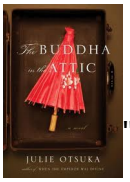
Buddha in the Attic and Narrative Mode



"On the boat we were mostly virgins" begins Julie Otsuka's gem of a book, *The Buddha in the Attic*. One of the noticeable things from that first sentence is the unique narrative mode. The whole book is written in the first person plural style. This type of narration can be awkward -- most fiction is written in either first person or third person. Convention can be comforting, we know immediately how to read the story and relate to those characters. In first person plural, the story is told from the group's perspective, and with no main character, the rules are different.

Otsuka said in an interview that she wanted to tell the story of Japanese picture brides -- not just one bride, but that as a group. And in this case, the narrative mode makes perfect sense. Between 1908 and the 1920s, thousands of young Japanese women came over to the United States after an arranged marriage agreement. Instead of focusing on one story, this book introduces the reader to many stories, some devastatingly sad, some happier, but all of them are sympathetic. And by not focusing on just one story, we read the book with a fuller picture and are moved by their collective experiences and struggles. The stories begin on the boat, and follow them through marriage, manual labor, child raising and the heart wrenching internment following the attacks on Pearl Harbor. I can imagine that this book might appeal to a wide range of fiction readers -- fans of historical fiction, women's fiction, immigrant stories, Asian-American experiences, World War II home front, and readers of fiction set in California and the West.

With a smaller set of possible readership, I would also suggest *Then We Came to the End* by Joshua Ferris. This is a completely different type of book but is also told from the first person plural perspective. In this case, the group of people are office employees at an unnamed company in Chicago, all of whom are worried about the constant layoffs. This novel might not have the wide ranging appeal like *The Buddha in the Attic*, but is both hysterically funny and also poignant. I would recommend this to those who are drawn to creative narrative structures and anyone who has worked in an office setting. Think of a literary and less slapstick version of The Office tv show.

If you've never thought about narrative mode before, I hope you will in whatever you might be reading next!

For the Love of Reading Information, Answers & Reviews Fiction Historical Marriage The Buddha in the attic World War II

Posted by Sarah B. on Oct 17, 2012

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