

Children's Book Review

Say, Allen (2002). *Home of the brave*. New York: Houghton-Mifflin. 40 pp. ISBN: 0-618-21223-X (hc), \$17.00 (ages 6-10).

Reviewed by June Harris, Texas A&M University, U. S. A.

In the early 1950s, my family moved to Arizona. I was a young teen. On a Sunday afternoon when my father decided that we should drive out to a location near Florence, Arizona, to view a "Japanese camp," I was certainly up for the adventure.

I do not know what I had expected, but I know what I thought then. I believed I was seeing a place in which Japanese prisoners of war had been held. I did not realize that I was viewing a site in which American citizens of Japanese ancestry had been interred for no reason other than that they were—well, descendants of Japanese immigrants.

I later learned that the site was the Gila River War Relocation Center, a relatively benign name for a very ugly situation.

Today, more than fifty years after this experience, I believe I may be one of a relatively few non-Japanese Americans who have actually seen an internment camp. When I was there, the buildings were deserted. The tumbleweeds blew around the shacks; the fences were falling down; the weeds had taken the place.

Therefore, when I picked up Allen Say's *Home of the Brave*, it was with a shock of recognition that I saw the camp in the story, and I cringed to know what it represented.

The story is told in simple terms.

A man is kayaking on a river. The river becomes a waterfall, and the man goes over. He is swept into an underground river, and he emerges into a cave. There is a shaft of light illuminating a ladder, which he climbs. He comes out of the cave onto a desert landscape, and he sees two children crouched against an adobe wall. The children are wearing tags that he cannot read, and they are waiting to go home. He leads the children into the desert against a blowing wind and sand storm. Soon he sees lights. The lights come from a row of buildings made of wood and tarpaper. The buildings are empty, but in one of them he finds a piece of paper like the nametags the children wore. It had his name on it. The children outside want him to take them home. But the searchlights from the watchtowers blind him. He finds a hole with a ladder and a tag with his mother's name on it. He climbs down the ladder and goes to sleep. When he wakes, a

group of children are nearby. He sees the nametags, runs up the bank, and scatters the tags in the air. The man and the children say, "They went home."

On the one hand, *Home of the Brave* seems a very necessary book. The internment of more than 120,000 Japanese-Americans, 62% of whom were born in the United States, is a chapter in American history that is both ugly and hidden from most students. The history of the United States has some glorious and elevated moments, but this episode is not among them. The treatment of Japanese-Americans during the internments of World War II is a shameful bit of history, and a bit that is carefully ignored during most discussions of the WW II experience.

On the other hand, it is hard to know what children would make of this book on their own. The subject is approached obliquely, and it is an unfamiliar subject to most children and, for that matter, to most adults. The book may need a considerable amount of context to make the story clear to young readers.

These things said, the book is gripping and intense to those who are familiar with these events. When the young man and the children come out of the sand storm and see the wooden buildings that are the camp, my response was visceral; I'd seen those buildings. I'd seen those wooden structures in the Arizona desert—in a place with temperatures of up to 116 degrees in the summer and no air conditioning—and I knew what they were like.

Allen Say is a wonderful writer and illustrator of children's books, a winner of the Caldecott for *Grandfather's Journey*. His illustrations in *Home* are beautiful and very appropriate to the content of the story. Unlike the illustrations in *Grandfather's Journey*, however, the tone of Say's pictures in this work is dark. Most of the pictures in *Grandfather's Journey* are sunlit and scenic. The pictures in *Home of the Brave* are almost uniformly dark with overcast skies, shadows, and muted colors. The muted tones are appropriate for the subject matter, of course, but they do make for a less visually inviting book.

Even with the caveats, however, this is a powerful book and as such is highly recommended. Those books that make adults uncomfortable are often the very books to which children need exposure, and this may very well be one of those necessary books.