



John Okada served in the US Army during World War II, intercepting enemy messages while airborne over the coastline of Japan. He sent this photo of himself, standing beneath the wing of a B-24 Liberator, to his brother Roy. Courtesy Roy Okada.

Frank Abe will interpret John Okada's novel *No-No Boy* in the upcoming exhibition *A Thousand Words' Worth*, opening March 9, 2019, at the Washington State History Museum. In this unique exhibition created by the Historical Society, Washington authors will tell stories using objects from the Historical Society's collections, instead of through words!

REDISCOVERING JOHN OKADA

Review by Steve Scher

The writer and teacher Shawn Wong, one of the contributors to *John Okada: The Life & Rediscovered Work of the Author of "No-No Boy,"* says that Okada's 1957 novel is at the very foundation of what he knows about Asian-American literature.

But little has been written about Okada himself. This new volume remedies that.

John Okada was born in Seattle. His parents had emigrated from Japan. Just a few years before Pearl Harbor, Okada was playing sandlot baseball, going to school, and helping his parents run a hotel in Seattle. He started at the University of Washington in September 1941.

A few months later, his life changed.

Okada wrote a poem the night of December 7, as Pearl Harbor smoldered. "I Must Be Strong" revealed the passion, patriotism and turmoil that would emerge in his life and his novel. The first stanza reads:

I know now for what war I was born.
Every child is born to see some struggle,
But this conflict is yet the worst.
For my dark features are those of the enemy,
And my heart is buried deep in occidental soil.
People will say things, and people will do things,
I know they will, and I must be strong.

By Executive Order, without due process or trial, the U.S. Government forced thousands of Japanese-Americans living on the West Coast into desert prisons. Okada, his family and his friends found themselves behind barbed wire and staring into the barrels of machine guns in the hands of fellow Americans.

Like thousands of other American citizens of Japanese descent during World War II, Okada eventually joined the military and fought in the Pacific.

Those experiences shaped his too-short life. Okada died of a heart attack at age 47 in 1971.

He wrote a letter to a prospective publisher in February, 1956. It is available for the first time in this volume. In the letter, Okada said that *No-No Boy* was about a conflicted Japanese American who chooses to continue his life in America, "a country which has made mistakes and will make more but, at the same time, it is a country which is striving constantly to rectify the conditions which breed those mistakes."

Okada's novel is full of upheaval, confusion and rage. Unwrapping these emotions and exploring a recent history many wanted to ignore, left Okada a lonely voice outside mainstream literature in the 1950s.

Okada's voice is lonely no more.

Longtime Seattle journalist Frank Abe, producer of the PBS documentary *Conscience and the Constitution* has written a thoughtful biography, bringing the writer to life through oral histories from Okada's friends and family. Abe's co-editors are history professor Greg Robinson and literature scholar Floyd Cheung, and together, the three to bring context to Okada's life and work. They've also included essays from scholars who argue over Okada's ideas, characters and relevance.

Most welcome of all, the book presents Okada's early writings, many in print for the first time. Okada's voice is often funny and satirical. In an essay in the book, Floyd Cheung writes that the early pieces reveal Okada already considering "the absurdities of a world unhinged."

When he died, Okada had been struggling with his unfinished second novel about the Issei, the first generation of Japanese to emigrate to America. The unfinished manuscript was discarded by his grief-stricken widow. Was it the great American novel he hoped to write? We won't know. Maybe he already had.

John Okada: The Life & Rediscovered Work of the Author of "No-No Boy," is published by University of Washington Press.