

The Sky We Shared

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In the historical novel *The Sky We Shared*, two girls—one Japanese, one American—live through separate atrocities during World War II, learning about the complexity of the idea of “enemies” in the process.

Nellie is almost fifteen. World War II changed her life: her best friend’s brother was killed; she misses sugar; she hates Japanese people. Tamiko is also almost fifteen. The war changed her life, too: her brother joined the imperial forces; she is always hungry; and she hates American people. Thus, when Tamiko is conscripted to assemble paper balloons to transport firebombs across the Pacific to the US, she is proud to do her part for the emperor. But one of those balloons makes its way to Nellie’s town and explodes.

Based on a true incident, the story is told through the girl’s alternating perspectives. They both have epiphanies in the course of the war: Tamiko comes to understand that the firebombs will hurt people who are like her and her family; Nellie comes to understand that Japanese families are as complex as her own. A central, meaningful message about the flimsiness of hatred emerges, and the barbarities of the war are revealed in an uncommon, important way—though, in Tamiko’s case, this is not an #OwnVoices story. And while the book makes frequent use of cultural terms to lend authenticity to the girls’ period, one of Tamiko’s aphorisms hinges on a play on English that does not work in Japanese.

In the historical novel *The Sky We Shared*, two girls who live thousands of miles apart experience war, death, and destruction, but they grow from these losses, ending up with a broader understanding of compassion.

RANDI HACKER (July / August 2022)

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