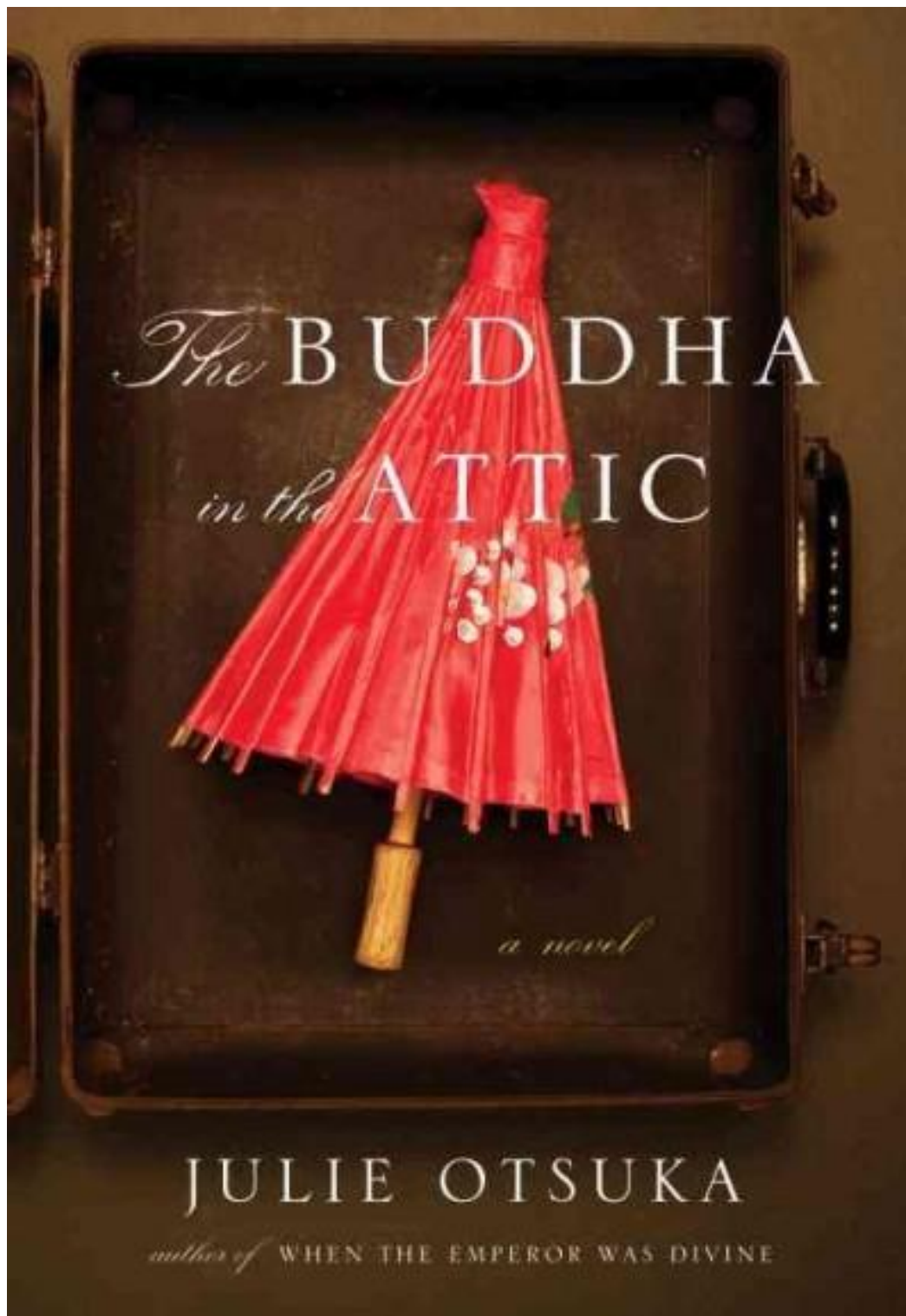


## About the book...



Julie Otsuka's long awaited follow-up to *When the Emperor Was Divine* is a tour de force of economy and precision, a novel that tells the story of a group of young women brought over from Japan to San Francisco as 'picture brides' nearly a century ago.

In eight incantatory sections, *The Buddha in the Attic* traces their extraordinary lives, from their arduous journey by boat, where they exchange photographs of their husbands, imagining uncertain futures in an unknown land; to their arrival in San Francisco and their tremulous first nights as new wives; to their backbreaking work picking fruit in the fields and scrubbing the floors of white women; to their struggles to master a new language and a new culture; to their experiences in childbirth, and then as mothers, raising children who will ultimately reject their heritage and their history; to the deracinating arrival of war.

In language that has the force and the fury of poetry, Julie Otsuka has written a singularly spellbinding novel about the American dream.

## About the author...



Julie Otsuka was born and raised in California. After studying art as an undergraduate at Yale University she pursued a career as a painter for several years before turning to fiction writing at age 30. She received her MFA from Columbia. She is a recipient of the PEN/Faulkner

Award, the Asian American Literary Award, the American Library Association Alex Award, an Arts and Letters Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and was a finalist for the National Book Award.

Her first novel, [When the Emperor Was Divine](#) (Knopf, 2002), is about the internment of a Japanese-American family during World War II. It was a *New York Times* Notable Book, a *San Francisco Chronicle* Best Book of the Year, and a Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers finalist. The book is based on Otsuka's own family history: her grandfather was arrested by the FBI

as a suspected spy for Japan the day after Pearl Harbor was bombed, and her mother, uncle and grandmother spent three years in an internment camp in Topaz, Utah. *When the Emperor Was Divine* has been translated into six languages and sold more than 300,000 copies. *The New York Times* called it “a resonant and beautifully nuanced achievement” and *USA Today* described it as “A gem of a book and one of the most vivid history lessons you’ll ever learn.” It has been assigned to all incoming freshmen at more than 35 colleges and universities and is a regular ‘Community Reads’ selection across the US.

Her second novel, [The Buddha in the Attic](#) (Knopf, 2011), is about a group of young Japanese ‘picture brides’ who sailed to America in the early 1900s to become the wives of men they had never met and knew only by their photographs.

Otsuka’s fiction has been published in *Granta*, *Harper’s*, [The Best American Short Stories 2012](#), [The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2012](#), and has been read aloud on PRI’s “Selected Shorts” and BBC Radio 4’s “Book at Bedtime.” She lives in New York City, where she writes every afternoon in her neighborhood café.

## **Awards**

Pen/Faulkner Award, 2012

## Reviews

*Booklist*/*\*Starred Review\**/

Otsuka's stunning debut, *When the Emperor Was Divine* (2002), a concentrated novel about the WWII internment of Japanese Americans, garnered the Asian American Literary Award, the ALA Alex Award, and a Guggenheim. Her second novel tells the stories of Japanese mail-order brides at the start of the twentieth century in a first-person-plural narrative voice, the choral "we." This creates an incantatory and haunting group portrait of diverse women who make the arduous ocean journey to California buoyant with hope only to marry strangers nothing like the handsome young men in the photographs that lured them so far from home. Prejudice and hardship soon transform the brides into fingers-worked-to-the-bone laborers, toiling endlessly as domestic workers, farmers, prostitutes, and merchants. Every aspect of female life is candidly broached in Otsuka's concise yet grandly dramatic saga as these determined, self-sacrificing outsiders navigate the white water of American society, only to watch their American-born children disdain all things Japanese. Drawing on extensive research and profoundly identifying with her characters, Otsuka crafts an intricately detailed folding

screen depicting nearly five decades of change as the women painstakingly build meaningful lives, only to lose everything after Pearl Harbor. This lyrically distilled and caustically ironic story of exile, effort, and hate is entrancing, appalling, and heartbreakingly beautiful."

*Library Journal*/\*Starred Review\*/

In her acclaimed *When the Emperor Was Divine*, Otsuka wrought third-person narratives of a northern California Japanese family facing internment and alienation during World War II. Now she gives us a luminous second novel, setting off from the early 20th century on a ship of "picture brides" headed from Japan to San Francisco to meet Japanese workers who have arranged to marry them. Otsuka works an enchantment upon her readers—no *Sturm und Drang* here—and leaves us haunted and astonished at the powers of her subtlety and charms. This time she employs a choral-like narrative expressed in the third-person plural, with a gentle use of repetitive phrasing ("One of us..."; "Some of us...") punctuated by small, italicized utterances representing individual voices. The results are cumulatively overwhelming, as we become embedded in the hope, disenchantment, courage, labor, and resignation of these nameless women and their families across four decades. Did they think all their compromises, their search for community, meant

that they had found a place here in America? Or, just as they had been upon their arrival in California, were they mistaken about what this land had to offer them? VERDICT Unforgettable and essential both for readers and writers.

### *Kirkus Reviews*

Otsuka, whose first novel ([When the Emperor Was Divine](#), 2003) focused on one specific Japanese-American family's plight during and after internment, takes the broad view in this novella-length consideration of Japanese mail-order brides making a life for themselves in America in the decades before World War II.

There are no central characters. A first-person-plural chorus narrates the women's experiences from their departure from Japan until they are removed from their homes and shipped to the camps, at which point the narration is taken over by clueless whites. Rather than following an individual story, Otsuka lists experience after experience, piling name upon name. Voyaging across the Pacific to California, the women's emotions range from fear to excitement, but most, even those leaving behind secret lovers, are hopeful. Reality sets in when they meet their husbands, who are seldom the men they seemed from their letters

and photographs. And the men's reactions to their new wives vary as much as the women's. Some are loving, some abusive. For all their differences, whether farm workers, laundrymen, gardeners or struggling entrepreneurs, they share a common outsider status. Soon the majority of women who stay married—some die or run off or are abandoned—are working alongside their husbands. They begin to have babies and find themselves raising children who speak English and consider themselves American. And the women have become entrenched; some even have relationships with the whites around them; many are financially comfortable. But with the arrival of the war against Japan come rumors. Japanese and white Americans look at each other differently. Loyalty is questioned. Anti-Japanese laws are passed. And the Japanese themselves no longer know whom to trust as more and more of them disappear each day. Once they are truly gone, off to the camps, the whites feel a mix of guilt and relief, then begin to forget the Japanese who had been their neighbors.

A lovely prose poem that gives a bitter history lesson.

### *Publisher Weekly*

In the early 1900s, numerous Japanese mail order brides came to America seeking better lives. Otsuka's (When the Emperor was Divine) latest novel paints a



delicate, heartbreaking portrait of these women. Using a collective first-person narrator ("On the boat we were mostly virgins."), Otsuka looks at the experiences of these "picture brides," organizing their stories into themes which include: their arrival in America; their first nights with their husbands; their interactions with white people; their children; and finally, the experience of World War II. Each section is beautifully rendered, a delicate amalgam of contrasting and complementary experiences. Readers will instantly empathize with these unnamed women as they adjust to American culture, a remarkable achievement considering Otsuka's use of the collective voice. Otsuka's prose is precise and rich with imagery. Readers will be inspired to draw their own parallels between the experiences of these women and the modern experience of immigration. By the time readers realize that the story is headed toward the internment of the Japanese, they are hopelessly engaged and will finish this exceptional book profoundly moved.

## **Discussion questions**

**1.** *The Buddha in the Attic* is narrated in the first person plural, i.e., told from the point of view of a group of women rather than an individual. Discuss the

impact of this narrative decision on your reading experience. Why do you think the author made the choice to tell the story from this perspective?

**2.** Why is the novel called *The Buddha in the Attic*? To what does the title refer?

**3.** The novel opens with the women on the boat traveling from Japan to San Francisco. What does Otsuka tell us is "the first thing [they] did," and what does this suggest about the trajectories of their lives?

**4.** What are the women's expectations about America? What are their fears? Why are they convinced that "it was better to marry a stranger in America than grow old with a farmer from the village"?

**5.** Discuss Otsuka's use of italics in the novel. What are these shifts in typography meant to connote? How do they add to our knowledge of the women as individuals?

**6.** Otsuka tells us that the last words spoken by the women's mothers still ring in their ears: "*You will see: women are weak, but mothers are strong.*" What does this mean, and how does the novel bear this out?

**7.** In the final sentence of "First Night," Otsuka writes, "They took us swiftly, repeatedly, all throughout the night, and in the morning when we woke we were theirs." Discuss the women's first nights with their new

husbands. Are there particular images you found especially powerful? How did you feel reading this short chapter?

**8.** Why was the first word of English the women were taught "water"?

**9.** In the section entitled "Whites," Otsuka describes several acts of kindness and compassion on the part of the women's husbands. In what ways were the husbands useful to them or unexpectedly gentle with them in these early days? How does this reflect the complexity of their relationships?

**10.** What are the women's lives like in these early months in America? How do their experiences and challenges differ from what they had been led to expect? How are they perceived by their husbands? By their employers? Discuss the disparity between the women's understanding of their role in the American economy and what Otsuka suggests is the American perception of the Japanese women's power.

**11.** Later in this section, the women ask themselves, "*Is there any tribe more savage than the Americans?*" What occasions this question? What does the author think? What do you think?

**12.** Discuss the passage on p. 37 that begins, "We forgot about Buddha. We forgot about God. . . . *I fear my soul has died.* . . . And often our husbands did not

even notice we'd disappeared." What does Otsuka mean by "disappeared"? What is she suggesting about their spiritual lives, their inner selves? Do the women reappear in this sense in the course of the novel? When?

**13.** Throughout the novel, Otsuka uses the phrase "One of us..." Why? What is the effect of this shift in point of view? What does Otsuka achieve through this subtle adjustment?

**14.** Otsuka writes, "They gave us new names. They called us Helen and Lily. They called us Margaret. They called us Pearl." Discuss how this mirrors the names taken by the women's children later in the novel.

**15.** Discuss the complexities and nuances of the relationship between the Japanese women and the white women. Was it strictly an employer/employee relationship, or something more?

**16.** What is J-town? Why do the women choose J-town over any attempt to return home?

**17.** The section called "Babies" is just six pages long but strikes with unique force. What was your reaction to the experiences of the women in childbirth? Take a close look at the last six sentences of the chapter, with a particular emphasis on the very last sentence. On what note does Otsuka end the chapter, and why?

What does that last sentence reveal about Otsuka's ideas about the future and about the past?

**18.** "One by one all the old words we had taught them began to disappear from their heads," Otsuka writes of the women's children. Discuss the significance of names and naming in *The Buddha in the Attic*. What does it mean for these children to reject their mother's language? What point is Otsuka making about cultural inheritance?

**19.** How do the dreams of the children differ from the dreams of their mothers?

**20.** Why do the women feel closer to their husbands than ever before in the section entitled "Traitors"?

**21.** How is the structure of the penultimate section, called "Last Day," different from the structure of all the sections that precede it? Why do you think Otsuka chose to set it apart?

**22.** Who narrates the novel's final section, "A Disappearance"? Why? What is the impact of this dramatic shift?

**23.** Discuss themes of guilt, shame, and forgiveness in *The Buddha in the Attic*.

## Readalikes

[\*A Bridge between Us\*](#) by Julie Shigekuni (1995)

Four generations of women of the Hito family live together in San Francisco united primarily by ties of family and culture. Each reveals the "bridges" that connect her to other generations and the secrets contained in those bridges. Grandma Rio tries to commit suicide when Nomi is a young girl but is nursed back to health by Nomi's devotion. As she becomes older, it's granddaughter Nomi who returns to Japan to find her heritage, but it's thoughts of Rio that bring her home in this first novel.

[\*How to Be an American Housewife\*](#) by Margaret Dilloway (2010)

Margaret Dilloway's *How to Be an American Housewife* is a moving tale of a mother and daughter and the turbulent relationship they share. After World War II has ended, Japanese clerk Shoko marries American soldier Charlie Morgan, much to the ire of Shoko's father, Taro. The newlyweds return to the United States, where they begin a family. Shoko feels isolated in her new surroundings and struggles to fit in with the American wives, prompting her to channel her hopes and dreams into her daughter, Sue. Not surprisingly, this places an intense strain on the mother-daughter bond. Sue grows up under her mother's exacting eye, but when Shoko becomes ill, it is Sue who returns to Japan to mend her mother's ties with Taro.

[\*The World We Found\*](#) by Thrity Umrigar (2012)

Armaiti, Laleh, Kavita, and Nishta are four Indian women for whom life has changed drastically since they first met about 30 years ago. Though they have lived separate lives for many years, they formed close friendships in the late 1970s when they attended college in Bombay. In those days, Armaiti, Laleh, Kavita, and Nishta were enthusiastic activists, fighting for their ideals and dreaming of a better world. Three decades later, however, their lives have moved in very different directions, and they have seen very little of each other. That all changes when Armaiti calls from her home in the United States and asks the others to come together with her one last time before she succumbs to cancer. Through their emotional reunion, the four women are forced to confront their pasts and determine whether they can reclaim the youthful idealism they once shared.

[\*Shanghai Girls\*](#) by Lisa See (2009)

Pearl and May relish all the delights 1930s Shanghai has to offer to a pair of beautiful young sisters. As daughters of a successful businessman, the siblings have enough resources and connections to do anything they desire. But when their father confesses he has lost the family fortune gambling, their entire lives

change. To pay back his debts, their father sells them to two American men seeking Chinese wives. From here, Pearl and May embark upon the greatest adventure of their lives, through war-torn China to the sunny shores of California and the bright lights of Hollywood.

*Midnight at the Dragon Cafe* by Judy Fong Bates  
(2005)

In Judy Fong Bates' first novel, *Midnight at the Dragon Cafe*, she introduces Su-Jen Chou, the daughter of refugees from Communist China. The story is set in the 1950s in a remote Ontario town, where Su-Jen's parents, Hing-Wun and Jing, own a Chinese restaurant. Su-Jen soon learns English and becomes comfortable in her Canadian surroundings, even adopting the nickname Annie, but her mother remains isolated. Hing-Wun is constantly working in an effort to get ahead to benefit his much younger wife and his only child. Lee-Kung, Su-Jen's adult half brother, comes to live with the family and helps them in the restaurant. Su-Jen wonders what type of secret Jing and Lee-Kung may be hiding when she sees the two of them exchanging mysterious looks across the room. After finding her escape from reality through books and her father's storytelling, Su-Jen must eventually face the situation when Lee-Kung's mail-order bride arrives and everything erupts.



## Further Reading

*Between Two Empires: Race, History, and Transnationalism in Japanese America* by Eiichiro Azuma (2005)

The author examines the complicated issue of Japanese immigration to the United States before World War II. Organized into four parts--"Multiple Beginnings," "Convergences and Divergences," "Pioneers and Successors," and "Complexities of Immigrant Nationalism"--this insightful study discusses the role of early immigrants in American society, the implementation of internment camps, and the complex relationships the Japanese maintained with their motherland and their new country. Azuma reveals a people defined by ancestry and tradition and determined to establish a legitimate place in the culture of America.



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