

Novels make History come alive

Stories with Canadian connections focus on WWII

By ELAINE KALMAN NAVES, The Gazette February 18, 2012



In 1942, Japanese Canadians living within 165 kilometres of Canada's Pacific coast were forced to relocate to camps in the interior of British Columbia. Photograph by: Library and Archives Canada C046355, Library and Archives Canada

Betrayal, persecution, brutality, hunger - it must be a challenge for a writer to dramatize the horrors of war for children. All three of these excellent novels from Scholastic Canada target readers in the 8-to-12 age range. All three have fictional protagonists, but are based on carefully researched historical events.

Each presents a facet of the Second World War as seen by a young first-person narrator. *Torn Apart* and *Behind Enemy Lines* are attractively designed hard covers in the *Dear Canada* and *I Am Canada* series respectively, the first aimed at girls, the other at boys. *Making Bombs for Hitler* is a paperback sequel to *Stolen Child*, an earlier war story by its author, Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch. All of them have a Canadian connection.

For most Canadian readers, the most recognizable of these accounts will be Susan Aihoshi's *Torn Apart*, which examines the evacuation and displacement of Japanese Canadians from the west coast to internment camps in the B.C. interior beginning in 1942. But though the outlines of the story may seem sadly familiar, they are chilling when revisited in the diary of 12-year-old Mary Kobayashi.

Mary begins her account in May 1941, when - despite the fact that Canada is at war in Europe - her life on Vancouver's Oxford St. revolves around her family, best friends, school, Girl Guide meetings and grass-hockey games.

But beneath this tranquil ordinariness lies an undercurrent of anxiety. Why are young Japanese Canadian men who try to enlist turned down? Why don't Japanese Canadians have the vote? Why in B.C. are they obliged to have an identity card? And why does her classmate Billy Foster torment her with racist gestures involving slant eyes?

These troubling undercurrents turn into full blown fear when Japanese forces attack Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7. Mary writes at the end of that day, "The war has finally become real in a way it never was before."

Measures directed at Japanese Canadians begin immediately. Though Mary's family consider themselves "100 per cent Canadian," Papa is told to stay away from work, Mama's job at a Japanese-Canadian newspaper is eliminated, and the term "enemy alien" comes into general usage. Step by incremental step, a family is divided and scattered, with the first to be cast out being the most vulnerable: Mary's grandfather exiled to a road camp in the Rockies. "I can barely believe this. How can it be happening . in my own city and my own country?"

In *Making Bombs for Hitler*, a Ukrainian woman warns 8-year-old Lida in the cattle car transporting her to slavery in Germany, "Be useful or they will kill you."

Lida's story dramatizes the little-known story of slave raids made by Nazi forces in the Soviet Union during the war. Young people were rounded up and used for forced labour in appalling conditions. Many were worked or starved to death; some were used in medical experiments.

From the Bukovina region of Ukraine, Lida is all alone in the world. Her mother was murdered by Nazis as she tried to help Jews, her father was killed by the Soviets. Lida is ripped away from her younger sister, whose story is told in the earlier novel, *Stolen Child*.

Lida learns to lie to protect herself, to say she is much older than she looks. But, alongside shrewdness, she has other sources of strength. She remembers her mother's teaching that "You can make beauty anywhere." And so she takes pains to stitch her work badge, the one that marks her in the eyes of her masters as a subhuman from Ukraine. Her talent with a needle saves her on more than one occasion, but her survival instinct doesn't blunt her conscience. In a brave attempt to shield a Jewish child, she gives up her one precious keepsake, an iron crucifix.

Making Bombs for Hitler is a sensitively written page turner that teaches lessons in courage, faith, ingenuity and hard work. Lida's odyssey brings her to the edge of death and, after a protracted struggle, immigration to Canada. It is an important story, but one requiring much adult guidance, even for an older age group than the 9-to-12 bracket for which it is recommended.

Carol Matas dedicates *Behind Enemy Lines* to "the 168 Allied airmen shot down and sent to Buchenwald, and to all the other airmen to whom we owe our freedom." The novel begins with a nail-biting description of the downing of 18-year-old Winnipeg native Sam Frederiksen's bomber over occupied France. But what starts as a rip-roaring adventure soon becomes a sobering account of strength in the face of adversity that encompasses the workings of the French Resistance and illuminates the Holocaust from a fresh angle. According to the Geneva Convention, Sam and his crew ought to have been sent to a POW camp. Instead they end up in a savage Parisian prison from where they are shipped to the Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany. Fortitude, a sense of humour and memories of home keep Sam alive. As with the two other books under discussion, the subject matter is difficult but ultimately uplifting.

Elaine Kalman Naves's documentaries about photographer William Notman will air on CBC Ideas on Feb. 22 and 23 at 9:05 p.m., FM 88.5. ElaineKalmanNaves.com

Torn Apart: The Internment Diary of Mary Kobayashi By Susan Aihoshi Scholastic, 209 pages, \$16.95

Behind Enemy Lines World War II: Sam Frederiksen Nazi-Occupied Europe, 1944 By Carol Matas Scholastic, 200 pages, \$14.99

Making Bombs for Hitler By Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch Scholastic, 186 pages, \$8.99

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