

# Book Review

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## Children's Books

### BASEBALL SAVED US

By Ken Mochizuki.

Illustrated by Dom Lee.

Unpaged. New York:

Lee & Low Books. \$14.95.

(Ages 5 to 9)

By Ira Berkow

**U**NLIKE a famous predecessor that was made into a gloriously successful movie, this little baseball book might have been called "Field of Nightmares."

In "Baseball Saved Us," a baseball diamond is constructed not in a cornfield beside a homey white-frame farmhouse but in a barren desert — subject to blistering heat, dust storms and bitterly cold nights. It is built behind barbed-wire fences, under the gaze of armed guards standing in towers and beside dreary barracks that are part of an internment camp for Japanese-Americans during World War II.

The story is seen through the eyes of a young Japanese-American boy called Shorty, who, through baseball, will seek dignity and self-esteem. He and his family have been "relocated" from their West Coast home, along with thousands of other Japanese-Americans. "Relocated" was the euphemism used for one of the most deplorable episodes in United States history, the removal by force of American citizens who were considered threats to the war effort because of their origin.

The narrator recalls his playmates on the sandlots of where he grew up: "The kids started to call me names and nobody talked to me, even though I didn't do anything bad. At the same time the radio kept talking about some place far away called Pearl Harbor." The name he was called was "Jap."

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Ken Mochizuki, the author of this story-book, was born and raised in Seattle. During World War II, his parents were sent to the Minidoka internment camp in Idaho.

He captures the confusion, wonder and terror of a small child in such stunning circumstances with convincing understatement. Daily life in the camp is a tense situation in which the proud Japanese-Americans

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Illustration by Dom Lee from "Baseball Saved Us."

are degraded and humiliated. "One day," Shorty says, "my dad looked out at the endless desert and decided then and there to build a baseball field. He said people needed something to do in camp." The decision is to use something characteristically American in order to lift up the spirits of his fellow prisoners.

Water is funneled from irrigation ditches to flood what will become the baseball field, packing down the dust to make it hard. Stands are erected. "Bats, balls and gloves arrived in cloth sacks from friends back home," Shorty says. "My mom and other moms took the covers off mattresses and used them to make uniforms. They looked

almost like the real thing."

Shorty participates in the games, though he "wasn't that good," just as he was usually the last picked in games back home. Dad tells him just to "try harder." He does, and it comes as no surprise that he succeeds in a dramatic part of the championship game.

But the story doesn't end there. After the war, Shorty and his family return home, and while Shorty is still the smallest boy on the sandlots, his baseball has improved because of his play in the camp. During a game, he hears the hurtful word "Jap" once more.

With hands shaking, he again is at bat in a deciding moment in a game. Will he get a hit or will he fail? In a sense, it is a despairing commentary that so many boys' and men's self-respect has too often been dependent on such athletic, or physical, moments. But here it remains an apt metaphor for justice conquering prejudice, for the fortitude that must go hand in glove with courage and hope.

The illustrations by Dom Lee, some inspired by photographs taken by Ansel Adams at the Manzanar internment camp in 1943, add a proper serious mood to this fine book. In unadorned language that carries the greatest impact, we are told in an author's note at the beginning of "Baseball Saved Us": "In 1988, the U.S. Government admitted that what it did was wrong." □

*The moment of truth  
for the boy comes  
when he steps up to  
the plate and hears a  
racial slur.*