In one form or another, many of the stories in Section One of *Secret Identities* spring forth from the seminal event of 20th century American history: World War II. These stories use the prism of the superhero genre to explore the particular effect of the “War to End All Wars” on Americans of Asian descent. Spanning both the past and the present, they tackle topics that include the wartime incarceration of innocent Japanese Americans, the heroism of nisei (U.S.-born Japanese American) soldiers, the devastating atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the long legacy of Asian American soldiers of conscience.

**9066, pg. 25**

*Story by: Jonathan Tsuei; Art by: Jerry Ma*

In this short story, an unidentified superhero, referred to simply as the “Nisei Kid,” finds himself interned along with his fellow Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor is attacked. Despite his high-profile status as a costumed crusader and his proven commitment to truth, justice and the “American Way,” he nevertheless finds himself singled out by his peers and imprisoned alongside tens of thousands of other innocent American citizens, solely because of his ethnicity. “9066” is a meditation on the fragility of civil rights and liberties in a time of fear and uncertainty, and the injustice of judging character based solely on race, ethnicity, national origin or ancestry.

The title is taken from the number of the executive order that called for the “relocation” of Japanese Americans to guarded camps inland. United States Executive Order 9066 was signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on February 19, 1942. This order officially declared areas of the United States—primarily on the West Coast—as “military areas” and authorized the Secretary of War and military commanders to remove “any or all persons” who presented an alleged threat to security. Japanese American residents and citizens were most affected by this order; nearly 120,000 were forcibly removed from their homes and sent to distant inland internment camps.

**Discussion Questions**

1. The protagonist refers to himself as “just a Nisei kid,” but otherwise goes unidentified. Why do you think the creators decided not to name the hero of this story?
2. What difficulties, if any, do you think might have existed for a superhero of Asian descent in pre-WWII America even prior to December 7, 1941, the day that Pearl Harbor “changed everything”?
3. The “Nisei Kid” says he knows he can defeat the other heroes who come to “arrest” him, yet he refrains. Why do you think he surrenders to the authorities instead of fighting back?
4. Of the nearly 120,000 interned, more than 60% were nisei—second-generation Japanese Americans—or sansei, third-generation Japanese Americans. Why is this fact significant?
5. Compare and contrast the treatment of Japanese Americans after the attack on Pearl Harbor to the treatment of Arab and Muslim Americans in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001.
Heroes Without a Country, pg. 29
Story by: Daniel Jai Lee
Art by: Vince Sunico

“Heroes without a Country” follows a superhuman taskforce called the Sunset Squad as they trek across Germany in order to rescue Samson, a Jewish American superhero captured by the Nazis. Modeled after the legendary nisei 100th Battalion/442nd Regimental Combat Team, the members of the Sunset Squad are Japanese American super-soldiers assembled under the command of Captain Matt Kim—a character inspired by real-life 100th Battalion hero Colonel Young Oak Kim (the unit’s sole Korean American soldier). Along the way, the Squad battles Hitler’s own team of metahumans, witness the unspeakable horrors of war and ponder what it means to fight and die for a country that treats them and their families as second-class citizens.

The 100th Battalion/442nd Infantry Regimental Combat Team was an all-Asian American military unit made up almost exclusively of nisei, second-generation Japanese American soldiers who had volunteered for service in order to prove their community’s loyalty to the nation of their birth—even as their families and friends were unjustly imprisoned behind barbed wire back home. They fought primarily in the European theater, displaying such bravery and self-sacrifice that they remain today the most highly decorated military unit in the history of the United States Armed Forces. Their members earned a staggering 21 Medals of Honor, and suffered so many combat injuries that they were subsequently nicknamed “The Purple Heart Battalion.”

Colonel Young Oak Kim became the most decorated soldier in the 100th/442nd, despite being one of the few non-Japanese among its ranks. In fact, after being assigned to the unit, he was offered a transfer out, only to refuse, declaring “there is no Japanese nor Korean...we’re all Americans and we’re fighting for the same cause.” Kim’s courage won him 19 medals, including the Distinguished Service Cross, a Silver Star, two Bronze Stars and three Purple Hearts. During the Korean War, Kim became the first person of color in U.S. history to command an Army combat battalion.

Discussion Questions
1. The soldiers of Sunset Squad fight for their country despite the treatment of their families back home—mirroring the decision of the real-life men of the 100th/442nd. Would you have made the same decision?
2. A number of Japanese Americans who were conscripted to serve during WWII refused to do so because of a controversial questionnaire whose questions implied allegiance to a country other than their own. In refusing to agree to these questions, one asking if they were willing to serve, the other asking them to forswear their loyalty to the “Japanese Emperor.” These men were known as “No-No Boys.” If you were in these men’s shoes, how would you respond to the call to serve?
"The Hibakusha" follows a group of young people with superhuman abilities—descendants of the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and thus, literal "Children of the Atom." Under the supervision of a secret U.S. government agency tasked to the Department of Energy, the "A.P.s" (short for "Atomic Progeny") are being trained to learn how to control their unusual talents—while also being closely watched by mysterious third-party forces, represented by the shadowy figure known simply as Mishira (Japanese for "stranger").

The Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the sites of the only nuclear attacks in the history of the world. Convinced that Japan would not soon surrender due to losses from any conventional form of assault, and determined to bring the bloody and costly war to an abrupt end, U.S. President Harry S. Truman issued executive orders to use nuclear weapons on these two populous cities. The bomb called "Little Boy" was deployed over Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, and "Fat Man" was detonated over Nagasaki three days later, on August 9. The bombs killed over 100,000 people instantly; by the end of 1945, over 220,000, nearly all civilians, had died from injuries or illness attributed to the attacks.

The total number of people who suffered illness or death from the bombs (through direct exposure to the blast or radiation or indirectly as affected descendants of those exposed) is unknown, but those designated by Japanese law as "hibakusha" (literally, "explosion-affected people") include: Those who were within 2km of the hypocenters of the bombs; who were within 2km of the hypocenters within two weeks of the bombings; who were exposed to radiation from fallout; or who were babies carried by pregnant women in any of these categories. As of August 2008, the death tolls of hibakusha stand at 258,310 for Hiroshima and 145,984 for Nagasaki.

The bombs succeeded in ending the war: Six days after the destruction of Nagasaki, Japan surrendered and declared an end to hostilities.

**Discussion Questions**

1. In the story, the phrase shikata ga nai ("it can’t be helped") is repeated several times. What does this phrase imply?
2. History has noted that Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer, who led the Manhattan Project that developed the atomic bomb, instantly regretted its creation. How did the invention of nuclear weapons forever alter the ways wars are fought and conflicts are settled?
3. Knowing the consequences and casualties that resulted, do you believe the Hiroshima and Nagasaki attacks were justified? Why or why not?
The Citizen, pg. 56
Story by: Greg Pak
Art by: Bernard Chang

This story follows Sgt. Frank Murakawa, an enlistee from the Arizona National Guard who, due to exposure to unknown chemicals during a freak training accident, has been endowed with amazing abilities—turning him into the superpowered patriot known as The Citizen. Believing himself to be employed by “the country, not the government,” Murakawa finds himself branded a traitor and summarily incarcerated after attempting to arrest the former President of the United States for war crimes. However, just hours into his administration, the new Commander-in-Chief releases him, telling him he needs help unwinding an even greater conspiracy.

The character of Frank Murakawa represents an interesting confluence in American history: The Asian American soldier of conscience. The phrase “soldier of conscience” refers to military men who have chosen to speak out about misconduct or to refuse orders they consider breaches of moral or ethical code. Those who make such a decision to disobey or break discipline face harsh consequences, including isolation or harassment from fellow soldiers and even court-martial, despite the fact that the Nuremberg principles adopted after World War II require soldiers to refuse orders they believe to be illegal.

In recent years, the Asian American community has had a disproportionate number of high-profile soldiers of conscience.

June 2003: Army Chief of Staff Gen. Eric Shinseki retired after contradicting the Secretary of Defense, stating a far higher estimate for troops needed to secure Iraq than Secretary Donald Rumsfeld had been asserting.

September 2003: Army chaplain Capt. James Yee was charged with sedition, among other offenses, in the course of ministering to detainees at Guantanamo.

January 2006: Maj. Gen. Antonio Taguba was asked to retire after authoring an extremely critical report on prisoner abuse at the Abu Ghraib facility in Iraq.

June 2006: Army 1st Lt. Ehren Watada was court-martialed after refusing to participate in the “illegal war” in Iraq.

Meanwhile, in 2009, two soldiers stood up to openly protest the military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy barring gays and lesbians from serving in the armed forces—and both happened to be Asian American: 2nd Lt. Sandy Tsao and Lt. Dan Choi.

The common inspiration cited by many of these soldiers: A commitment to justice shaped by the experiences of Asian Americans during World War II—notably the heroism of those who stood up for their ideals, both in fighting and in refusing to fight.

Discussion Questions

1. From the details present in the story, what can you infer about Murakawa’s character? Cite examples from the text.
2. Why do you think the current President is determined to free The Citizen considering the crime he committed against the former president?
3. Compare Murakawa’s attempt to “arrest [the president] for war crimes” to the actions of one of the soldiers noted above: General Eric Shinseki, Major General Anthony Taguba, Captain James Yee, First Lieutenant Ehren Watada.
4. Why do you think so many high-profile “soldiers of conscience” are Asian American?
SECTION ONE: Resources and Further Reading

Books


Executive Order 9066: The Internment of 110,000 Japanese Americans / Maisie & Richard Conrat ; with an original introduction by Edison Uno ; and an original epilogue by Tom C. Clark ; photographs by Dorothea Lange... New ed. [Los Angeles, Calif.] : University of California, Los Angeles, Asian American Studies Center, c1992.


Articles


Lesson Plan | “9066” + WWII Japanese American Internment

Background:
When films, stories, or books discuss American involvement in World War II, the topics typically include the attack on Pearl Harbor, the storming of the beaches of Normandy and the dropping of atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, one event often gets overlooked in the history books: the forced relocation and incarceration of Japanese Americans by official act of the United States government. This wartime action, directed by Executive Order of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and carried out by the U.S. military, led to nearly 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent being displaced from their homes and brought under guard to 10 relocation camps scattered throughout the western part of the country.

Rationale:
The story “9066” in Secret Identities reflects on this dark period in American history through the lens of the superhero story. In it, an unnamed crimefighter, who refers to himself self-deprecatingly as “just a Nisei kid flying by the seat of his pants,” is one of a number of specially talented individuals who have donned costume to defend justice and protect the nation in an era corresponding to the “Golden Age” of comic book history, the early to mid 1930s. It is implied, but not stated that he is the first Asian American to “don the mask” of the superhero—or at least the first to win the acceptance of his peers and the American public.

After the events of December 7, 1941, however, he is singled out by his contemporaries and imprisoned alongside hundreds of thousands of other Japanese Americans. Despite his heroism and commitment to truth, justice, and the American way, the loyalty of the “Nisei Kid” remains suspect because of his ethnicity.

Grade Levels: Middle School and High School

Objective:
The student will be able to demonstrate knowledge of the major causes and effects of American involvement in World War II; describe the impact of World War II on the home front; analyze the factors that led to the internment of Japanese Americans; research and describe the characteristics of life at an internment camp.

Time Allotted: Depending on class length. One 90 minute class or two 45 minute classes.

Vocabulary: nisei, surrender, loyalties, consistently, internment

Make the Connection:
The story “9066” follows in the long comic book tradition of inserting superheroes into the events of American history. During the 1930s and 1940s, also known as the “Golden Age” of comic books, it was common to see heroes such as Superman and Captain America battling Nazis alongside the Allies. Rather than having their fictional superhero join the fight against the Axis forces, the creators of “9066” cast their hero as a victim of his own government’s actions. Named after President Roosevelt’s executive order that interned 120,000 Japanese Americans, “9066” shows that even the superpowerful are powerless against the forces of hate and paranoia.
Direct Teaching:
Give the students time to read the story independently (4 pages)—since the story is relatively short, it can be completed at the beginning of the class period. If you have more time allotted for this lesson, you could participate in guided reading during class as well.

Vocabulary Instruction:
Though this lesson is intended for a social studies classroom, it can serve a cross-curricular purpose by introducing students to unfamiliar yet relevant vocabulary. Write the following words on the board:

Nisei, surrender, loyalties, consistently, internment

Before asking students to locate these words in a dictionary, have them write down what they think the words mean using context clues or visual cues from the story.

Then ask the following questions:
1. Why is it significant that the protagonist is considered Nisei? How does that affect the government’s need to intern him and others like him?
2. What is the reason the “Nisei Kid” offers for surrendering to the authorities? What does this say about his attitude regarding the decision?
3. The “Nisei Kid” was a fellow superhero who consistently protected the citizens of the country. Why were his loyalties questioned after Pearl Harbor?
4. What are some synonyms for the word internment?

Extension Activity:
After Executive Order 9066 was signed, the mass relocation of Japanese Americans from the West Coast took place over an eight-month period. Though it was dubbed an “evacuation”—which implies that Japanese Americans were taken away from their homes for their own safety—E.O. 9066 essentially forcibly exiled American citizens in their own country, without due process and with little warning. Many families were only given 24 to 48 hours to prepare for relocation, often being told to take “only what they could carry.” Families were numbered, tagged, and taken to Relocation Camps located in remote and desolate areas of Arizona, Arkansas, California, New Mexico, Utah, and other inland states; the presence of armed guards and barbed wire made the internment camps resemble prisons. Despite these unbearable living arrangements, many families did their best to maintain some semblance of normalcy, setting up schools and churches and other community institutions. In particular, baseball and other sports leagues proved to be an important means by which interned Japanese Americans passed the time and preserved a sense of dignity. Assignment: Imagine that you’re a child living in one of the internment camps during World War II who looks up to the “Nisei Kid.” Write a one-page letter to your best friend back home describing your life in the camps, and discussing how it feels to see your hero subjected to the same conditions. Be sure to include details and imagery when describing your environment.

Further Discussion:
In late 1944, the Supreme Court determined that the forced detainment of American citizens was unconstitutional, and over the course of 1945, most internees were reintegrated into society. Though they were given back their freedom, the years of internment had taken its toll. Families were stressed and friendships broken; loss of property, businesses, and homes as a result of internment ravaged Japanese American communities throughout the West Coast. Though many communities were rebuilt over time, official redress for monetary and psychological damages did not come for another four decades, when President Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which authorized repayment for damages inflicted on the victims of Japanese American internment. A possible further discussion topic: Compare and contrast the treatment of Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor with the treatment of Arab and Muslim Americans in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001. What are the similarities and differences? Do facilities like Guantanamo Bay echo the camps of Manzanar and Tule Lake?