The Destructiveness of War

Flags. Maxine Trottier. Illus. Paul Morin. Stoddart Kids, 1999. Unpag. $19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-3136-9.

Told from a child's perspective, yet couched firmly in the socio-historical context of World War II, *Flags* explores how war affects peoples' lives in ways that transcend age and cultural background. Maxine Trottier sensitively depicts the disruption of a cross-cultural friendship between Mary, a young white girl, and Mr. Hiroshi, a Japanese-Canadian, through a narrative told from Mary's perspective. Beneath the engaging narrative is a clear protest against war, racial discrimination, and lack of understanding towards other cultures. Paul Morin's acrylic illustrations skilfully accentuate the moods and concerns in Trottier's story through suggestive colours and realistic images.

The first half of the story depicts the close friendship shared between Mr. Hiroshi and his neighbours, and Mary and her grandmother. Morin's illustrations depict Mr. Hiroshi's garden and the enjoyment that both Mary and her grandmother derive from it; the intimacy of Mary's friendship with Mr. Hiroshi is evoked through a close-up picture of her and Mr. Hiroshi happily engaging in conversation.

All of this takes a sudden turn when Mr. Hiroshi is going to be relocated. Trottier strongly conveys the sense of injustice that she feels the Japanese-Canadians have suffered. In a poignant scene, Mary and Mr. Hiroshi have one last conversation together, the day before he is to be taken away. The landscape scene shows them sitting together on a bench, cast against the backdrop of a subdued, dark sunset that casts a reddish shadow over Mr. Hiroshi's garden. Mr. Hiroshi says, "How sad that I may not be able to finish my garden." Without being didactic, this scene asks readers to consider the hard question, Why should people be discriminated against because of their ethnic background?

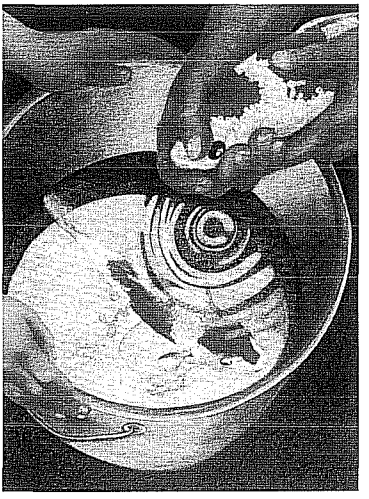

Illustration from **Flags**

When Mr. Hiroshi has to leave on the bus, the evocative, two-page illustration of Japanese on the bus situates his story within the larger socio-historical context. Other Japanese who are to be relocated are suggestively depersonalized in Morin's illustration through blurred, featureless faces that peer out of the bus window, implicitly reminding us that Mr. Hiroshi's experience is common to other Japanese-Canadians. The text completes the situation, and reminds us of how the Canadian and American governments had treated the Japanese as "the enemy": "Many Japanese people sat inside it, their faces stiff with sadness." The language is simple but it captures the sadness of relocation succinctly.

Trottier further conveys the injustice of the relocation of the Japanese by contrasting Mr. Hiroshi's situation with the other characters' more fortunate situations. Mary and her grandmother both have homes to return to, whereas Mr. Hiroshi does not. Trottier also evokes sympathy for Mr. Hiroshi's situation through his fish. The fish, known as Nishikigoi in Japanese (*koi* for short), parallel Mr. Hiroshi's situation. Both are forced away from their home, and neither of them can return: "'Maybe they will swim to Japan,' I said to Grandmother. 'Maybe they will,' she answered sadly." The focus on the koi inside the bucket in one illustration conveys a sense of entrapment that perhaps parallels not only Mr. Hiroshi's relocation, but also the powerlessness of Mary and her grandmother, since they have no control over what is happening either.

Mr. Hiroshi loses his home, his friends, and his garden as well. His presence, and gifts of raising koi and growing gardens (two prominent Japanese cultural traditions) are literally erased when the new owners of his home dig up his gardens and replace it with grass: "They seemed very pleased with their work." It is all the more tragic because the text implies that the new owners do not appear concerned about what they have dug up, nor about the house's previous owner. And it is also tragic because the neighbourhood has lost something precious through Mr. Hiroshi, who spread his own bit of happiness and friendship to Mary and her grandmother. At a microcosmic level, I think that the new owners' digging up Mr. Hiroshi's garden indirectly shows how the disruptions of war erase the love expressed throughout the first half of the story — Mary's love for her grandmother and their friendship with Mr. Hiroshi, and Mr. Hiroshi's love for his garden and fish.

An alternative philosophy of living thus seems to arise out of Trottier's story — a philosophy of peace, caring, and positive cross-cultural communication. As Mr. Hiroshi says, "'I started with one flower and a few perfect stones. Such things take time. But then a garden must begin somewhere.'" The story ends on a note of hope, for Mary dedicates a new garden to Mr. Hiroshi back at her home on the prairies and ends the story with "But then a garden must begin somewhere." It is a gentle ending, yet a reminder to us that we should not forget what has happened to the Japanese in Canada, nor the war's impact on destroying relationships between people.

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