



# **Bento Box in the Heartland: My Japanese Girlhood in Whitebread America**

*Linda Furiya*

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While growing up in Versailles, an Indiana farm community, Linda Furiya tried to balance the outside world of Midwestern America with the Japanese traditions of her home life. As the only Asian family in a tiny township, Furiya's life revolved around Japanese food and the extraordinary lengths her parents went to in order to gather the ingredients needed to prepare it.

As immigrants, her parents approached the challenges of living in America, and maintaining their Japanese diets, with optimism and gusto. Furiya, meanwhile, was acutely aware of how food set her apart from her peers: She spent her first day of school hiding in the girls' restroom, examining her rice balls and chopsticks, and longing for a Peanut Butter and Jelly sandwich.

*Bento Box in the Heartland* is an insightful and reflective coming-of-age tale. Beautifully written, each chapter is accompanied by a family recipe of mouth-watering Japanese comfort food.

## **Bento Box in the Heartland: My Japanese Girlhood in Whitebread America Details**

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# From Reader Review Bento Box in the Heartland: My Japanese Girlhood in Whitebread America for online ebook

## Gwen says

A very well-written memoir, I thoroughly enjoyed it. Even though I'm not a Japanese girl growing up in the Midwest, I felt I could relate to the author, especially her desire to fit in at school. I learned quite a bit about Japanese culture and I'm hoping to try some of the recipes in the book.

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## Dana says

This memoir takes place in Versailles--don't forget to pronounce the l's and s--Indiana. It has some bitterness, some forgiveness, and lots of mouth-watering recipes. Oh, and the ring of truth. A fresh perspective.

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## Sheila says

This book is about a Japanese American girl that group up in the state of Indiana. She had difficulty with what her identity was. She tried to fit in in America and she tried to fit in in Japan(when she went to visit). Growing up she didn't understand why her parents were the way they were, hush hush about things, ignore comments, etc. She was basically the only Asian girl in her community. So it was difficult growing up. But as an adult she has come to realize that food in her family is what helped her know who she is. The Japanese food she ate at home always brought her back to family in Indiana.

Interesting book. There are some recipes from her childhood that you can try to make.

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## Bookfanatic says

I love the title of this book. It's what caught my eye. This is an enjoyable memoir of growing up as a Japanese-American in the American Midwest (Indiana). It's a classic fish out of water/coming of age memoir. Furiya is candid about her life. There really isn't a whole lot of angst or family problems. Much of the book is centered around food and its importance to the family. In that way, it's similar to Like Water For Chocolate. The author gives recipes for the delectable dishes she describes. I was familiar with some of the dishes since my husband is part-Japanese. Some of the chapters are disjointed and not connected very well, but my overall impression of the book is good. Read this if you like Japanese food, Japanese culture, or if you just simply want an interesting book from an Asian American perspective.

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## Laura says

A gorgeous memoir that resonated deeply with me as a (half) Japanese American who lived as a child in both Japan and the Midwest. It seems difficult to write about painful personal memories without descending into

self-pity, but Furiya does this well. She also does a wonderful job of presenting a warts-and-all perspective on her parents while giving enough context about their personal histories that the reader feels compassion for them - and so many others of their wartime generation. Anyone who grew up as a minority or the child of immigrants will find common ground in this book that is steeped in Japanese culture but presents a universal story of the human longing for acceptance.

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### **Rebecca says**

This is a story about growing up as an outsider, as a first generation American, as a child of immigrants from a land that had been an enemy. Food is how they connect, to thier Japanese culture, to each other, to the past. i can not imagine the pain the author endured or the struggle her parents faced. This story could easily have dipped into self pity but instead took an honest look her growing up and the unseen forces of culture, history, family that influenced it and wrapped it up in mouth watering descriptions of food and recipes.

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### **Bookworm says**

Interesting story but the writing's not so great The title and premise had me intrigued. The author, a first generation Japanese American, writes a memoir looking what it was like to grow up in Indiana where there were no other Japanese families in the near vicinity. A story of food, of growing up in a place where no one else looks like you except your family and navigating growing up as an "American" child and teenager.

Her story is an interesting one, from how her parents met (they had an arranged marriage) to what it was like growing up in Indiana. However, the writing is terrible. Although I could feel for her at certain points, understood some of experiences, recognized much of what happened to her is an experience many immigrants/children of immigrants share, etc. I found it to be tough to get through. The writing can be disjointed and really needed a better editor.

It's a pity because a lot of what she says will likely resonate with the children of immigrants. From having to translate/speak for the parents (because of the language barrier) to wanting to be more like the other kids when it comes to something like what you have in your lunch bag/box, etc. I'd bet a lot of first generation children would recognize a lot of Furiya's experiences, even if they don't share the same background.

I also liked the stories surrounding the food. Once again food is very much an interesting and important vehicle for immigrants/children of immigrants and it's interesting to see how this affects Furiya growing up. From what's in her lunchbox to trying out wasabi to how some foods eventually leave a bad memory due to a really creepy man (luckily it appears nothing happened) we see the role food plays for her and her family.

I think a lot of people who are looking to read about her story or would like to understand what it's like to be a part of the only Japanese family for miles around might enjoy this. She does include recipes, but no pictures. I recommend the library for this, although I didn't mind paying for a used copy. Wouldn't make a huge effort to hunt this one down though.

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## **Amanda says**

This is a food memoir- I didn't even know that was a genre! I requested it from my library because I was doing a little research about bento after being introduced to the concept by a friend. There was actually very little about bento in the book, it is more a coming of age story of a Japanese-American girl in small town Indiana. Her writing is very honest and the descriptions are engaging. I finished this in 2 sittings, because it was a very interesting close look into another persons childhood. She dealt with things I never did like racism and lack of family nearby, but also things that I think most people can identify with like being different, feeling isolated and lonely. Her journey is much more interesting than mine, I think, and the way that she deals with her parents is an interesting part of the book. The cultural differences and their amazing histories make for an enjoyable read, if not necessarily always heartwarming. I especially like how she explores the idea of home and it's importance in our lives. I haven't tried the recipes, but her descriptions of them make me want to. The one for Gyoza is printed at the end of 2 chapters, which disappointed me because the second chapter mentioned a Japanese pizza that was her favorite and I was hoping that was the recipe she'd include. No such luck I guess!

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## **Raghaib says**

The first food memoir I've ever read...

I actually did enjoy it and would recommend to anyone interested in learning about how it felt to live in the Midwest as an Asian during the mid half of the last century.

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## **Courtney M says**

I got through about 3/4 of this book but couldn't finish it as I have misplaced it! ? This book really allowed me to realize and appreciate history behind Japanese culture, in a creative way that kept me interested. Also has a recipe at the end of each chapter!

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## **Linda Hagedorn says**

I LOVED this book. Living in Japan for 3 years in the seventies possibly brought on in me a deep connection to this young woman's experiences. Happily I went through reminiscing foods we ate in Japan, various festivals we experienced first-hand, temple visits we made while learning proper etiquette for going into public places and homes. I felt great joy in thinking about those years and what it must have been like to see Japan first-hand.

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## **Pam says**

I loved this book! It was a fun but informative read. Linda Furiya did an excellent job communicating the complexities of her family and the emotional challenges she faced.

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## **Tracey says**

Bento Box is unique and almost reads like a personal ethnography. Because I currently live in Tokyo and spend my vacations in Indiana, there was SO much I could relate to. I appreciated the simple honesty in Furiya's reflection of her upbringing. At the start of the book, I had a hard time adjusting to the style, the way Furiya would jump around a few decades, sometimes all on the same page. As I got more comfortable with the style, I was able to see the bigger picture of why she chose the order she did and appreciated the artistry it brought to the book. I wanted a little more closure in the ending because I wasn't done learning about her journey to become a strong woman. Overall it was an interesting and enjoyable read.

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## **Lisa Kimura says**

As a Japanese-American woman myself, I completely resonated with Furiya's coming-of-age memoir more than I expected. Every chapter examines a turning point in her childhood, from parents' secrecy of their former years, incessant bullying from ignorant classmates, to the infamous "lunchbox moment" that most children of color experience growing up in a foreign land. I've been struggling with my identity for so many years now, but this book has given me the strength to tell my own stories, and to know that I'm not completely alone in my thoughts. I would love to see more work from Furiya, and read more food memoirs because the recipes included at the end of every chapter look phenomenal and surprisingly easy to make.

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## **Marie says**

Of all the things I miss about living in Japan, the food is on the top of the list. So a memoir about Japanese food, by a Japanese-American being reared in America's heartland, was right up my alley.

Furiya grew up in rural Indiana, in one of the few Asian-American families in her Versailles community. She takes us back to her early childhood and describes her unique family upbringing, of which food was central. Furiya's parents felt closer to home (Japan) when they could eat Japanese food; however, this was not easy given the unavailability of fresh Japanese ingredients in rural Indiana in the 1970s. Furiya recalls with fondness the occasions when they would drive into Chicago or Cleveland to procure Japanese ingredients or go to a Japanese restaurant, and how those excursions lifted the whole family's spirits.

Each chapter ends with a recipe, most of which are fairly simple for those uninitiated to Japanese cooking. (I did notice an error--the recipe for dumplings, or gyoza, is repeated.)

She describes her parents' unique journeys to Indiana--they both experienced hardship and starvation in the war and were extremely strong people. They came together through an arranged marriage, and Furiya's upbringing and family life sounded very Japanese. She balked at the fact that she (as the only girl) had to do all of the chores, while her brothers could relax--just as her mom was on her feet during the entire meal, serving her father's and children's every whim. When she was grown it became increasingly annoying to her that her dad barked orders and requests at her mother instead of serving himself. (This, too, grated on me deeply when I lived in Japan.)

Furiya's father arrived in the U.S. from Japan with \$29 in his pocket. Her mother left a highly satisfying, fulfilling life working in Tokyo and spending the weekends skiing and hiking, to go to the U.S. to get married and become a housewife in a foreign land. Her dad worked two jobs throughout her childhood, one of them "chick sexing" (separating the male and female chickens), and her mom spent much of her time planning how to make Japanese foods and rationing ingredients so they wouldn't run out.

When Furiya was 10, she accompanied her mom on a trip to Japan--the first time her mom had been home since she had left. She describes the wonderful feeling she had of being at home, amongst people who looked like her and figuratively embraced her as family. (This description made me realize how fortunate I am to be growing up near so many of my own extended family members, something I probably take for granted.) When it came time to leave Japan, she couldn't bear to go.

One thing I found odd about the description of her trip: she and her mom went to a ryokan (traditional Japanese inn), and when they were taking the traditional Japanese bath, they soaked in the tub first, and then got out to soap up and rinse off, followed by another soak. This is not proper Japanese bathing etiquette...the whole point being to keep the water pristine and pure. You are not to step into the hot bath until you have soaped and cleaned yourself. I was surprised that in her time traveling through Asia, she hadn't learned that important point.

She also writes about her deep happiness from buying yakitori (broiled chicken skewers) from a stand on the sidewalk in Tokyo, and walking along as she was eating...another no-no in Japanese etiquette (eating while standing on or walking down the street, unless at a festival).

This is certainly not to say that I didn't make a lot of etiquette errors while living in Japan (I could list them for you!), but I was surprised that I knew more about these things than she did, being raised by issei (first-generation Japanese).

Later she writes about a Vietnamese family coming to live in Versailles, back in the era when the U.S. took in a lot of Vietnamese immigrants, often sponsored by churches, and they were spread out to lessen the burden on one particular community (also ignoring the importance for immigrants of having access to their own community, and food ingredients). Although she was initially excited about the prospect of other Asian-Americans in her school, she eventually grows to be resentful and withdraws from their outreach of friendship, mostly because they were not Americanized enough. (When an adolescent girl is trying her best to fit in, the last thing she wants is a friend who makes her feel more like an outsider.) I know that most of us have a few skeletons in our closet as well, from a time when we treated someone unfairly or unkindly. Furiya writes openly and honestly about hers.

Her descriptions of the regular gatherings with other Japanese-Americans in the area reminded me of similar memoirs. The food usually made it all worthwhile, but for the children, it wasn't all fun and games. Sometimes she heard parents joke about life in the (Japanese internment) camps, hinting at much more serious content underneath. At the last potluck she attended, she encountered a lecherous American man who was stationed in Japan during occupation and picked up a war bride. This reminded me of many of the men I met in Japan...westerners who never really fit in back home and who wanted to find a docile, submissive Japanese woman to wait on them and cater to their every need. I thought most of them were total creeps. Even though this lecher made a move on her (as a teenager), no one stepped in to intervene, reflecting the conflict-averse culture that she found stifling and at times like this, infuriating.

The descriptions of Japanese food--and the recipes--reminded me of all of the wonderful eating adventures I had in Japan. Now, in reflection, I realized that I took them for granted at the very young age of 21 to 24.

The beautiful presentation, fresh ingredients, and special attention that goes into making each Japanese dish are colorfully described in this memoir, a love story about Japanese food, and an anchor for a young girl growing up in whitebread America.

As a memoir, it's not really complete, though...because it stops when she goes off to college. She alludes to having a son and getting divorced a couple of times. Time for a sequel...perhaps about introducing her son to the foods and cultures she has come to appreciate more as she's gotten older.

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