

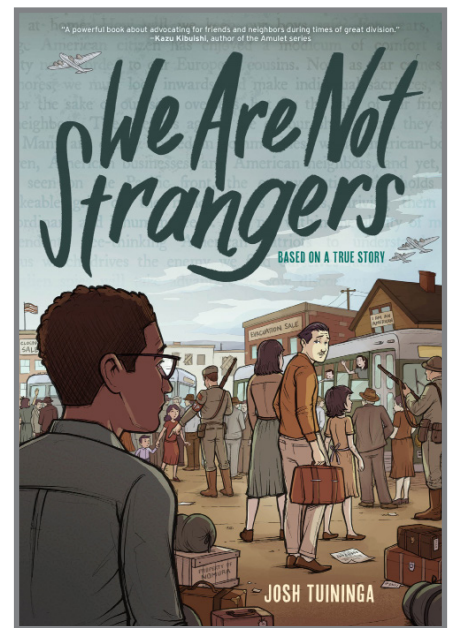
# We Are Not Strangers: Based on a True Story

AUTHOR/ILLUSTRATOR  
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**RECOMMENDED FOR:** Lower to Mid Secondary  
(Violence)



## SYNOPSIS

Marco Calvo always knew his grandfather, affectionately called Papoo, was a good man. After all, he was named for him. A first-generation Jewish immigrant, Papoo was hardworking, smart and caring. When Papoo peacefully passes away, Marco expected the funeral to be simple. However, he is caught off guard by something unusual. Among his close family and friends are mourners he doesn't recognise—Japanese- American families—and no-one is quite sure who they are or why they are at the service. How did these strangers know his grandfather so well?

Set in the multicultural Central District of Seattle during World War II and inspired by author Josh Tuinga's family experiences, *We Are Not Strangers* explores a unique situation of Japanese and Jewish Americans living side by side in a country at war. Following Marco's grandfather's perspective, we learn of his life as a Sephardic Jewish immigrant and his struggles as he settles into an America gearing up its war efforts. Despite the conflict raging just outside US borders, Papoo befriends Sam Akiyama, a Japanese man who finds his world upended from President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066. Determined to keep Sam's business afloat while he and his family are unjustly imprisoned, Sam and Papoo create a plan that will change the Akiyama's lives forever.

An evocative and beautifully illustrated historical fiction graphic novel, *We Are Not Strangers* converges two perspectives into a single portrait of a community's struggle with race, responsibility and what it truly means to be an American.

## ABOUT THE CREATOR

Josh Tuinga is an author, artist and designer living in North Bend, Washington. After studying fine art at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, he founded an art and design agency, where he continues to work as its creative director. His work has been published in *Communication Arts* magazine and *HOW* design magazine, and he was awarded with the Communication Arts Award for excellence in illustration. Tuinga is the author of two children's books: *Why Blue?* (Xist Publishing, 2014) and *Dream On* (Indiegogo campaign, 2019). *We Are Not Strangers*, which has been awarded a 4Culture Heritage Grant, is his first graphic novel.

## STUDY NOTES

- Before reading research the following events:
  - The bombing of Pearl Harbor
  - The Holocaust
  - Executive Order 9066.

Discuss your findings as a class and summarise these events into these categories:

- What happened?
- Where did it happen?
- Who was involved?
- After reading, facilitate a group discussion using the following prompts:
  - What do you understand the title to mean?
  - Which character did you empathise with the most? Why?
  - Do you think the Japanese being evacuated was reasonable? Why/why not?
  - Consider what you know about the concentration camps during the Holocaust and the internment camps the Japanese were 'evacuated' to. What are the differences and similarities between the two?
- In small groups or individually, have students define the following terms and give a brief description of how each word applies in *We Are Not Strangers*:
  - Xenophobia
  - Integrity
  - Oppression
  - (Cultural) assimilation
  - Internment
  - Anti-semitic
  - Patriotism
  - Power of Attorney
  - Othering
  - Multicultural
  - White flight
  - Gentrification
- What is the difference between an Ashkenazic Jew and a Sephardic Jew?
- How were the neighbourhoods in Seattle organised?
- How did Marco/Papoo assist Sam during his internment?
- Consider the experience of Mary Akiyama (see April 8, 1942).
  - How is she treated?
  - How does she respond?
  - How much do you think the children understand what is going on?
- Consider the newspaper headlines depicted throughout *We Are Not Strangers*.
  - What events do they narrate?
  - How do these events contribute to the narrative?
- Why do you think Marco/Papoo never revealed the part he played in helping his Japanese friends following the Executive Order 9066?
- What is meant by first generation immigrant? Second generation? Third generation? What generation was Sam?
- How did the character, Noni, bypass immigration laws?
- Consider the bill posters stuck on the walls in the background of some of the images. What do they say? What do they tell us about attitudes at the time?
- Organise the students into teams. Ask students to research immigration stories—the experiences, contributions and difficulties faced by migrants settling in a new country. Once they feel they have thoroughly researched this topic, organise a student debate on the following topic:
  - When you migrate to a new country, you should leave your old culture behind.
 Student must use examples from the text as well as drawing on their own research into the migrant experience.
- The following are some essay prompts that apply to *We Are Not Strangers*:
  - History is experienced by individuals. Discuss this statement using examples from *We Are Not Strangers* to demonstrate your arguments.
  - Marco/Papoo assisted Sam out of friendship and empathy. Why could Marco/Papoo empathise so well with Sam.

Use examples from *We Are Not Strangers* to support your arguments.

- Watch the following video where American citizens discuss what it was like to be Muslim following the 9/11 attacks in America: <https://tinyurl.com/2wvhy8fa>. Answer the following questions in relation to the video:
  - How did the response towards Muslims change after 9/11?
  - What was the American government's response to Muslims after 9/11? How has this changed over time?
  - Consider the experience of the Japanese after Pearl Harbor as depicted in *We are Not Strangers*. What comparisons can be drawn between the experience of the Japanese and the experience of Muslims after 9/11.
- An oral history is the telling of a personal experience of past events. It is considered a primary resource. Ask students to interview a parent, grandparent or guardian about their personal experience of a national or international event. Based on that oral history, ask students to create a piece of creative work (story, fictional letter, collage, short film, etc) that draws on the oral history. They are to provide a creative exergies for their creative work which includes the following:
  - Who provided the oral history.
  - How they incorporated the resource into their creative work.
  - What they learnt during the interview.