

BOOK REVIEWS



Hiroshima

A Novella

BY LAURENCE YEP

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Most children in middle school expect one day to follow another in a steady advance of sameness. They make the transition from youth to adulthood in a relatively seamless transition. Carpools, homework, trips to the mall are the expected and predictable routine that fashion their lifestyle.

This was not so for the children of Hiroshima. On August 6, 1945, their youthful expectations were altered so drastically that not even the most discerning of historians might have predicted what was to happen. Laurence Yep has written a novella about how the atomic bomb suddenly changed the course of a young

girl's life. This horrific story is told with a clear and graceful cadence that allows us to see how her heroic acts of perseverance and forgiveness can be a symbol of hope for global peace.

Historians have written many essays on the bombing of Hiroshima. It is a complex topic when one includes the events leading up to the bombing, the horror of the bombing, and the aftermath. Very few are written in language a middle grade student could understand. Very few are written with a style that does not frighten young people. Yep has written a clear and accurate account of these terrible events with a sensitivity of spirit that encourages young readers to empathize with his heroine and her struggles to overcome both the physical and psychological scars she has received.

Yep begins his tale with an explanation of events leading up to the bombing. He discusses topics that students would be curious to know—for example, how the bomb was given the name “Enola Gay” and why the United States entered World War II. His description of what makes the atomic bomb so deadly, and why the United States would drop this powerful weapon on the people of Hiroshima is fair and impartial.

Although much of Yep's story is told almost in the manner of an unbiased reporter, many of his images have lasting poetic qualities. Here is how he describes Hiroshima on the morning just moments before the bomb is dropped:

A peddler wheels his cart carefully through the crowd. A colonel exercises his white horse. There are about 320,000 people in Hiroshima that morning.

Riko and Sachi stop by a shrine. They say a prayer for their father, who is in the army. Looking at the calm, forgiving face of Buddha, they begin to feel at peace.

Later, when describing the bomb he writes:

There is a blinding light like a sun. There is a boom like a giant drum. There is a terrible wind. Houses collapse like boxes. Windows break everywhere. Broken glass swirls like angry insects.

Somehow, through the devastating events that follow the bombing, Yep's heroine Sachi survives. It is through her eyes that

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we see the desperate struggle of the people of Hiroshima. The things Sachi sees as a twelve-year-old are at the same time interesting and appalling to young people. Yep writes:

It is so hot the grass catches fire. People rush to find a river to escape the heat. They jump in even though they cannot swim. Ash from the fires and the bodies rises to the sky, mixes with cold air, and creates a rain that is at once black and oily.

The second bomb, dropped on Nagasaki, and the subsequent surrender are mere footnotes compared to the enormity of despair suffered by Sachi. We see her young life shattered as she learns to deal with the disfiguration the bombing burns have left on her face. We learn that her sister dies during the bombing. Her father never returns from the war.

But Yep's novella is more than just a historical recounting of the events surrounding the bombing of Hiroshima. The novella concludes with the story of what have come to be known as the "Hiroshima Maidens." In this conclusion we see how Sachi and others like her, come to find forgiveness. The "Maidens" are a group of twenty-five women who bear burn scars from the bomb. They travel to the United States to receive treatment from American plastic surgeons. These fragile, damaged women overcome their personal fears of Americans and develop fast friendships. As Yep writes:

For the doctors it is a labor of good will. For the women it is a matter of trust and hope.

Hope is a curious concept when one considers the destructive power of the bomb. Yep carefully takes the reader through the years of nuclear arms build-up and finally to the hope of disarmament. He credits ordinary citizens, like Sachi, for the turn-about in political thinking:

In 1985, 40 years after the bomb dropped, people all around the world marched for peace. In the capital, Washington, D.C., many thousands of people carried banners with peace messages and symbols. Stitched together, the banners formed a peace ribbon 15 miles long.

He also firmly places credit with the Peace Park in Hiroshima for helping to call attention to the devastating potential of the bomb. The park houses a dome that contains a list of all who have died as a result of the bomb, which includes those who died from radiation after the bombing. One of the most famous of these is a little girl named Sadako who died ten years after the bomb dropped.

Many middle school children already know the story of Sadako and the paper cranes. Yep calls attention to the fact that each year, as many as 400 million paper cranes are sent to the Peace Park from children all over the world. He leaves the reader with the belief that children can make a difference when it comes to molding public opinion.

Middle school children are interested in how other children around the world live. They also enjoy stories that empower young people, or present young people as strong and capable heroes to emulate. Yep's heroine Sachi is a capable character who tells us a story from history and inspires us to become involved in the peace movement. ■

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