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Reader Resources

When the Emperor Was Divine

by Julie Otsuka



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Preface

🔊 Indicates interviews with the author and experts on this book. Internet access is required for this content.

Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine* follows one Japanese family uprooted from its Berkeley home after the start of World War II. After being delivered to a racetrack in Utah, they are forcibly relocated to an internment camp. They spend two harrowing years there before returning to a home far less welcoming than it was before the war. Using five distinct but intertwined perspectives, Otsuka's graceful prose evokes the family's range of responses to internment. Culminating in a final brief and bitter chapter, Otsuka's novel serves as a requiem for moral and civic decency in times of strife and fragmentation.



“Mostly though, they waited. For the mail. For the news. For the bells. For breakfast and lunch and dinner. For one day to be over and the next day to begin.”

What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



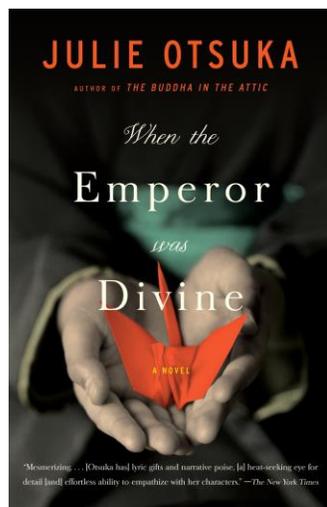
About the Book

Introduction to the Novel

It all began with a sign. Posted on telephone poles, park benches, community centers, and a Woolworth's, Executive Order No. 9066—issued by President Franklin D. Roosevelt—sought to prevent “espionage and sabotage” by citizens of Japanese descent in the wake of the 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor. Japanese Americans were arrested, rounded up, and transported to detention centers across the United States, where in some cases they were held for several years.

This sign, introduced in the first line of Otsuka's novel *When the Emperor Was Divine*, prompts “the woman” to begin packing important belongings. After her children return from school and work quietly on their homework, the woman tells them that tomorrow they “will be going on a trip.” That trip will take them from a comfortable existence at their home in Berkeley, California, to a sterile and uncomfortable internment site in Topaz, Utah, “a city of tar-paper barracks behind a barbed-wire fence on a dusty alkaline plain high up in the desert.”

Otsuka's novel unfolds in five different but interconnected narrative perspectives, and moves hauntingly through the family's internment experience in the voices of the mother, daughter, son, and father. The woman and her children recount, in sober detail, the daily events of their journey to—and time in—Topaz, where besides the internees, their barracks, and the soldiers, there was “only the wind and the dust and the hot burning sand.”



After the war, the family is permitted to return home. But they return to a neighborhood neither familiar nor hospitable. Their home has been vandalized, their neighbors are at best aloof or at worst hostile, and their sense of place in America is forever changed.

Though the novel tells a powerful story of the fear and racism that led to exile and alienation, Otsuka weaves a compelling narrative full of life, depth, and character. *When the Emperor Was Divine* not only invites readers to consider the troubling moral and civic questions that emerge from this period in American history but also offers a tale that is both incredibly poignant and fully human.



California House (Courtesy of the Otsuka family)

Major Characters in the Novel

The woman

Following her husband's arrest by the FBI after Pearl Harbor, the woman is faced with abandoning her family's comfortable home and abruptly becomes sole caregiver of her two children. With a sense of both resignation and resolution, she manages to hold her family together throughout their forced internment.

🔊 To listen to Julie Otsuka talk about the characters' namelessness, and to writer Maureen Howard talk about the animals in the novel visit

<http://www.neabigread.org/books/whentheemperorwasdivine/readers-guide/#characters>



Julie Otsuka's mother
(Courtesy of the Otsuka family)

The girl

A child of ten when the story begins, the girl's growing sense of the hard realities of the family's situation stands in sharp contrast to her brother's innocence. Although she wears Mary Janes, owns a doll from the Sears catalog, and enjoys black licorice and Dorothy Lamour, this sense of her American identity, as well as her heritage, will be challenged by the novel's events.

🔊 To listen to Julie Otsuka and to writer Maureen Howard talk about the girl visit

<http://www.neabigread.org/books/whentheemperorwasdivine/readers-guide/#girl>

The boy

An eight-year old with a child's natural instincts to make the best of any situation, the boy struggles with the absence of his father, whom he sees everywhere, even in his dreams. He passes the time playing cops and robbers and war, and interests himself in the radio and magazine accounts of the conflict overseas, but his father's absence proves a deep sadness in his life.

🔊 To listen to writer Maureen Howard and to Julie Otsuka talk about the boy visit

<http://www.neabigread.org/books/whentheemperorwasdivine/readers-guide/#boy>

The father

Arrested and sent away prior to the opening of the novel, the father's presence through much of the story is seen at a distance through his letters to his wife and his children. After his extended detention at the Lordsburg Facility in New Mexico, he returns home to his family a hollow man. His narration in the novel surfaces angrily in the final chapter titled "Confession."

🔊 To listen to Julie Otsuka and to writer Maureen Howard talk about the father visit

<http://www.neabigread.org/books/whentheemperorwasdivine/readers-guide/#father>

About the Author

Julie Otsuka (b. 1962)

Julie Otsuka was born in Palo Alto, California, in 1962 to parents of Japanese descent. Her father, an *Issei* or Japanese immigrant, was an aerospace engineer. Her mother, a *Nisei* or second-generation Japanese American, was a laboratory technician before Julie's birth.

Otsuka excelled in school, and eventually moved east for college. In 1984 she earned her Bachelor of Arts degree at Yale University. Through her early 20s she studied to be a painter, but decided instead, after suffering a self-described "creative breakdown," to turn her attention to another art form: writing.

In New York City the seeds of a highly successful career were planted when she enrolled in a writing workshop. Otsuka earned her MFA in writing from Columbia University in 1999. Part of her MFA thesis became the first two chapters of her novel *When the Emperor Was Divine*, published in 2002.

Otsuka's family history figures prominently in the novel. A day after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, her grandfather was arrested by the FBI on suspicion of being a Japanese spy. Her mother, grandmother, and uncle were subsequently interned at a camp in Topaz, Utah. Otsuka drew on both research and personal experience to craft this debut novel, which won the American Library Association's Alex Award and the Asian American Literary Award in 2003. *Emperor* has been assigned to incoming freshmen at more than 45 colleges and universities.



Julie Otsuka. Copyright Robert Bessoir.



Julie Otsuka's mother and grandmother (Courtesy of the Otsuka family)

🔊 To listen to Julie Otsuka talk about writing *When the Emperor Was Divine* visit <http://www.neabigread.org/books/whentheemperorwasdivine/readers-guide/about-the-author/#writing>

Published in 2011, Otsuka's second novel—*The Buddha in the Attic*—is based on Japanese "picture brides" who were brought to America to marry men they had never met. In 2012 it won the PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction and was a finalist for the 2011 National Book Award, among other notable recognitions.

The literary journal *Granta* published three of her short stories, "Come, Japanese," "The Children," and "Dien Perdid," the first two of which were excerpts from her novel *The Buddha in the Attic*. Her short story, "Whites," which is another excerpt from *The Buddha in the Attic*, was published by *Harper's*. Her work has also appeared in *The Best American Short Stories 2012* and *The Best American Non-required Reading 2012*.

Otsuka she says she writes every day at her local café.

An Interview with Julie Otsuka

On February 6, 2014, Josephine Reed of the National Endowment for the Arts interviewed Julie Otsuka. Excerpts from their conversation follow.

🔊 To listen to the full interview with Julie Otsuka visit <http://www.neabigread.org/books/whentheemperorwasdivine/readers-guide/about-the-author/#interview>

Josephine Reed: The main characters (who are the narrators of the story) are nameless. Why did you make that choice?

Julie Otsuka: I actually had written an earlier version of the first chapter in which the mother had...a Japanese surname, and as I continued to write about these characters I thought it seemed more effective actually to un-name them. I was really interested in the psychology of the situation. [I] happened to be writing about Japanese Americans but...could have been writing about any ethnic group at any point in history. I feel like there has always been another group that's been expelled and sent away, and I also thought that my characters were people from whom everything had been taken: their liberty, their belongings, their sense of self. And I think that the one thing that you can't take away from someone is their name, so I wanted to leave them just some tiny shred of self so only they and they alone know who they are.

JR: It's also interesting because each character is telling us a different segment of the story.

JO: [T]he daughter is right on the cusp of adolescence and I think she's in a semi-rebellious phase, even if she happens to be in an internment camp; she's a very kind of feisty girl. And the boy is a little younger, he's seven when the novel starts; and he's a little bit too young to understand what's going on. He's a very dreamy child and very much a magical thinker and he thinks in the way that children often do that everything is his fault, that everyone is being sent away because he's done something wrong.... And even if he's in a camp in the middle of the desert for three and a half years, I feel children have this sense of wonder and connection to nature. He's still very compelled by the natural world around him, by the scorpions, by lizards, by snakes, by turtles just in the way that children are. And so it's not an utterly bleak and devastating experience, although in many ways it is, but I feel like there are these kind of moment spots of color and he's just—he's very innocent and he...makes up stories about why he is where he is.



Julie Otsuka's mother and grandfather (Courtesy of the Otsuka family)

[T]he point of view of the father is kind of held back throughout the entire novel. He's just this missing presence who we see glimpses of through the other characters, their memories of the father, their dreams of the father. And when we finally see him at the end of the novel, when he's reunited with the family, he's not the man that...his wife and children remember. He's a very bitter, angry man and clearly something has happened to him while

he's been away and detained but we don't know exactly what. So there's this outburst of anger at the very end of the novel which again came to me as a surprise...[but] looking back I think the novel's just a very slow, simmering buildup of nerves; there's all this tension that's built up. And throughout [the mother's] emotions are very, very deeply buried. On the surface she tries to remain very calm for the sake of the children but...there has to be a release to that

tension somewhere and I feel like there is at the end of the novel with the father's angry rant.

JR: In the chapter where the family comes home, part of what you explore is the way they're coming to grips with their racial identity. In that chapter, they're very much rejecting things that are Japanese.

JO: [T]hey were ashamed and also they're children. They still don't quite understand, but I think they don't want to be identified with anything that's Japanese. And of course right after Pearl Harbor was bombed, American families were just burning all of their Japanese things. There were bonfires in everyone's backyard. And so they come back and all they want to do—I think all any child wants to do is on some level is just really to fit back in. They don't want to stand out, so they really try to downplay their Japanese-ness as much as they can, and yet they're still seen as being very foreign...by their classmates. But they're determined never to be seen as the enemy again, which, I think, in some way means further rejection of their parents.

JR: The book was published in the year following 9/11, and it has a very particular resonance in that context.

JO: I finished writing the novel in June of 2001, so I had no idea that it would resonate in the way that it has post-9/11 as a sort of cautionary tale about what can happen when the government starts singling out ethnic groups as being the enemy. So, I thought the book, if I were lucky, might be respectfully reviewed as a historical novel. But I think for many, many Japanese Americans, 9/11 just brought back so many memories. It was just all so very, very familiar. You just had a group that overnight becomes the enemy. And I think it brought up a lot of unpleasant memories for many of the older Japanese Americans. You have people being rounded up in secret and sent away to secret detention camps and Guantanamo. I think being a dangerous enemy alien is not that unlike being an enemy combatant. And there are just all these eerie parallels, and I always thought while writing the novel that this could never happen again, but it just seems like in so many ways we never learn from history.... I've been traveling the country for years and speaking to many young people about the camps, but a lot of them have not heard about the camps still. I think it's not something that's included in most American history books, and so some of them are surprised...they'll say, "This is a work of fiction, right? It didn't really happen." I'll have to explain that, yes, it is a work of fiction, but it is based on a very big and often omitted historical truth.

JR: And it was very moving in the period after 9/11, because as you say, Japanese Americans tend not to speak

very often about the camps and their experiences, but many, many spoke up right after 9/11.

JO: They did, and many reached out to Arab American, Muslim American groups, too, and I think it's very hard for Japanese Americans to speak up and assert themselves, especially Japanese Americans of that generation. I think it was a very important thing for them to do, to reach out and to say, "You are not alone," and just to be a living lesson in history on what can go wrong.

Historical and Literary Context

The Life and Times of Julie Otsuka

1940s

- 1941: Japan attacks Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, December 7.
- 1941: FBI arrests Otsuka's grandfather as spy, December 8.
- 1942: President Roosevelt issues Executive Order 9066, authorizes internment, February 19.
- 1942: Otsuka's mother and family travel to Topaz Internment Camp.
- 1944: In *Korematsu v. United States*, Supreme Court rules against Japanese American man who refused to leave his home for internment camp.
- 1945: World War II ends in Japan, August 15.
- 1945: Otsuka's family returns to home in Berkeley, California, September 9.

1950s

- 1952: The Immigration and Nationality Act liberalizes immigration from Asia.
- 1952: Japanese Americans given the opportunity, for the first time, to become naturalized U.S. citizens.

1960s

- 1962: Otsuka born in California.
- 1962: *USS Arizona* Memorial at Pearl Harbor dedicated.
- 1965: Immigration and Naturalization Act abolishes quotas based on national origin.

1970s

- 1971: Emergency Detention Act of 1950 repealed, removing threat that internment camps could be reactivated.
- 1976: President Gerald Ford rescinds Executive Order 9066.

1980s

- 1981: Otsuka visits Japan for the first time.
- 1988: President Reagan signs Civil Liberties Act, HR 442, with an apology and reparations to Japanese Americans.

1990s

- 1990: President George H.W. Bush proclaims May as Asian Pacific American Heritage Month.

2000s

- 2002: When the Emperor Was Divine published.
- 2007: Topaz Internment Camp designated National Historic Landmark.

2010s

- 2011: *The Buddha in the Attic* published.
- 2011: Otsuka wins PEN/Faulkner award for *The Buddha in the Attic*.

Japanese American Internment Camps

Thousands of Japanese immigrants came to Hawaii and California in the late nineteenth century to work. During the first decade of the twentieth century, almost 130,000 Japanese immigrated to the United States despite longstanding efforts at restricting their entry and widespread discrimination when they arrived.

 To listen to author and scholar Gary Okihiko talk with the NEA's Josephine Reed about the history of Japanese immigration to the U.S. visit <http://www.neabigread.org/books/whentheemperorwasdivine/readers-guide/historical-context/#immigration>

First-generation Japanese immigrants were known as *Issei*; the second generation was called *Nisei*. The Nisei claimed citizenship by birth. Because many Issei were proud of Japanese culture, they tried to impart this heritage to their offspring, which led many in the United States to fear that Japanese Americans were disloyal to their adopted country.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 provoked fears of Japanese invasion and collaboration with “the enemy” by the Issei and Nisei. Congress declared war

on Japan on December 8, 1941. Soon after, the FBI incarcerated thousands of Japanese American men. On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, giving the Secretary of War the right to send both Issei and Nisei to internment camps.

"Military necessity," or fear of sabotage and espionage, was the rationale given for Executive Order 9066. More than 120,000 individuals, many of whom were citizens, were forced to sell their homes, businesses, and belongings. One Japanese American citizen, Fred Korematsu, refused the order to evacuate and took his case to the Supreme Court. By a vote of 6-3, the justices upheld the legality of Executive Order 9066. The order required families to appear at assembly centers for transit to "relocation centers" or internment camps. Camps were located in California, Idaho, Utah, Arizona, Wyoming, Colorado, and Arkansas. Among the most famous ones were Manzanar and Tule Lake in California, and Topaz in Utah.

🔊 To listen to author and scholar Gary Okihiro talk with the NEA's Josephine Reed about Pearl Harbor and its aftermath visit

<http://www.neabigread.org/books/whentheemperorwasdivine/readers-guide/historical-context/#pearlharbor>



Julie Otsuka's family at an assembly center, 1942
(Dorothea Lange/National Archives)

The camps were often in desert areas where it was hot in the summer and cold in the winter. Around the perimeter of the camps were barbed wire fences and guard towers. Soldiers policed the camps. The buildings where internees slept were overcrowded, dusty, and dirty. Cots with thin cotton mattresses were laid out in rows, with little privacy to

be had. Meals were taken in mess halls with long lines for a paltry allotment of food.

Many internees worked for meager wages, typically about \$16 a month. Children were supposed to go to school, but recruiting and retaining teachers was difficult. Sports and libraries provided diversion from daily routines. Boredom and anxiety, however, were constant companions.

For most individuals, an end to the ordeal of internment came as the war wound down in 1944 and 1945. Some internees chose not to return to their homes, wishing to make a fresh start in a new place. Others did return, only to discover that their homes, properties, or businesses had been vandalized or appropriated for non-payment of taxes. The sense of shame from being considered dangerous or disloyal to their adopted land shadowed all those released from the camps. Sometimes these feelings led to depression and suicide; other times, they led to disillusionment and protests over the injustice perpetrated against them.

🔊 To listen to author and scholar Gary Okihiro talk with the NEA's Jo Reed about Japanese Americans' loss of property visit

<http://www.neabigread.org/books/whentheemperorwasdivine/readers-guide/historical-context/#property>

The last internment camp was closed in March 1946. In 1988, President Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act that apologized for the internment, attributing it to racial prejudice and war hysteria. The U.S. government eventually distributed more than \$1.6 billion in reparations to internees and their heirs.

🔊 To listen to author and scholar Gary Okihiro talk about the injustice of internment visit

<http://www.neabigread.org/books/whentheemperorwasdivine/readers-guide/historical-context/#injustice>

Other Works/Adaptations

Otsuka and Her Other Works

In Julie Otsuka's writings, perspective plays an important narrative role. Whether it is the multiple character voices in *When the Emperor Was Divine*, or the first-person plural "we" that both welcomes and implicates the reader in *The Buddha in the Attic*, Otsuka's characters speak with quiet, precise voices that demand to be heard. Because of the historical subject matter of her two novels, and because that subject matter has had limited or faulty treatment in media or fiction, her narrators' acts of speaking "out loud" to the reader should be seen as moral and civic events. Moral, because the narratives encourage readers to consider their relationships with others on the basis of right and wrong; civic, because the narrators force us to consider how fragile our place in our own country could be in times of political or social upheaval.

 To listen to writer Maureen Howard talk about Julie Otsuka's narrative voice visit <http://www.neabigread.org/books/whentheemperorwasdivine/readers-guide/other-works-adaptations/#voice>

Even the order of the perspectives in *Emperor* reinforces this message. The novel moves from a distanced third-person—three chapters told from the perspective of "the woman," "the girl," and "the boy"—to a more personal "we," and then to a still more intimate "I" in the father's final chapter. This movement from the distant to the proximate is both stylistic and prescriptive. It follows a similar path to the intellectual and emotional experience of living history. One graduates from an impersonal series of facts to a closer examination and connection with characters whose faces ultimately emerge not in the sepia tones or black-and-white imagery of a historical photograph, but through the rich coloration offered by a masterful author's paintbrush.

 To listen to Julie Otsuka talk about how her characters speak with different points of view visit <http://www.neabigread.org/books/whentheemperorwasdivine/readers-guide/other-works-adaptations/#pov>

In addition to the immediacy of these character portrayals told in the singular voice, Otsuka's first-person plural holds equal interest for readers. The choral "we," as Michiko Kakutani of the *New York Times* refers to it, of both *Emperor's* fourth chapter and the entirety of *Buddha*, allows Otsuka to express a more universal viewpoint than had she only offered a range of singular narrative perspectives. Otsuka speaks to the simultaneity that this method provided—that many voices could speak as one:

"I wanted to tell everyone's story, and this voice let me weave in these emerging 'I's.... There was something

joyous, almost ecstatic, about the 'we' voice. I think of it being more like a song."
—from an interview in *Poets & Writers*

This chorus offers her novels their specific and powerful civic urgency. America, after all, is a country founded and made special by "we the people."

But as a nation, our greatest strengths and weaknesses are often bound up in how our government has both defined and responded to the "we." Racism, xenophobia, and the treatment of immigrants in times of national stress are betrayals of this relationship, and it is on this particular topic that Otsuka's works are so revelatory.

 To listen to writer Maureen Howard talk about the treatment of immigrants visit <http://www.neabigread.org/books/whentheemperorwasdivine/readers-guide/other-works-adaptations/#immigrants>

Themes of Otsuka's Novels

Otsuka's second novel, *The Buddha in the Attic*, was published to much acclaim in 2011. *Buddha* tells the story of Japanese "picture brides" who sailed to America after World War I for arranged marriages. In a series of linked and parallel narratives, Otsuka's characters share with us their brutal struggles, small joys, and eventual betrayals by the country in which they had worked so hard to make a home.

The Buddha in the Attic and *When the Emperor Was Divine* both are stories about power and the abuse of it. In *Emperor*, the United States government wields the power in ways that damage the rights of its citizens. In *Buddha*, it is the men to whom the brides are promised who steal the women's sense of independence, purpose, and individuality.

In each of these slim but lyrical books, Otsuka examines the effects of this abuse of power on the characters' identities. The internees in *Emperor* are pressed to forsake their Japanese heritage, while the husbands in *Buddha* rob the women of their self-respect and self-identity.

At the heart of both novels are beautifully written stories that engage readers on the themes of race, identity, and freedom. Otsuka's concern with moral and civic issues is translated compellingly by characters whose personal and colorful voices have become indispensable testimonials for all Americans to hear.

 To listen to writer Maureen Howard talk about why Julie Otsuka writes visit <http://www.neabigread.org/books/whentheemperorwasdivine/readers-guide/other-works-adaptations/#writing>

Discussion Questions

1. Each but the final chapter of *Emperor* begins with an image. Otsuka has said that her idea for the novel actually began with one: the image of the mother standing in front of the evacuation order. What do you imagine was going through the woman's mind when she read this evacuation order?
2. What possible reasons might Otsuka have had in depicting in such detail the images of Americana (Woolworths, the YMCA, Lundy's Hardware, etc.) in the first chapter?
3. What do you think about the United States government's choice of words like "evacuated," "assembly center," or "relocation center" to describe the internment camps?
4. "*Shikata ga nai*" is a phrase in Japanese that means "it cannot be helped now." Does this phrase influence the mother's or father's behavior in the novel? What other factors might explain their behavior?
5. The boy inscribes on his pet tortoise's shell his family's identification number. In another place, we learn that the girl "[p]inned to her collar...an identification number." We also learn that "around her throat she wore a faded silk scarf." What might Otsuka be suggesting about the experience of internment for these children?
6. In an interview, Otsuka said that she "wanted [the novel] to be a universal story, although it happened to a particular group of people." What universalities did you find present in the story or the characters' experiences?
7. Compare the views of the family's neighbors from before the internment and after. Do you notice any differences in the family's interactions with their neighbors? In what ways does the family itself act differently?
8. At one point in the fourth chapter, the narrator states, "we tried to avoid our own reflections wherever we could. We turned away from shiny surfaces and storefront windows. We ignored the passing glances of strangers." How does this reflect one of the principal psychological effects of the internment on the family?
9. The final chapter of the novel is told in a much different voice than the preceding chapters. What purpose might Otsuka have wanted to serve by constructing the father's voice in this way?
10. What do you think the title means? How do you see it related to the experience of internment?

Additional Resources

Books Similar to *When the Emperor Was Divine*

- David Guterson's *Snow Falling on Cedars*, 1994
- Jeanne and James Houston's *Farewell to Manzanar*, 1973
- Frances Itani's *Requiem*, 2011
- Joy Kogawa's *Itsuka*, 1992
- John Okada's *No-No Boy*, 1957
- José Saramago's *Blindness*, 1995

Other Books about the Immigrant Experience

- Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, 2007
- Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*, 1990
- Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, 2003
- Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, 1959
- Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, 1989
- Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers*, 1925

Credits

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Acknowledgments

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