

# Culture Notes

## *A Place to Belong*

by Cynthia Kadohata  
Illustrated by Julia Kuo

**Simon & Schuster, 2019**

**Fiction, set in Japan**

**2019 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/Middle School Literature**

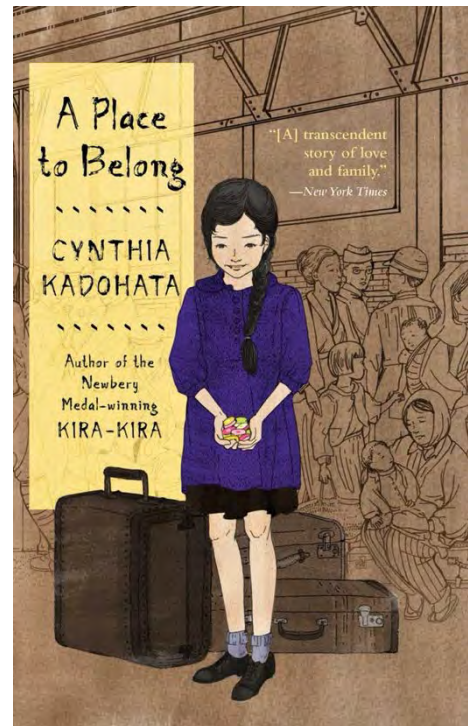
In the opening pages of *A Place to Belong*, the author introduces the reader to Hanako (pronounced: HA-nah-koh) and her little brother Akira (pronounced: AH-key-rah) as they board a ship leaving the United States to sail to Japan. Hanako, Akira, and their parents had been living in Los Angeles on December 7, 1941, when Japanese planes attacked the U.S. fleet anchored in Pearl Harbor. Not long after, their family was incarcerated in Japanese relocation camps as enemies and potential saboteurs. During this period, Hanako's parents renounced their American citizenship and with it their right to live in the United States. As a result, in 1945 the whole family is being deported to Japan.

Climbing aboard the ship and looking for their bunks, Akira says to his older sister, "Hanako, I'm afraid. Why do we have to go on this ship?"

"Because we don't belong in America anymore," she says as she dusts herself off.

"I think I *do*. I do belong in America," Akira counters.

In this lengthy text written for middle school students, author Cynthia Kadohata tells the story of Hanako, Akira, and their parents as they leave the only home the children have known to go to Japan and live with their grandparents. They arrive to discover a nation overwhelmed by poverty and destruction. The children meet grandparents who love them dearly but have barely enough food to feed themselves. Communication between grandparents and grandchildren is conducted at first in stilted English, but eventually a powerful loving relationship develops between them. In the larger community, however, conditions are more complicated. Poor orphans view the Americans as rich outsiders and steal from them. New schoolmates tease Hanako and Akira because of their poor Japanese language skills and their American clothing. Before





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long, Hanako's parents realize they made a big mistake by returning to Japan, and they seek the long-distance assistance of an American lawyer to help them recover their citizenship and return to the United States. Frustrated in their attempts, Hanako's parents decide at the end of the story that if their children are to have any hope of succeeding in life, Hanako and Akira must return to California to live with their aunt, even if they will face racism. (Since they were both born in the United States they hold American citizenship.) The parents, meanwhile, will remain in Japan while they continue to fight for the same right to return. Hanako and Akira are excited to go back to the U.S. but heartbroken at leaving their parents and the grandparents they have grown to love. Throughout the book, the entire family struggles to find "a place to belong."

While many American students are familiar with the Japanese relocation camps, the vast majority are unaware of the plight of those who returned to Japan. In 1944, Congress passed the Renunciation Act, which President Roosevelt quickly signed into law. By so doing, lawmakers hoped Japanese American internees would renounce their citizenship, thereby allowing immigration officials to deport them to Japan. In the end, 5,589 Japanese Americans officially renounced their citizenship, most coming from the Tule Lake Internment Camp (5,461) in California. While it is impossible to determine the motivations of each of these renunciants, the vast majority had been forcibly removed from their homes, stripped of their employment, incarcerated, and assumed to be a danger to society. It is no wonder so many felt they had no future in the United States and willingly renounced their citizenship. Others, such as Minoru Kiyota, renounced his citizenship "to express my fury toward the government of the United States" for his treatment during the war (Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, pg. 192).

Following the war, U.S. attorney Wayne Collins filed a class-action lawsuit to allow all renunciants to reobtain U.S. citizenship. He argued that since their decision to return to Japan was made under duress, their citizenship should be restored. When the class-action suit failed, Collins proceeded to file individual affidavits on behalf of each affected individual. The first successful restoration of citizenship came in 1951. The last was in 1968.



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Because these details are little known, *A Place to Belong* is a valuable resource in the classroom. Furthermore, it touches on themes relevant to students in the twenty-first century. Many students come from immigrant families with emotional and family ties in multiple countries, and many of them are increasingly fearful for their safety in American society. Some Americans clamor to build a wall to “protect” U.S. borders. Some decry the arrival of “kung flu.” Still others engage in acts of violence, as we have seen in the 2021 mass shooting targeting Asian Americans in Atlanta. According to a 2022 AAPI survey, nearly a third of Asian Americans report having experienced a hate crime during 2021 (<http://aapidata.com/blog/year-after-atlanta/>).

Today we celebrate the loyalty and self-sacrifice of many of these same Japanese Americans who were interned during the war. Approximately 30,000 volunteered to serve in the U.S. Armed Forces. The 442nd Infantry Regiment, which consisted almost entirely of Japanese Americans, became the most decorated unit in U.S. military history. Recognizing the bravery and loyalty of these Japanese Americans and admitting the government’s moral failings in unlawfully sending so many to relocation camps, in 1988 President Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act, which granted reparations to Japanese Americans who had been interned. *A Place to Belong* reminds us of another group of Japanese Americans who made extremely difficult and brave choices as they left their adopted homeland and sought to start a new life in war-ravaged Japan.

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