



## Aleutian Sparrow

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In June 1942, seven months after attacking Pearl Harbor, the Japanese navy invaded Alaska's Aleutian Islands. For nine thousand years the Aleut people had lived and thrived on these treeless, windswept lands. Within days of the first attack, the entire native population living west of Unimak Island was gathered up and evacuated to relocation centers in the dense forests of Alaska's Southeast.

With resilience, compassion, and humor, the Aleuts responded to the sorrows of upheaval and dislocation. This is the story of Vera, a young Aleut caught up in the turmoil of war. It chronicles her struggles to survive and to keep community and heritage intact despite harsh conditions in an alien environment.

## Aleutian Sparrow Details

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Author : Karen Hesse , Evon Zerbetz (Illustrator) , Kim McGillivray (Illustrator)

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## **Valerie Dominguez says**

This book is a good resource to incorporate with in a unit on WWII because it presents a culture that isn't one that is usually discussed, or known about. I am not saying that time should be spent reading the entire book, but a few key poetic versus to show what the Aleutian people went through would be helpful. Also being that is is historical fiction it would allow the students to learn about this occurrence in a more interesting way. With a read aloud of just a few of the poems it may spark some of your students interest to perhaps read it on their own for fun, or during the course of studying poetry. As a preservice teacher it was helpful for me to see that there are books like this that can be used in a varetiy of ways with in the classroom. This book is suitable for around 6th through 8th grade, maybe 5th depending on your students. My first impression after finishing the book was that I really didn't like it, then through our class discussion it made me gain a better appreciation of this book.

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## **Heather says**

A beautifully written story told from the eyes of a native Aleutian teen. Adding yet another layer to the horrors of war is the little known fact about the travesties that haunted and scarred the small chain of islands off Alaska's coast called the Aleutians. In 1942, the Aleutian Islands were attacked by Japan. Vera and her family are forced to move to from their land, where they made seal-gut pants, could capture cod with their hands and gather grass for fires and medicine to a dirty, inhospitable camp. In the camp they wait for three long years through death, disease and persecution for the US Government to let them return to the home that bombs and US soldiers have destroyed. I enjoyed the historical relation to the story and appreciated that Hesse told the story in such a beautiful emotive way. I felt the pain and longing of Vera through the poetic language.

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## **J-Lynn says**

Written in poetry, this book tells the forgotten story of the forced relocation of Native Alaskan tribes during WWII. Not many Americans realize that Japanese soldiers invaded American soil, off the coast of Alaska, during WWII. For the native inhabitants of those islands, the invasion began a long ordeal of poor living conditions and discrimination.

Told through the voice of a teenage Aleut girl, the story is informative, compelling, and simultaneously heart-breaking and heart-warming.

I highly recommend this quick read.

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## **Q\_Barb says**

This is the fictionalized account of the true event during World War II when the U.S. government relocated thousands of residents of the Aleutian Islands to the forests in southeast Alaska as told through the eyes of a young girl, Vera. They remained there for three years, and one in four died. This book should be included in any study of World War II as much as study is given to the relocation of Japanese, which has been given more attention. I never knew of this relocation or its effect on the Aleutian people. It is told by Hesse in lyrical verse, each page its own poem, usually short and with its beginning written in a kind of inverted paragraph style. Her imagery for nature was unique and breathtaking. I love trees and that environment and would likely not eagerly live in an environment without them, yet Hesse does just that: as Vera, yearns for the sun, the fog, the wind, the ocean and its inhabitants and all the native plants that are a part of her culture and grows angry with the shade and wetness of the trees, the lack of sun that are their relocation camp, I began to miss her home too, fear the damage the relocation is doing to them as a people, as a culture. As one poem states at its end: "How many times can a people lose their way, before they are lost forever?" An abundance of metaphors and similes saturate the text and would be an excellent mentor text to students ages 10 and up who are studying the use of such imagery in their writing. In fact, though, that strength was also at times its weakness for me: I as the reader could get caught up in the magical wording of her metaphors and similes and not pay as much attention to the gravity or melancholy or pain that she is writing about.

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### **Susan Cimino says**

My first impression of this book was that it appeared to be an easy read. However, the writing style is too sketchy. The author's switching from log style observation to romantic poetic style description is distracting and a serious interruption to the flow of the story. The author relinquishes any responsibility for historical accuracy by stating that it "is a work based on true events." The author does not state which events these are, so further research would have to be done by the reader to separate fact from fiction. The character of Vera can be related to on a general level in her displacement from her home. However, her character lacked depth. While the author used some actual events and maybe interviewed Aleutians for this story, there is still a superficial quality to this work that simply capitalizes on a bad and sorrowful situation.

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### **Steven Shane says**

Karen Hesse has created a very poignant novel.

I was pleased with the form of writing, terse vignettes bring a type of transcendence of the mundane, spotlighting the daily activities and subsequently infusing the prosaic with meaning. An example of this would be the use of descriptions of the preparation of meals.

The writing style being focused and simple fits the form perfectly. The free verse form has an interesting effect when used to describe a story of multiple years.

The author writes about what needs to be shown, each verse is free from distraction. These verses create a resonant procession of events which are strongly linked and are complimentary to creating a powerful historic narrative.

I was impressed with the way the author kept the use of the protagonist's reflections consistently in the service of expressing the effects of dislocation so that a broad human experience is portrayed. Many simple

details of daily life were described.

The book had a map  
and illustrations at the chapter breaks, which are immediate aids to setting context for readers.

There could be reaction to the idea that soldiers are being cast in a poor light.

I did not see a threat toward a historical perspective of the military or a significant change in social perspective of the military.

This story is one book of many that students will read. The description of the role of the military is a small portion of the book. The government, any government agency, city government or the cities of Ketchikan and Wrangell are only mentioned on about 30 of 156 pages.

To ease students in this mindset I could first ask students to describe the most common elements of the story, if the portrayal of the military is mentioned and through questioning students expressed their anger at the military or anger at the writer tempering the discussion with positive precedents in each case. With the writer examples of the positive aspects of the writing and likewise positive aspects of the military.

As much of the book is about nature as it is about war. The choice of settings in time and space are striking and unique. As well as the view of nature held by the protagonist,

“Around our crowded camp, everywhere we turn green life rubs its moss skin against us. The air steams green, and always the sound of dripping. Always the smell of rot. Always green curtains smothering us. On the Aleutians there are no trees.” (p.54).

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### **Aaron says**

I like this book well enough and think that it would be a good addition to a WWII unit or poetry unit. It would also be a good way to introduce poetry and perspective. Children are more willing to write poetry when they find out that it doesn't always have to rhyme or be a specific length. However, in a school setting some background knowledge would I need to provide lots of discussion time for students to work out the complex issues of intolerance, persecution, and feeling of sorry that book evokes. On the positive side this a book that you could read in class in about a week, maybe even less if you read it to the class yourself. I think this would be a great read to do for 10-15 minutes a day.

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### **Book Concierge says**

This slim volume, written in luminous free verse, tells the story of the Aleutian Evacuation during WW II.

Hesse's novel follows one young teen, Vera, and her friends and family as they struggle to make sense of what is happening, to survive the hardships and to adapt to a life none had ever imagined. The beauty of the work is that Hesse can convey so much in so few words. Here is one page...

#### ***KETCHIKAN CREEK***

*When Eva returns from Ketchikan, she says*

*The creek there is like a woman*

*Dressed in a filmy green gown,  
Her lace pockets spilling with leaping salmon.*

Despite the hardships, there is room for love and faith. Babies are born and cherished. Christmas is celebrated. Still, the sense of loss is palpable. I will be thinking about this novel and the Aleutian Evacuation for a long time.

I had never heard of this episode in the USA's history. Shortly after the Japanese attacked Attu Island in June 1942 (an attempt to distract the US Navy away from the South Pacific), the government decided that it would be "best" for the Aleutian natives living on the islands to be evacuated "for their protection." Nearly 900 Aleuts were removed by the US government from nine villages on six islands and forcibly transported to Southeast Alaska "detention camps." Most were given little more than an hour to collect their necessary belongings, for a trip to an unknown destination, for an unknown length of time. People used to a subsistence living, were deposited in old canneries, or mining camps, without adequate shelter, sanitation, water, food, medical care or any means to support themselves. While the Japanese left the islands by 1943, the Aleuts were not allowed to return to their homes for three years. The deplorable conditions they endured resulted in epidemics of TB, pneumonia, whooping cough and other disease; over ten percent of them died during internment. Those who did return to the islands found that their homes had been destroyed and/or ransacked ... not by the Japanese, but by American military troops.

I learned all the above by doing some research after reading this novel. But I certainly gathered clues and a feeling of the injustice suffered by the Aleuts during this time.

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### **Jentry Hammond says**

The historical content included in this book was very eye opening and interesting. If poetry interests you this is an excellent choice that will keep you entertained as well as informed. Hesse uses short precise stanzas and vivid descriptions which come together to create an interesting, thought provoking read.

As a teacher, if I incorporate this book into my curriculum I will use it as a segway or compliment to some other lesson. Possibly with a unit on WWII to offer other perspectives on the war, or to stimulate ideas for a writing assignment (a creative piece or a research paper) but I feel it leaves too many holes, questions, and inquiries to be simply left alone and not manipulated. The style of writing leaves a lot of room for interpretation from the reader which offers up a ton of possibilities for assignments and follow ups which make it worthwhile in the classroom.

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### **Jill says**

I think this is a great book to use in conjunction with a social studies lesson about WWII. The story of the Aleutians is not one commonly addressed in education, so it is a good way to show the marginalized accounts of some groups. It also offers a great basis for comparison regarding the treatment of others and the "persecution" some experienced at the hands of governments. I would not use it without background knowledge of both the time period and the people first. I also do not...more I think this is a great book to use in conjunction with a social studies lesson about WWII. The story of the Aleutians is not one commonly

addressed in education, so it is a good way to show the marginalized accounts of some groups. It also offers a great basis for comparison regarding the treatment of others and the "persecution" some experienced at the hands of governments. I would not use it without background knowledge of both the time period and the people first. I also do not think that I would also not use the entire text, but perhaps sections from it. It is easy to read, it offers a minority perspective that is often marginalized, it is something my students might be able to redly relate to.

On a literary note, it is unique in its style. It is historical fiction written in pros. I might be a good point to introduce the students to the genre and the subject.

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