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Interviews:

Jade Magazine

[1975?]

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JADE MAGAZINE: An in depth interview with
writer, Yoshi Uchida, is featured in the latest
edition of the Asian Identity magazine, JADE.
As a member of the Sycamore Church family,
Yoshi's interesting and creative life may go
unstudied. The interview carried in the JADE
magazine reveals the whole person that she
really is, creative, fun loving, goal oriented,
philosophical. Read the article in the fourth
edition of the first volume of JADE. Yoshi,
the acclaimed children's writer, talks about
her books and herself. -- H. Katayama

[1975?]

Hope and No Monsters

Mrs. Yoshiko Uchida is one of our most popular children authors. Her seven published books have received numerous



Mrs. Yoshiko Uchida

Do you live in a mansion?" they write. "Can I come visit with you for five weeks?" "I told my little sister about your book, but she didn't want to read it because it didn't have any monsters in it."

Lack of monsters is characteristic of the books of Yoshiko Uchida. She would much rather write about a warm relationship developing, for example, between a cranky old man and two of the children he terrifies. Her young readers respond with floods of letters.

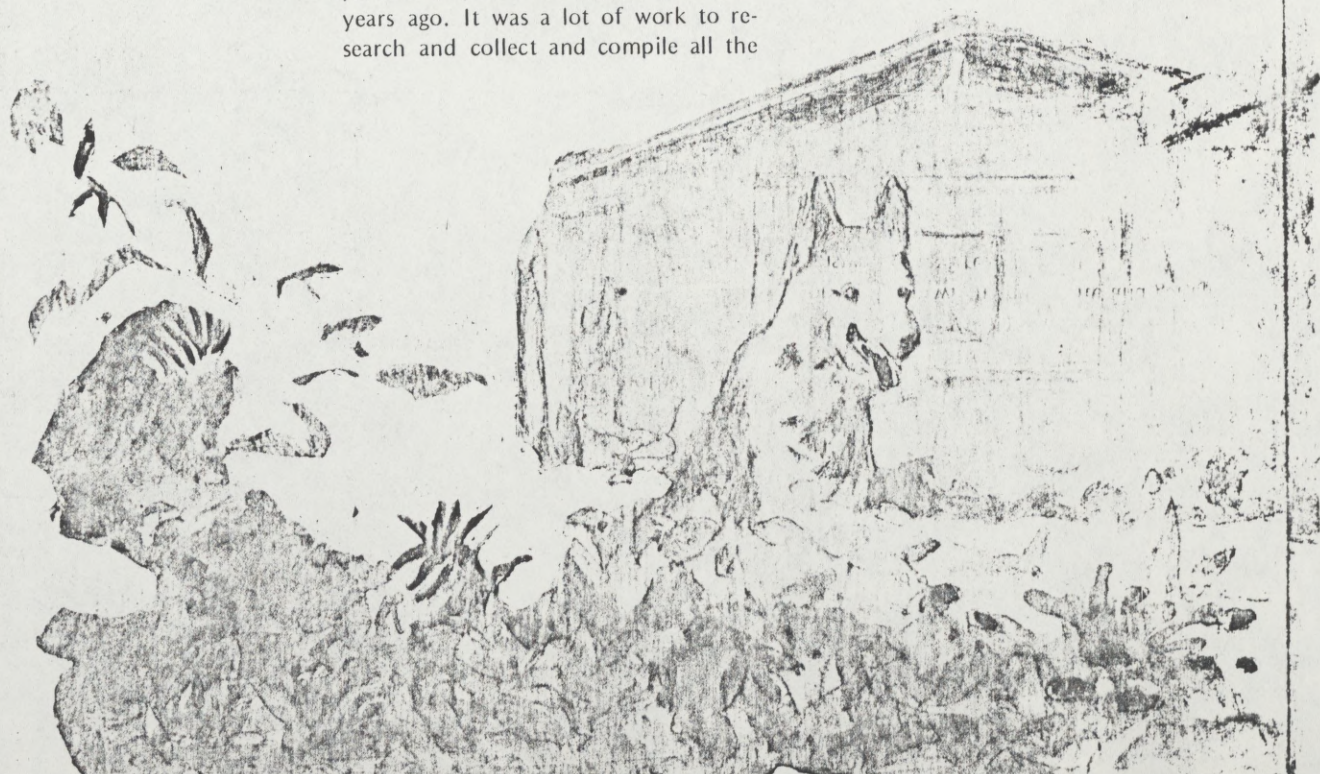
"Can I help you write a book?" asks one. "I guess you had a hard time writing 18 books," says another, "but when you enjoy doing something, it isn't so hard to do."

"That's really rather perceptive," Ms. Uchida comments. "Last year, I wrote *The History of Sycamore Church*. My parents helped found it over seventy years ago. It was a lot of work to research and collect and compile all the

information, but I was happy it was something that made good."

Ms. Uchida glances through a few more letters, holds up a Valentine that is a drawing. "Sometimes they tell me I'm the best writer that they ever read," she laughs. "I'm sure the next year they tell that to someone else, but at least it helps my morale."

She replaces the picture in a folder. "When I was young, I never even thought of writing to an author. A book was just there to be read and I didn't think of anyone's writing it. I'm happy they feel there's a real person behind these books, someone they can relate to. I try to answer each child at least once. Then when they write and get an answer, they realize that this person



cares about them as an individual, and that's good for them too."

Individuality is important to Ms. Uchida, who fights stereotypes by striving to make every one of her characters a complete, unique person. As a result, people get involved with her stories. They believe in her characters.

"Sometimes when children write to me they ask questions about the characters in my books as if they are real people that I actually know," she says. "They want to know what happened to Yuki after she left camp and if I ever see her. And they all want to know what happened to Ken."

Ken and Yuki are brother and sister who are sent to an internment camp in Utah in *Journey to Topaz*, a book based on Ms. Uchida's own wartime experiences. Inside the barbed wire, they try to cope with the indignities and hardships in whatever ways they can.

"There was one reviewer who seemed to feel that the characters in my book didn't display enough of a sense of outrage or emotion towards the situation,"

Ms. Uchida relates. "Perhaps such anger would have been cathartic for guilt-ridden Americans, but this reviewer was not Japanese and did not participate in the evacuation. He did not understand the nature of the Japanese people of that time whose values included a traditional respect for authority; a strong sense of group obligation and such traits as a quiet endurance of circumstances.

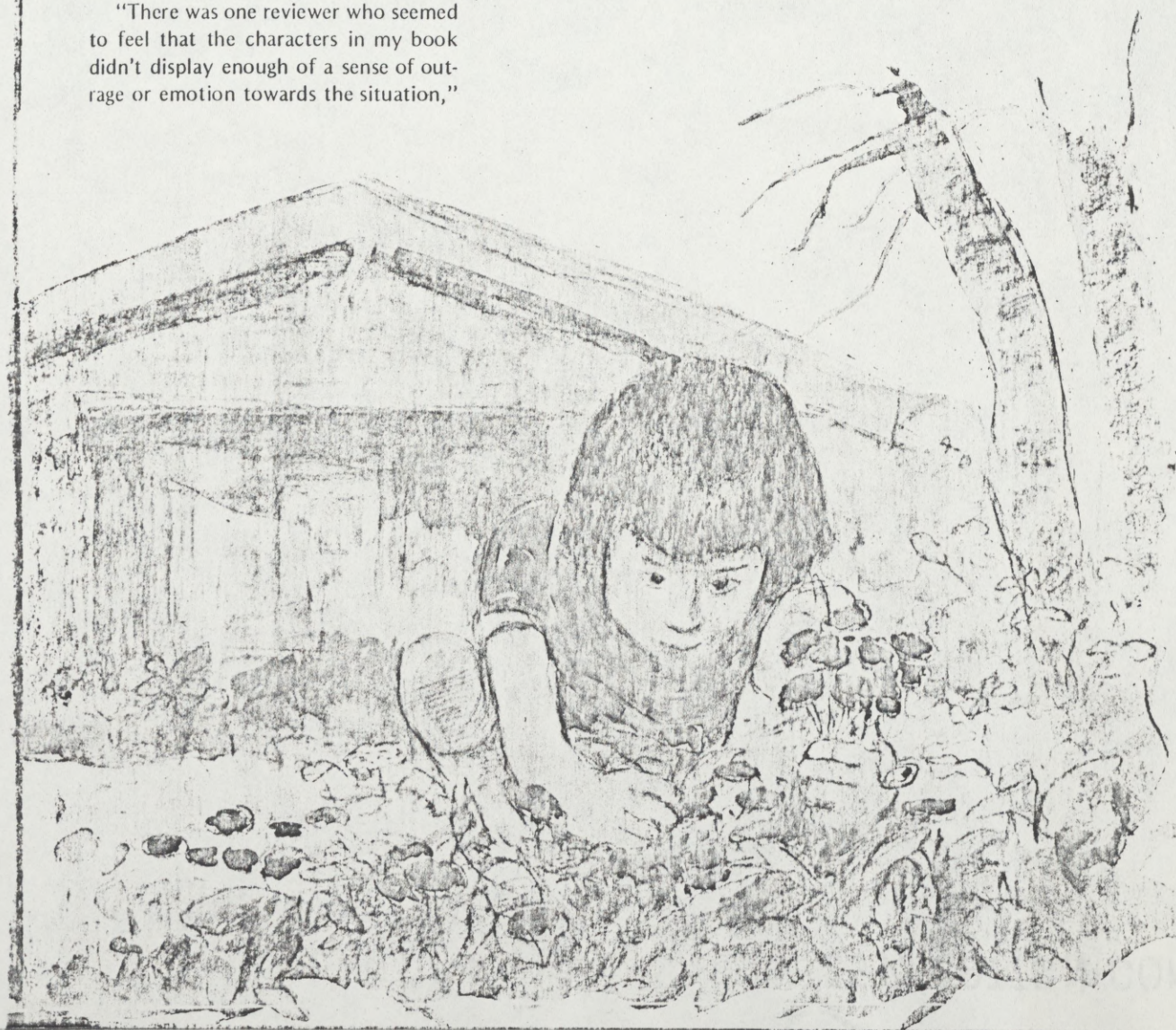
"Without exception, every Japanese who wrote or spoke to me about the book told me that I had described the evacuation and their feelings exactly as they had experienced it themselves."

The need for authentic ethnic insight is one of the things Ms. Uchida stresses when she speaks on panels, at workshops, or at special gatherings such as the recent Asian American Writers' Conference in Oakland, California.

"More writers from within the various ethnic groups must be encour-

aged to write for and about themselves; to describe from their own viewpoints their feelings and goals and values. The sad thing," she says, "is that there doesn't seem to be many Asians writing for young people. If we Asians don't write for our own children, others will because there's such a need now for good ethnic material. It's certainly not that non-Asian writers aren't capable of writing such books, it's simply that they can never know how it feels to be Asian."

It was a phone call from a non-Asian that brought *Journey to Topaz* into existence. "She said her publisher wanted her to do a children's book about the evacuation," Ms. Uchida remembers. "It was that startling remark that really propelled me into finishing *Journey*, which was then still



of book.

"The Nisei, my generation, were almost ashamed of our heritage. At the time I was growing up, we were rejecting our Japaneseness and trying hard to become assimilated into this great melting pot. We wanted to be American like everyone else.

"Today, the ideal of the great melting pot has been replaced by the realization that enrichment comes from diversity. The Sansei are proud of their Japaneseness. They're interested in their history. Consequently, I found I wanted to write for them and to reinforce their knowledge of themselves as Asians. I wanted to give them as much information as I could about the history of their parents and grandparents—the Japanese experience in California. So I wrote *Journey*, and *Samurai of Gold Hill*, which is about the first colonists who came from Japan.

The new books are receiving quite a lot of attention. *Journey to Topaz* was nominated for the Dorothy Canfield Fisher Children's Book Award in 1972, the Sequoyah Children's Book Award in Oklahoma in 1973, and the William Allen White Award in 1974. It was also an American Library Association Notable Book. *Samurai* was honored with a display and reception by the Special Exhibits and Education Department of the Oakland Museum and also received the Commonwealth Club of California Medal for being the best juvenile book by a California author in 1972. And one more thing that pleases her greatly: *Journey* is being translated into Japanese.

"I'm really excited about it," says Ms. Uchida. "My books have been translated into German, Dutch and Afrikaans, but this is the first one translated into Japanese. I can see why they wouldn't want to do the others—books about Japanese in Japan written by a Japanese in America. But this one is about a Japanese-American experience. It's something they don't know much about."

Journey to Topaz begins with eleven-year-old Yuki's preparations for Christmas—plans which are shattered by the attack on Pearl Harbor. Her father is suddenly arrested by the FBI and she,



her mother, and her older brother Ken are now all treated as enemy aliens, sent to live in a horse stall and then shipped to Topaz to live in a comfortless relocation camp in the desert.

It tells how they made it liveable, in spite of latrines without doors, endless food lines, the terrible strain on their dignity and the affront to their loyalty.

As camp life slowly disintegrates the close family units, as crises develop and the prisoners try to deal with them and each other, Ken and Yuki are forced into decisions about themselves and their futures. Although Father is returned to them, the reunion is short-lived for even, though Yuki gets her wish when they relocate outside Topaz, Ken has already decided to leave them and enlist in the special all-Nisei combat team.

Throughout the book, Ms. Uchida writes of individuals. She stresses that. Even the men who come to arrest Yuki's father are human beings, neither monsters nor saints.

"I think that I am writing for the young Sansei, but I would hope that any child living in this country or any other country where my books are translated would get a feeling for the Japanese person I'm writing about and to like that person as an individual human being as well as whatever they represent culturally."

She says it best, perhaps, in the preface pages describing her books. Including the one that, in 1955, won the Herald Tribune Honor Book Award:

"The fourteen folk tales in this book

have been adapted from stories still being read today by the children of Japan. About the same time they reach the book shelves of children in San Francisco or New York, or perhaps even London or Copenhagen, the children of Tokyo and Kyoto and Osaka, too, will be reading and listening to them."

"It is a happy thought that children in so many different countries can have a good time hearing the same stories. But this is only natural, and was as true a hundred years ago as it is today. With so much in all of us that is alike, it is a pity people the world over have continued to find so much in each other that is different and strange."

"Just as the universal qualities of the folk tales can bring the children of the world closer together, it is my hope that a further sharing of common ideas and hopes will eventually bring them closer together as adults."

She has a new book out, *The Birthday Visitor*, number nineteen. She's working on an adult novel and continues to go to museums and concerts and lunch with friends. When she feels like writing, she writes. She makes jewelry and looks after her plants. She takes walks where she can see trees and the hills and a bit of the bay and she talks to schools and with young writers. She also answers letters.

"*Magic Listening Cap* was the first book that I really, truly (sic) liked," writes one.

"I could not believe my eyes when I saw you," writes another. "You were very fatiblos." (sic)

"I liked *Journey to Topaz*, but what happened to Ken?"

"Oh, Ken?" she tries to look serious, but ends up smiling. "He comes back."

At a time when too many Kens are lost, it is good that there are books being written which deal with individuals, not types; that have hope and no monsters. ○