

FOR PARENTS & EDUCATORS

A DISCUSSION GUIDE

SHELL SONG

Based on a True Family Story
by Sharon Fujimoto-Johnson

STUDENT/CHILD
ACTIVITIES START
ON PAGE 7



ABOUT THE BOOK

Based on the author's true family history, this picture book about Japanese American incarceration in Hawai'i during World War II is a moving tribute to the importance of finding and collecting pieces of hope, big or small, even in the darkest of times.

Grandfather loved music, seashells, and the sound of the ocean in Hawai'i. But when war came, there was no more music. And in this war, there was no kindness for anyone who looked Japanese.

Taken to an island prison, Grandfather passed many long, lonely days away from his family searching for tiny seashells. He collected the shells, labelled them, and saved them with care. His collection has been passed down to his children and grandchildren, and now, author-illustrator Sharon Fujimoto-Johnson tells the story of her grandfather and his shells

This is the first children's book to address the Japanese American incarceration camps in Hawai'i during World War II.

SIMON & SCHUSTER/BEACH LANE BOOKS
48 PAGES
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR-ILLUSTRATOR



SHARON FUJIMOTO-JOHNSON is a fourth generation Japanese American who grew up in both America and Japan. She now lives in California, where she makes children's books in a house filled with three generations of family, two languages, and countless books and art supplies.

When Sharon was around ten years old, she inherited the shells her grandfather collected in incarceration camps in Hawai'i during World War II. These shells inspired *SHELL SONG*, and her grandfather's actual shells are digitally collaged into the artwork.

Sharon is also the author-illustrator of *THE MOCHI MAKERS*, a gentle and joyous "storytelling treat" (*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review) celebrating family, tradition, and the memories that matter most.



ABOVE: Some of the shells that Sharon's grandfather collected while in a Japanese American incarceration camp.

RIGHT: Sharon's grandfather.

FOR PARENTS & EDUCATORS

PREPARING TO READ SHELL SONG

SHELL SONG gives readers, parents, and educators an opportunity to learn more about the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II. This guide is meant to help clarify historical context, define appropriate terminology, and provide teaching tools that parents and educators can use to facilitate age-appropriate understanding and student discussions.

In SHELL SONG, readers of all ages can relate to the tangible act of collecting shells, as well as the themes these shells represent, such as the passing of time, injustice, loneliness, family love, and hope. This story encourages a deeper understanding of history and human nature and further provides an opportunity for readers to develop empathy.

The number of living Japanese Americans who experienced the incarceration camps first hand is dwindling. Preserving and sharing their stories is all the more important today.

THE INCARCERATION OF JAPANESE AMERICANS: A SUMMARY

After the Japanese military attacked the US naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawai'i on December 7, 1941, war broke out between the United States and Japan. Many people falsely believed that Japanese Americans could not be loyal to America.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which allowed the forced removal of the entire Japanese American population on the West Coast of the United States. Families, including men, women, children, elderly, and babies, were displaced from their homes, with short notice, and forced into prison camps surrounded by barbed wire and patrolled by armed guards.

Executive Order 9066 did not apply to Hawai'i, which was then a territory and not yet a state. Instead, martial law was declared, suspending the rights of civilians and giving the military the authority to selectively arrest and incarcerate Japanese American leaders. While the injustice of the mass incarceration on the West Coast was the forced removal of entire families and communities, the particular injustice of the incarceration in Hawai'i was family separation, in which Japanese American leaders, mostly men, were torn from their families.



TOPICS ADDRESSED

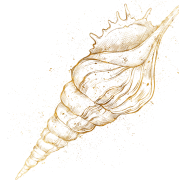
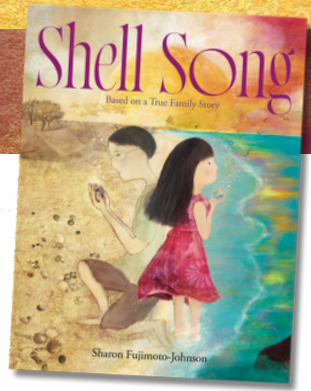
- World War II
- Japanese American history
- Immigration
- Attack on Pearl Harbor
- Executive Order 9066
- Incarceration of Japanese Americans
- Family separation
- Seashell collecting
- Inheritance

FACTS & NUMBERS

- More than 125,000 Japanese Americans were forced into incarceration camps during World War II.
- No Japanese American was ever convicted of spying for Japan during World War II.
- About two-thirds of the Japanese Americans incarcerated were US citizens by birth. The rest were mostly first generation immigrants who could not become US citizens due to discriminatory laws.
- On the West Coast, entire Japanese American communities were forced from their homes into prison camps.
- In Hawai'i, community leaders were targeted to be arrested and sent to prison camps.
- There were 75 incarceration camps and detention centers in the United States.
- Approximately 2,000 Japanese Americans were incarcerated in Hawai'i.

Source: *When Can We Go Back to America?* by Susan Kamei

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ADDITIONAL HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As early as the 1920s, the US government was already drafting plans for the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans in Hawai'i in case of a war with Japan. Tensions between America and Japan were high due to a multitude of factors, including military and business conflicts in Asia. When the Japanese military attacked the US naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawai'i on December 7, 1941, years of anti-Japanese sentiments erupted.

Even though US intelligence reports showed that Japanese Americans posed no security threat to the United States, many people falsely believed that Japanese Americans had spied, or might spy, for Japan and could not be trusted. President Franklin D. Roosevelt used "military necessity" as an excuse to issue Executive Order 9066 that forced more than 125,000 Japanese Americans from their homes and into prison camps. These camps ranged from temporary holding sites like tents and repurposed barns to hastily constructed barracks that provided little privacy or protection from the elements. These camps were behind barbed wire and were patrolled by armed guards.



Sharon's grandfather after his arrest.

"RACE PREJUDICE, WAR HYSTERIA, AND A FAILURE OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP... NOT MILITARY NECESSITY"

The Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC), a bipartisan group that investigated the incarceration of Japanese Americans, determined that the decision to imprison Japanese Americans was not based on military necessity but rather "race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership." In other words, the US government had imprisoned innocent Japanese Americans because of prejudice against their Japanese heritage, not because of any actual threat.

No Japanese American was ever convicted of spying for Japan during World War II. On the other hand, many second generation Japanese American young men volunteered to fight for the Allied Forces, despite their families being imprisoned by the US government. The Japanese American 442nd Regimental Combat Team (RCT) became the most decorated unit in the U.S. military history for its size and length of service.



Artwork from SHELL SONG

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THE FAMILY STORY

Sharon Fujimoto-Johnson's grandfather, Shigeki Fujimoto, was vice president of Fujimoto Trading Company, a successful business that his father had founded to import a variety of household goods from Japan to sell in Hawai'i. Shigeki's father was a prominent leader in the Japanese American community and was a key target of the FBI. However, he had traveled to Japan on business, just before civilian travel between Japan and Hawai'i was shut down. In his stead, the FBI arrested Shigeki. He was classified as an "alien enemy," meaning a citizen of a country at war with America, even though he was an American citizen by birth.

Sharon's grandfather was first imprisoned at Sand Island Internment Camp, a five-acre prison surrounded by a barbed wire fence on a man-made island in Honolulu Harbor and later at the 160-acre Honouliuli Internment Camp located inland on Oahu.

Conditions were harsh in the incarceration camps, and Shigeki's health suffered. After about two years, he was released to his family, but his health and spirit never fully healed. He died at the age of 49. He did not live long enough to see his sons launch successful careers, marry, and start families of their own. Nor was he alive to witness the day in 1988 when President Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act, the US government's way of apologizing for its wrongdoing in unjustly imprisoning Japanese Americans.



Sharon's grandparents' wedding portrait.



Artwork from SHELL SONG

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ABOUT THE ART

Collaged into the art for this book are Sharon's grandfather's shells that he collected in the incarceration camps of Hawai'i, soil from Sand Island Internment Camp and Honouliuli Internment Camp, fabric from Sharon's grandmother's wedding kimono, family photos, and fabric textures from her father's wardrobe.



Artwork from SHELL SONG



Artwork from SHELL SONG

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Q & A

Why did the US government force Japanese Americans from their homes into prison camps?

Even though Japanese Americans were loyal to America, some people were afraid of them because they looked like the enemy that had attacked Pearl Harbor. Some people believed that Japanese Americans could not be loyal to America. The decision to imprison Japanese Americans was not based on military necessity but rather “race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership” (The Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians). In other words, the US government imprisoned innocent Japanese Americans because of prejudice against their Japanese heritage, not because of any actual threat.

Was the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans fair?

No, American military intelligence reports before World War II showed that there was no threat posed by Japanese Americans. The incarceration on the West Coast included children, babies, and elderly who could not have posed any threat. Most of the incarcerated Japanese Americans were United States citizens by birth. No Japanese American was ever convicted of spying for Japan during World War II.

Why were only community leaders incarcerated in Hawai‘i when entire Japanese American families and communities were rounded up on the West Coast?

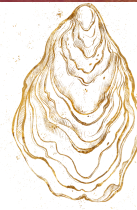
In Hawai‘i—which was then a territory of the United States, not yet a state—Japanese Americans made up more than 35 percent of the population. There was no place to imprison the entire Japanese American community. Also, the economy of Hawai‘i relied on the labor of Japanese Americans. Instead of rounding up the entire community, martial law was declared, suspending the rights of civilians and giving the military the authority to selectively arrest and detain Japanese Americans who were community leaders.

What was life like in the incarceration camps in Hawai‘i?

Japanese Americans were treated like prisoners. Soldiers with guns guarded the camps surrounded by barbed wire, and the incarcerated suffered the humiliation of searches, threats, hard labor, and inadequate food and shelter. As a result, many incarcerated suffered from poor health.

What can we learn from the unjust incarceration of Japanese Americans?

We can learn that it is critically important to protect the civil rights of all Americans and to protect the human rights of all people. It’s impossible to know if a person is American or not based on how they look. We cannot determine if a person can be loyal to America based on their skin color or cultural background. We must speak up against injustice.



VOCABULARY

Racial prejudice is thinking negatively of a group of people based on their race, ethnicity, or the color of their skin.

Discrimination is treating people unfairly because of racial prejudice.

Incarceration vs. internment

Although the term “internment” has been used euphemistically, the term “incarceration” is preferred to “internment,” because internment refers to non-national incarcerated, whereas incarceration is the terms used for citizens. Since two-thirds of incarcerated Japanese Americans were US citizens, “incarceration” is a more accurate term. (Government documents, in fact, referred to these camps as “concentration camps.”)

Japanese American

An American of Japanese descent.

Japanese American Incarceration Camps

The more accurate label is “Japanese American incarceration camps,” as opposed to “Japanese incarceration camps,” because the majority of incarcerated were Americans of Japanese descent, not Japanese nationals.

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SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

These are a few suggested activities that can be done at home or in classrooms to supplement a reading of SHELL SONG. In addition, there are printable activity sheets available online at Sharon Fujimoto-Johnson's website sharonfj.com and under [Resources & Downloads](#) on Simon & Schuster's webpage for SHELL SONG.

FOR EARLY ELEMENTARY

A Drawing Activity

In SHELL SONG, shells reminded the author's grandfather of his family. Draw a picture of something that reminds you of someone you love. Teachers: Pair students to share with each other what their picture represents and what it means to them.

FOR UPPER ELEMENTARY

A Letter-writing Activity

Imagine that one of your friends has been sent to an incarceration camp. What would you want to say to that friend? Write a letter to that friend.

FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL

A Social Justice Poster

Research some of the specific ways Japanese Americans faced prejudice and discrimination during World War II. Injustice in every chapter of history asks all of us to use our voices in protest. What would your message against injustice be? Come up with a slogan or message against prejudice and discrimination and create a social justice poster.

FOR HIGH SCHOOL

An Incarceration Camp Memorial Design

Research the locations of Japanese American incarceration camps and find the camp closest to you. How many people were incarcerated there? How long was this camp in use? What does this area look like now? Is there a memorial at that site? If not, if you could design a memorial that respectfully honors those held in that incarceration camp, what would it look like? Write a short report about that camp and include your memorial design.

A Report on Art in the Incarceration Camps

Research various ways that Japanese Americans made art in the incarceration camps, such as shell art, paintings, and poems. Write a report on art in incarceration camps. If you were in this same situation, what kind of art would you make? Include a sketch or rough draft of your own artwork. Perhaps you could even organize a small exhibit of art inspired by Japanese American art from the incarceration camps, making sure to include appropriate attribution to the source of inspiration.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

SHELL SONG may provide the opportunity for discussion of a wide range of topics, including, but not limited, to justice, war, racism, incarceration, loneliness, trauma, healing, hope, inheritance, family separation, belonging, and so much more.

Below are some questions that might help guide age-appropriate discussions. These questions are meant to be cumulative; thus older readers may benefit from some of the questions listed for earlier age groups as well.

FOR EARLY ELEMENTARY

- Do you have any collections or treasures that bring back special memories?
- How would you feel if someone treated you unfairly because of how you looked?
- How do you think the children in SHELL SONG felt when their father was taken away?
- How did the shells remind the author's grandfather of his family?

FOR UPPER ELEMENTARY

- Can you tell by looking at a person if they are American or not?
- Why did the U.S. government imprison Japanese Americans, and was it fair?
- Have you ever been treated unfairly because of your race, skin color, or how you look?
- Does your family have any heirlooms that represent family stories?

FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL

- What does it mean to be American?
- How do you think the characters in SHELL SONG felt when the "two countries of their hearts" were at war?
- Why do you think the author's grandfather collected shells in the incarceration camp?
- Was there a difference between the Japanese who attacked Pearl Harbor and Japanese Americans?

FOR HIGH SCHOOL

- What should qualify someone to be American?
- What does it mean that the shells brought back from the incarceration camp were "filled with sand, salt, and lost time?"
- What does it mean to love two countries?
- What do you think the significance of the title is?

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Beyond SHELL SONG, there are many resources that may provide further learning opportunities about the history of Japanese American incarceration camps. Below are a few selected additional resources:

MUSEUMS AND ORGANIZATIONS

- [The Japanese American National Museum](#)
- [Japanese Cultural Center of Hawai'i](#)
- [Japanese American Museum of San Jose](#)
- [Densho](#)
- [Japanese American Citizens League](#)
- [National Japanese American Historical Society](#)

PICTURE BOOKS

- *Baseball Saved Us* by Ken Mochizuki, illustrated by Dom Lee
- *The Bracelet* by Yoshiko Uchida, illustrated by Joanna Yardley
- *Fish for Jimmy* by Katie Yamasaki
- *Home of the Brave* by Allen Say
- *Love in the Library* by Maggie Tokuda-Hall, illustrated by Yas Imamura
- *My Lost Freedom* by George Takei, illustrated by Michelle Lee
- *A Place Where Sunflowers Grow* by Amy Lee-Tai
- *Write to Me* by Cynthia Grady, illustrated by Amiko Hirao

CHAPTER BOOKS

- *Displacement* by Kiku Hughes
- *Farewell to Manzanar* by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston
- *The Invisible Thread* by Yoshiko Uchida
- *A Place to Belong* by Cynthia Kadohata
- *Red Berries, Blue Sky, White Clouds* by Sandra Dallas
- *We Hereby Refuse* by Frank Abe and Tamiko Nimura, illustrated by Ross Ishikawa

ADULT BOOKS

- *The Afterlife is Letting Go* by Brandon Shimoda
- *The Gate of Memory*, edited by Brynn Saito and Brandon Shimoda
- *The Literature of Japanese American Incarceration* Edited by Frank Abe, Floyd Cheung
- *When Can We Go Back to America?* by Susan Kamei
- *When the Emperor was Divine* by Julie Otsuka

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PRAISE FOR SHELL SONG

Brian Niiya, editor of Densho Encyclopedia

Building on family lore and extensive historical research, Sharon Fujimoto-Johnson has crafted a moving and beautifully illustrated story based on the World War II incarceration of her Japanese American grandfather in Hawai'i along with the echoes of that story that she learned about in childhood and that continue to the present day. Both a story of historical memory and family through generations and a cautionary tale, SHELL SONG will be enjoyed by children and by their parents and grandparents alike.

Teresa Robeson, award-winning children's book author

With spare, lyrical prose, Sharon Fujimoto-Johnson recounts the ordeal her grandfather and his family went through during the unjust and brutal treatment of Americans of Japanese heritage during the Second World War. This poignant story simultaneously spotlights both pain and the joys of an ordinary family forced to endure extraordinary hardships without being didactic or melodramatic. The writing sings like the songs of the shells while the pastel-colored illustrations soften the harsh reality of the situation. It is a perfect book to ease kids—and adults—into learning more about this tragic episode of American history.

Eric K. Yamamoto, Fred T. Korematsu Professor of Law and Social Justice (emeritus), University of Hawai'i

Sometimes a child's story touches the struggles and joys of the young. Other times it also profoundly illuminates something larger. Sharon Fujimoto-Johnson's magnificent book SHELL SONG tells of children listening to the echoes of grandfather's sea shells from Hawai'i. It deftly locates grandfather's long-ago discovery of those shells in a desolate WWII "US government built prison camp for innocent Japanese Americans." And it shines a gentle yet bright light on what happened when "There was no justice. Not for my grandfather. Not for any Japanese Americans." A poignant, loving story for children, for us all.

Susan Kamei, author of *When Can We Go Back to America?*

Sharon Fujimoto-Johnson's *Shell Song* sheds a much-needed light on the unjust incarceration of persons of Japanese ancestry in Hawai'i during World War II. Her tender prose and beautiful art are fitting tributes to the resilience of the Japanese American incarcerated and serve to invite readers to join in a collective healing from this historic travesty of justice.



Duncan Ryuken Williams

Curator of the Ireicho exhibit at the Japanese American National Museum

Seashells carry a family's story of hope in the midst and aftermath of injustice, resounding for all of us in Fujimoto-Johnson's moving illustrations.



Artwork from SHELL SONG