When the Emperor was Divine

Comprehension Questions thru page 105

**II. Train**
1. How much time has passed since the family left its home and what has happened in the interim?

2. Why have the girl’s shoes gone unpolished since spring?

3. What sights draw her attention as she gazes out the train window?

4. Why does the soldier tell her to pull her shades down?

5. What might account for the boy’s newfound interest in horses? How do the grownups around him treat this interest? What about their responses might be confusing to him?

6. When the girl asks Ted Ishimoto if he is a rich man, he says “Not anymore.” [p. 33] What might account for his answer?

7. Do you think the girl’s story about her father is true? Why or why not, and if it isn’t true what might be her reason for telling it? Why does she later tell Ted that her father never writes to her?

8. What is striking about the boy saying that he forgot his umbrella? Is he telling a deliberate untruth or is he forgetting what actually happened? At what other points in the book do the characters suffer lapses of memory or remember events falsely?

9. Why might the boy draw his father inside a square?

10. What is Tanforan and what happened there? In what different ways do different characters remember it?

11. During the night the train crosses the Great Salt Lake. Given that the girl is asleep at the time, who is observing this crossing? And what might this narrator mean by “the sound of the lake was inside her” [pp. 46-7]?

**III. When the Emperor Was Divine**1. What is the significance of this chapter’s title?

2. Why does the boy keep thinking that he sees his father?

3. When the boy thinks, “For it was true, they all looked alike,” [p. 49] he seems to be echoing something he has heard elsewhere. Where might he have heard this?

4. What is the significance of the things the boy hears through the walls of his barracks? *Sayonara*is, of course, Japanese, but what language is *Auf wiederseh’n*, and what is the irony of hearing it in this setting?

5. Why does the boy’s mother warn him never to say the Emperor’s name out loud? Why does he later say it to himself, and why does he dream about the Emperor’s ships?

6 . In what different ways do the three characters spend their time in camp? How does this reflect their characters?

7. What is Mrs. Kato’s predicament, and how might it symbolize the common condition of the internees?

8. How reliable is the information the girl gives her brother? Where else have we seen her make authoritative-sounding statements that may not necessarily be accurate?

9. The letters the father sends the boy have been censored by an official. What things does the boy leave out of his letters back? Why might he do this?

10. What sort of things does the boy remember about his father, and what do they reveal about him?

11. Why does the mother fear that her husband may no longer recognize her?

12. When the boy asks his sister what time it is, what is the irony of her answer? Where else in the book do characters lose track of time?

13. What happens to the inmates who sign up to harvest crops?

14. What is the significance of the boy’s dream about doors? Where are Peleliu and Saipan? What are the claws the boy hears scrabbling, and why might their sound be growing fainter?

15. What detail of the father’s arrest does the boy find most troubling? What eventually makes him feel better?

16. What is the significance of the objects the boy’s mother destroyed?

17. What does the father mean by, “It’s better to bend than to break?” [p. 78] Compare this to the mother thinking, “The nail that sticks up gets hammered down.” [p. 99] How useful or relevant does this advice seem in the context of the novel? What does it suggest about these people’s characters and values? Do they actually abide by these sayings?

18. Why does the girl make the boy turn away while she undresses? In what other ways does her behavior change during this time?

19. Why does the boy feel responsible for the tortoise’s death? Do you think he is? His sister says, “We’ll resurrect him,” but is she just joking? Does the boy believe her?

20. The boy is particularly bothered because his father didn’t look back at him from the car in which the FBI men took him away. What significance do you think he places on this? What alternative reason might the father have had for not turning?

21. How does the mother change in the course of her internment? What memory seems especially affecting to her?

22. Why is the family in the next barracks sent to Tule Lake? What is the irony of punishing people imprisoned as enemy aliens for refusing to pledge allegiance to the nation that’s imprisoned them?

23. What is it that the boy sees blooming inside a peach tin? How is this connected to his vision of the tortoise? Do you think this vision is real or a fantasy?

24. Why is one of the inmates shot? What hypotheses are given for his seemingly reckless behavior?

25. On page 104 the boy imagines his father returning by various means (horse, bike, train), and dressed in various outfits (a blue pinstriped suit, a red kimono). What is the significance of these different guises? What, in particular, is the meaning of the pearl?