

JWH: Yes. When you are seven years old—and my mother's not going to explain war to me, she wouldn't have been able to explain what this was all about—all you know is the image in your mind, this bleak desert. We were coming from Santa Monica, where our family lived, and the wind was blowing sand against the bus, and people were just milling around out there in the camp. It was just astonishing. And I remember asking my mother after we'd been in camp for a while, 'Why are we in this camp? Why are we in this place?' And she said, "Because we're Japanese.' Now, she didn't say, 'it is because we are at war,' or 'America is at war with Japan' because at that age I would not have understood the concept of war and so forth, so she just said, 'it is because we're Japanese.' I realized later as an adult that from that moment on, I perceived that it was not only bad to be Japanese. It was criminal because we were locked up behind barbed wire.

DW: *Farewell to Manzanar* is powerful because it speaks so clearly about camp experience, all these on-the-ground details about day-to-day life in Manzanar and its effect on families, but fantastical elements break through. I sensed that fairy tales were a way of interpreting life in camp when you were a child.

JWH: You know, I never even thought of it until you just brought it up, but of course, imagine yourself as a child in this absolutely strange situation, living in these barracks, like living in an army base. You can't go beyond the barbed wire because there are these rattlesnakes out there and dragons, and you have these Indians, Indian ghosts, in the camp. My God, my imagination must have gone crazy! That is how I survived. I grew up in a household where there weren't books. My father was a fisherman with ten kids. In camp, I was first exposed to books, especially fairy tales. The Quakers donated truckloads of books. In camp we had twelve or thirteen barracks and a big firebreak, so if a fire broke out, the whole camp wouldn't go up. The trucks dumped these books in the firebreak so we had these huge mounds of books. It would rain on them, the sun would burn down on them. I would pass them by, we would play war with those books, go in and throw the books at each other. No one thought to read them. One day I was walking by, the

sun was shining, and I saw these gold leaves flitting. It was a book about Rapunzel letting her hair down. The pages were gilted with gold. It was sparkly. I picked up the book, and read it, and got all the fairy tale books I could find. That's how I began to read.

DW: As in old fairy tales, the spirits can be benevolent and also very frightening. In your novel, *The Legend of Fire Horse Woman*, (2003) you have a scene with a little girl who is respecting the boundaries of camp because she's scared of the spirits out there.

JWH: They told us it was filled with rattlesnakes. They told us, 'there is a fountain of youth out there, filled with fish and everything, but to get to that you have to walk past all these rattlesnakes and scorpions.' Nothing was just free out there. You had to go through all these steps to get to it like in *The Hobbit*. It must have been the books I read that told me that.

DW: Those fairy tale and fantastical elements are brought to the forefront in *The Legend of Fire Horse Woman*, but you've also added the traditions and legends of the Paiutes, who once lived on the land that Manzanar later occupied.

JWH: Their spirits were there. They still are. They were there for centuries before we went there. In one square mile of Manzanar, archaeologists have gone down through three layers of artifacts. The first one, way down, are the Indians who lived on that piece of land, then the white settlers who planted the apple and the pear orchards—they left because Los Angeles stole the Owens Valley water in the 1920s. These people were going bust. They left their artifacts, and on top of that they put up Manzanar.

DW: I was going to ask you about the strong role nature plays in your work. In your writing, the dust storms of Manzanar seem like living beings.

JWH: I think it is a cultural thing, because Japanese culture is very nature-bound. Nature is so precious. Not only that, but in Shintoism, everything is a god. All these gods up there—rocks, rivers, streams. It is a kind of animistic

DOROTHEA LANGE

Japanese Girl with Internment Tag,
Hayward, California, May 8, 1942
photographic print, 11 x 17 in



courtesy: Jane Diamond (pictured) and the National Archive