take what they could carry (75 lbs) with them. Encourage students to also consider the things they cannot take with them because those things can't be packed or there is no time to gather them. Ask students to write about what they would (or couldn't) take with them and why. Or ask students to make an artistic representation of what they would (or couldn't) take with them (a painting, drawing, or photograph) with a short paragraph explaining why they would take these things. Taking time through the writing or artistic process will help students attend to the details of the history, of their items and why they are important to them, and to the connections between their items and experiences in contrast to those of Hisa and other characters in the book.

Additional resource: check out Kayla Isomura's *Suitcase Project* (<https://suitcaseproject.ca/about>) in which participants are photographed with what they could pack in 24 hours.

2. **How would you live in an internment shack?** Show students pictures of shacks built for Japanese Canadians in the internment camps, like the ones below.



Photo courtesy of Norma Clarke



Rock Gardens at No. 193, New Denver, B. C.

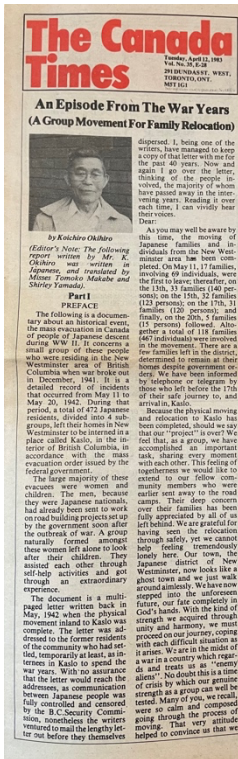
Photo courtesy of Norma Clarke

According to Ann Gomer Sunahara,

“Built from green wood, there were two types: small shacks, sixteen feet by sixteen feet, divided into a common room and two bedrooms; and large shacks, sixteen feet by twenty-four feet, divided into four bedrooms and a common room. The small shacks were to house a minimum of four people; the large ones, a minimum of eight. Where families had less than the quota of four or eight members, they were expected to share with strangers. The construction was simple and uninsulated: stud walls with one layer of green wood and a single sheet of tar paper for protection from the elements. Additional wood was supplied to the occupants to build beds, tables and benches. Since it was green wood, the furniture quickly warped, and moisture from the bed slats seeped into the mattresses. Apart from that green wood and a small stove, the inmates were to supply everything else themselves.” (*The Politics of Racism*, 79)

Working together, have students measure out a space in a large classroom, gym, or in the yard that is 16' x 16' (app. 5 x 5m). If you can, mark it out with painters' tape and, using craft paper or tape, outline where the bedrooms and beds for at least four people (possibly for two different families), the stove for heat, and a table might go. If students have questions about details, like toilets, etc., research the answers together and add the items to the shack outline. Ask students to imagine what it would be like to live in this space, with no insulation, for months or years with their family members as well as with strangers. Ask them to write about what they think of the space and what it would be like to live in it: the challenges, their fears. Would there be any benefits to this living situation? How might living in this shack compare to other experiences students may have had (camping, staying in hotels)? Leave the outline on the floor for a few days and ask students to think about how much our daily movements are bigger than, cross over, and go beyond the imagined walls and confines of the internment shack.

3. **Interview an elder in your own family or community.** Students should work on their own on this project so they can partake in the interview with an elder one-on-one. As a class or individually, students make a list of five to eight questions to ask. During the interview, students should start with asking the interviewee's full name. Encourage them to be polite and gracious, as well as flexible: besides the prepared questions, students might add questions on the spot as they learn more about their interviewee. Students should record the interview in notes or by audio or video recording. Be sure they request permission of the interviewee to record the interview. Ask students to write about the interview, either as a magazine-type article with an introduction followed by the transcription of the interview or in a reflection piece in which they discuss what they learned from the interview, including things that may have surprised them.



References and further reading:

The main sources for *Obaasan's Boots* were interviews and notebooks in which Grandma's stories were recorded, Grandpa's accounts of early 1942 published in *Canada Times* articles, government documents, interviews and conversations with other family and community members, as well as the following books:

- *The Enemy that Never Was* by Ken Adachi
- *The Politics of Racism* by Ann Gomer Sunahara
- *A Tragedy of Democracy* by Greg Robinson
- *Departures* by John Endo Greenaway, Linda Kawamoto Reid, and Fumiko Greenaway
- *Karizumai* by Linda Kawamoto Reid and Beth Carter
- *Our Edible Roots* by the Japanese Community Volunteers
- the Japanese Canadian History Reference Timeline:

<https://japanesecanadianhistory.net/historical-overview/reference-timeline/>

While there are many other books and resources about the Japanese Canadian and Japanese American internment experiences, the titles listed below inspired the writing of *Obaasan's Boots* and are excellent sources for further reading:

Middle grade fiction:

- *Torn Apart: The Internment Diary of Mary Kobayashi* (Dear Canada series) by Susan Aihoshi (see <http://www.susanaihoshi.ca/tornapart.html>)
- *Naomi's Road* by Joy Kogawa
- *Journey to Topaz* by Yoshiko Uchida (US)

History books for children:

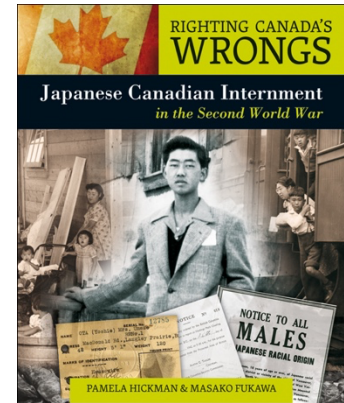
- *Righting Canada's Wrongs: Japanese Canadian Internment in the Second World War* by Pamela Hickman and Masako Fukawa

Graphic novels:

- *Displacement* by Kiku Hughes (US)
- *They Called Us Enemy* by George Takei (US)
- *Stealing Home* by J. Torres and David Namisato.

Picture books for younger children:

- *Naomi's Tree* by Joy Kogawa, illustrated by Ruth Ohi
- *Kimiko Murakami, a Japanese-Canadian Pioneer* by Haley Healey, illustrated by Kimiko Fraser
- *It Began With a Page*, about Gyo Fujikawa, by Kyo Maclear, illustrated by Julie Morstad (US)
- *Shizue's Path* by Mark Sakamoto, illustrated by Rachel Wada
- *On Being Yukiko* by Jeff Chiba Stearns and Lillian Michiko Blakey
- *Mira and Baku* by Sara Truvert, illustrated by Michelle Theodore



Non-fiction / history books for older readers:

- *Honouring Our People: Breaking the Silence* edited by Randy Enomoto
- *This is My Own: Letters to Wes and Other Writings on Japanese Canadians, 1941–1948* by Muriel Kitagawa, edited by Roy Miki
- *Redress* by Roy Miki
- *Forgiveness* by Mark Sakamoto

Fiction for older readers:

- *Requiem* by Frances Itani
- *Obasan* by Joy Kogawa
- *No-No Boy* by John Okada (US)
- *When the Emperor was Divine* by Julie Otsuka (US)
- *The Electrical Field* by Kerri Sakamoto
- *Floating City* by Kerri Sakamoto
- *After the Bloom* by Leslie Shimotakahara
- *The Three Pleasures* by Terry Watada



Films:

- *Minoru: Memory of Exile* by Michael Fukushima: <https://www.nfb.ca/film/minoru-memory-of-exile/>
- *Swimming Upstream* by Maryka Omatsu and narrated by Mark Sakamoto: <https://torontonajc.ca/project/swimming-upstream-injustice-revealed/>
- *One Big Hapa Family* by Jeff Chiba Stearns
- *Sleeping Tigers: the Asahi Baseball Story* by Jari Osborne

Teaching resources:

- Denso Teach About the Incarceration: Lesson Plans: <https://densho.org/teach/>
- Landscapes of Injustice Teacher Resources: <https://www.landscapesofinjustice.com/teacher-resources/>
- National Association of Japanese Canadians Educational Resources (including Lesson Plans at the bottom of the page): <https://naic.ca/resources/educational-resources/>
- Nikkei National Museum and Cultural Centre Teaching Guide: <https://centre.nikkeiplace.org/education/teaching-guide/>

Praise for *Obaasan's Boots*:

Obaasan's Boots is “a book that so beautifully captures the intimate and ongoing effects of internment on post war Japanese Canadian families. Bridger and Okihiro fully inhabit the idea that ‘history is not only about the past’ by tracing its present-day echoes and reverberations—in gardens, at dinner tables and through everyday familial relationships.”

– **Kyo Maclear**, author of *Virginia Wolf, The Wish Tree, It Began With a Page*

“The book’s strongest and most valuable aspect is its poignant and candid representation of the historical injustices endured by Canada’s Japanese communities during the Second World War. ... The book is an important contribution to the existing body of literature for young readers that focus on significant periods of Canadian history. It provides a positive message about connecting with the past and feeling proud of one’s roots.”

Highly Recommended

– **Huai-Yang Lim**, *CM: Canadian Review of Materials*

More about the novel:

- Watch a short movie about *Obaasan's Boots* by Lara Okihiro: <https://vimeo.com/899335709?share=copy>
- Listen to Lara read an excerpt from *Obaasan's Boots*: <https://youtu.be/ORUMuT7edpM?t=2542>
- Watch the Festival of Literary Diversity (FOLD) for Kids panel discussion on Engaging Japanese Canadian History, including Lara Okihiro talking about *Obaasan's Boots*: <https://foldkids2023.vfairs.com/en/> (you may need to login or check YouTube for access)
- See Lara Okihiro’s website: <https://laraokihiro.ca/obaasans-boots>
- Read articles about *Obaasan's Boots*:
 - “Alum Lara Okihiro draws from two Arts & Science degrees and her own family history to tell powerful story of Japanese internment”: <https://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/news/alum-lara-okihiro-draws-two-arts-science-degrees-and-her-own-family-history-tell-powerful-story>

- “Cousins Janis Bridger and Lara Jean Okihiro Share Their Grandmother’s Story in New Children’s Book”: <http://nikkeivoice.ca/cousins-janis-bridger-and-lara-jean-okihiro-share-their-grandmothers-story-in-new-childrens-book/>
- “New Book: Obaasan’s Boots”: <https://jccbulletin-geppo.ca/new-book-obaasans-boots/>
- “Rediscovering an Incredible Story of Community and Resilience in New Westminster”: <http://nikkeivoice.ca/rediscovering-an-incredible-story-of-community-and-resilience-in-new-westminster/>



The Okihiro and Nakazawa family and friends at Grandma and Grandpa’s Wedding, 1940.

For questions or comments about the *Obaasan’s Boots* Reading Guide, contact Lara Okihiro at obaasansboots@laraokihiro.ca.

