

IN SEARCH OF NO-NO BOY: CLASSROOM EDITION

Resources: Key Characters in the Novel

The characters in *No-No Boy* all return from their forced incarceration changed from the people they were before World War II.

THE YAMADA FAMILY (Ichiro's family)

The character of **Ichiro's mother** ("Ma") is based in part on the mother of real-life draft resisters Jim and Gene Akutsu. Mrs. Akutsu was shunned by other Issei mothers whose sons had gone to battle, and like Ichiro's mother she ultimately took her own life after the war.

Ichiro's mother, more than any other character, suffers the most vivid change in personality as a result of the upheaval of war and the loss of homes, livelihoods and freedoms. The novel dramatizes the stark difference between Ma's life before the war and after. Ma is described as a *"small, flat-chested shapeless woman ... hers was the skinny body of a thirteen-year-old which had dried and toughened... but which had developed no further."* (pg. 10). Ichiro's father, however, remembers her as a soft and desirable young woman. (pg. 108).

Why would Ma think Japan had won the war? The character of Ma may also be based on stories Okada heard about enclaves of Issei in camp who clung to the delusion that Japan won the war. Ma emotionally relies upon a letter from Brazil that assures her that ships are coming to carry the Issei to a victorious Japan.

"Heed not the propaganda of the radio and newspapers ... The day of glory is close at hand. The rewards will be beyond our greatest expectations." (18:20 and page 14)

She discounts as Western propaganda letters from her sister in Japan begging for food.

Delusions of a Japanese victory were especially rampant at the Tule Lake Segregation Center in Northern California, where a kind of collective insanity was fueled by rumor experiments conducted by government sociologists who would start a rumor at one end of the camp and time how fast it took to reach the other side.¹ Issei at Tule Lake also listened to shortwave radios carrying Japanese propaganda about supposed Japanese victories. George Nakano, a former California State Assemblyman, said that his parents believed Japan won the war and the family was preparing to expatriate to Japan, until they got a desperate letter from Japan warning them of the true devastation and starvation the Japanese were suffering. Jim Akutsu confirmed that John Okada heard all these stories:

"There used to be a half dozen people there including John's father ... and this one guy keeps bringing up this about Japan didn't lose the war, and he gets his news from Brazil or someplace ... Anyway, my mother's listening to all of that ... She wants to go back to Japan. And I told her, 'Japan lost the war and I don't want to go back.' ... And then we had to send old clothes to Japan because their house burned, or food to them so I knew and she knew, because she was making these care package(s). But she kept listening to this one guy saying that Japan didn't lose." (Jim Akutsu, Densho interview², near end of Segment 49)

¹ [The Spoilage](#), Dorothy Swaine Thomas and Richard S. Nishimoto, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1946.

² You can view this and other video interviews in the Densho visual archive at www.densho.org. Free registration required.

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Ichiro's father is described as round and fat and cheerful-looking (pg. 9). He avoids conflict by constantly moving, and by drinking heavily. He wonders if he and his wife had somehow done something wrong by having sex before being married – not following the rules – and thus were punished with imprisonment in camp (pg. 178). Once freed from his wife's delusions about a Japanese victory, Pa finds relief in sending food and supplies to relatives in Japan (pg. 211-213).

Taro, Ichiro's younger brother, buys into the false idea that resisters like Ichiro are somehow pro-Japanese who are disloyal to America. Taro is so ashamed of his brother and desperate to separate himself that he agrees to lure Ichiro into a dark alleyway for a gang attack (pg. 78-80). He rushes to join the Army even before he can finish high school (pg. 66-68).

For information about **Ichiro**, see *Lesson 1: A Search for Identity – Who is Ichiro Yamada?*.

While Ichiro's family resettled in Japantown, Okada presents two other families who have moved beyond those borders:

The **KANNO FAMILY** is presented as a warm, loving family with no generational or cultural conflict, a direct contrast to the Yamada family. Kenji's family of six grown siblings has evidently regained some of the stability they enjoyed before camp. From the description in the novel, their home appears to sit on Seattle's Beacon Hill, overlooking Boeing Field and what is now Interstate 5.

The **KUMASAKA FAMILY** bought a home but lost a son in the war. From the description their house could be near Jackson Street, west of Rainier Avenue. Ichiro reveals himself to be an "unreliable narrator" when he reproaches Issei like the Kumasaka's for only renting homes as if they were transients unwilling to set down roots. *"That ... was why the Japanese were still Japanese ... by refusing to learn how to speak English or write the language of America and by living only among their own kind and by zealously avoiding long-term commitments such as the purchase of a house"* (pg. 24-25). Ichiro is unaware that a Washington Alien Land Law dating back to 1889 prohibited the Issei from buying property.

ANOTHER DRAFT RESISTER: Freddie Akimoto

Freddie startles Ichiro with his "live for today" nonchalance and rebellion against the community that scorns resisters like them. However, his casual manner masks a deep-seated self-destructiveness. He speaks of former friends of theirs – veterans – who avoid him or pretend not to know him anymore. Where he once was choosy about his women, he is sleeping with a married Nisei woman in the next apartment, because *"She don't care who I am or what I done or where I been. All she wants is me, the way I am, with no questions."* (pg. 48). Later, Freddie knifes Eto in the Club Oriental (pg 197) an action that leads to a final confrontation and Freddie's death at the end of the novel.

THE VETERANS

Eto Minato represents that part of the Japanese American community that was hostile to the returning draft resisters, wrongly believing them to be somehow pro-Japan and blaming them for the lack of full acceptance of all Japanese Americans back into the Seattle community. Eto still wears his Eisenhower jacket and army fatigues on the streets of Seattle when he confronts Ichiro and spits on him upon realizing Ichiro is a draft resister. Freddie tells Ichiro that that Eto wrangled a medical discharge after serving only six months in the Army (pg. 48).

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Kenji Kanno represents the forgiveness and acceptance that Ichiro is unwilling to grant himself. Kenji is a decorated veteran who returns from combat with his left leg amputated above the knee. The government has symbolically given him mobility in the form of a specially-equipped new Oldsmobile. However, he dies from the creeping infection in the stump of his leg.

Author and veteran **John Okada** uses his own wartime experience for the character of the nameless airman in the *Preface*.

THE "EARTH MOTHER"

Emi represents the hope for the future of Japanese America, in a novel where so many other characters have none. She runs her parents' farm, which she managed to reclaim after the war. Seen working on her farm, Emi is figuratively an "earth mother" who helps ground Ichiro. Her mother died before the war and her father was among those Issei so embittered by the incarceration he sought expatriation to Japan but later regretted it.

Emi's husband Ralph volunteered for the Army out of camp, but re-enlisted after the war without coming home, reportedly out of shame for the actions of his brother Mike. Mike is the only true "no-no boy" in the book, having been shipped from Minidoka to the Tule Lake Segregation Center, the only camp actually named in the book.

Emi's father and her brother-in-law Mike are two among 8,000 who renounced their U.S. citizenship and were expatriated to Japan. Okada makes clear that this was not necessarily an expression of loyalty to Japan, but an emotional reaction to injustice in America.

On pages 94-101 and pages 167-171, Emi tries to help Ichiro understand how he feels: *"Pretend you're back in school. Make believe you're singing 'The Star-Spangled Banner' You'll get that feeling flooding into your chest and making you want to shout with glory ... That's how you've got to feel ... and then you'll understand why it is that your mistake was no bigger than the mistake your country made."* (pg. 96)

TWO WHITE AMERICANS

Ichiro visits **Professor Baxter Brown** at the local university (by the route he takes, it is clearly the University of Washington) to see about continuing work on his engineering degree. While sympathetic, Brown is unengaged and rushes through a conversation with Ichiro, who is left wondering, *"What happened? He was nice enough. Shook hands, talked, smiled. Still, it was all wrong ... It is I who reduces conversation to the inconsequential because Brown is of that life which I have forfeited."* (pg. 57)

Mr. Carrick represents a more "caring" response to the returning incarcerated. He owns an engineering firm in Portland and apologizes to Ichiro for what the government did to Japanese Americans. He rented a home to Japanese Americans before the war, and offers Ichiro a job as a draftsman regardless of his felony prison record – *"It wasn't your fault, really. You know that, don't you?"* (pg. 152) – but Ichiro turns down the offer. After their meeting, Ichiro realizes, *"If he was to find his way back to that point of wholeness and belonging, he must do so in the place where he had begun to lose it. Mr. Carrick had shown him that there was a chance and, for that, he would be ever grateful."* (pg. 154-55)