Seen and Unseen by Elizabeth Partridge —Chapter Summaries

Opening Pages & Context

The book opens by defining terms: the *Issei* (Japanese immigrants barred from citizenship) and the *Nisei* (their American-born children who were citizens). A map shows the ten War Relocation Authority prison camps across the American interior.

Section 1: December 7, 1941 — The Day of Pearl Harbor

The narrative begins in Los Angeles, where photographer **Toyo Miyatake** is photographing a fancy wedding when government agents burst in and arrest several Japanese American men, dragging them away in front of their families. The same scene plays out up and down the West Coast: bankers, priests, newspaper reporters, and teachers — leaders of the Japanese American community — are rounded up with no explanation given to their families. The very next day, the United States declares war on Japan.

Fear spreads rapidly. Rumors fly that Japanese Americans might signal enemy submarines, sabotage military infrastructure, or send coded radio messages from their fields. The US government acts swiftly: radios, cameras, and weapons are confiscated as contraband; bank accounts are frozen; curfews are imposed so that no one of Japanese ancestry can travel more than five miles from home or be outside after 8:00 p.m.

Japanese and Japanese American families are terrified. To demonstrate their loyalty, mothers pull kimonos from closets, fathers take calligraphy off walls, and books, letters, and photographs from relatives in Japan are burned in piles.

The book introduces future US Congressman **Norman Mineta's** Issei father, who gathers his children and tells them: "All of you are US citizens and this is your home. There is nothing anyone can do to take this away from you." The next line: *He was wrong.*

On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signs **Executive Order 9066**, authorizing the forced removal of more than 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast. The government disguises this with euphemisms: calling it an "evacuation," calling the forced detention sites "assembly centers," and calling the prison camps "internment" or "relocation" centers. The book explicitly corrects each term: these were forced removals, detention centers, and prison camps.

Section 2: Dorothea Lange Photographs for the WRA (March–July 1942)

Dorothea Lange is hired by the War Relocation Authority to document the roundup and forced relocation. Officials want photos showing it is being carried out in a "humane, orderly way." Dorothea is horrified but takes the job deliberately — she wants her photographs to expose the injustice, showing that imprisoning people without charges or trial is illegal and undemocratic.

She rises at dawn every day, photographing families on farms and in cities, trying to document Japanese American life *before* the forced removal. She pushes herself to exhaustion, photographing as long as there is light.

Meanwhile, Japanese Americans scramble to prepare in the few weeks given to them. They must sell cars and belongings for a fraction of their worth, put possessions in storage, and give away pets. Japanese farmers, who grow nearly half of California's fruits and vegetables, are ordered to keep working until the very last day. In one act of defiance, a farmer who is denied a 24-hour extension to harvest his strawberries plows under his entire ripe crop — and is immediately arrested by the FBI for "sabotage." Each family is assigned a number, stripping them of their names and identity. Six-year-old **Amy Iwasaki** thinks that she and all Japanese Americans "had done something so bad that the people didn't even want to look at us."

Dorothea photographs families arriving at the **Tanforan Assembly Center**, a former horse-racing track south of San Francisco. Families are assigned either rough barrack rooms or old horse stalls that have been swept out and whitewashed but still reek of manure and urine. Everyone is given a large cloth sack to fill with straw for a mattress. They wait in long lines for meals of canned meat, spinach, boiled potatoes, and bread.

When Dorothea develops her photographs and turns them in — along with meticulous captions and expense logs — to **Major Beasley** at the army's Western Defense Command, the two clash immediately. He is deeply suspicious of what her images reveal. After she leaves, he goes through every photograph and stamps "impounded" on the ones he wants hidden for the duration of the war, many of which reveal the harsh conditions prisoners face.

Section 3: Manzanar — Dorothea Continues Photographing (June–July 1942)

In June 1942, the prisoners are moved again from the temporary assembly centers to ten permanent War Relocation Authority camps. Dorothea drives hours through desolate California roads to reach **Manzanar War Relocation Center**, located in high desert 225 miles northeast of Los Angeles, between the Sierra Nevada and Inyo Mountains.

At the camp gate, her papers and camera are checked and rechecked, leaving her fuming. When she finally gets to work, a guard is assigned to follow her everywhere. New rules are strictly enforced: **no photographing the communal showers or bathrooms, no photographing the guard towers with machine guns and searchlights, no photographing the tall barbed-wire fences.**

Despite the restrictions, Dorothea photographs what she can: people making rough furniture from scrap lumber, hanging sheets for privacy, scrubbing and planting small gardens, farmers clearing sagebrush for vegetable plots, baseball teams, and school classes held outdoors without chairs or tables. Desert life is brutal — blistering summer heat, howling sand storms that cling to hair and teeth, rattlesnakes and scorpions on the ground, and children warned never to approach the fence.

Dorothea uses layered meaning in her photographs. An image of an elderly grandfather and a toddler, for example, quietly poses the question: why has the US government locked up a very old man and a baby?

At night, lying in bed, Dorothea is tormented by a sense of dread and a terrible stomachache, overwhelmed by the injustice of what she is witnessing. By early July, her assignment is over. All she can do is hope her photographs carry a message: *"This is what we did. How did it happen? How could we?"*

Section 4: Toyo Miyatake — Imprisoned at Manzanar (1942–1945)

The Miyatake family is assigned as **Family #9975**, Block 20, Building 12, Apartment 4 — seven people including Toyo, his wife Hiro, their children, and a cousin, crammed into one small room. Toyo's eldest son **Archie**, 18, had left all his friends at Roosevelt High School in Los Angeles and can hardly believe this is now his life.

One day, Toyo secretly shows Archie a camera lens he has smuggled into camp, along with a film holder. A friend in the carpentry shop secretly builds a camera body from small, sanded scraps of wood to fit the lens. Toyo's motivation is clear: *"I have to record everything. This kind of thing should never happen again."*

Getting film is the next challenge. A white salesman who visits the camp weekly to take orders for goods turns out to be an old friend of Toyo's. He agrees to smuggle film and darkroom chemicals into camp right under the guards' eyes.

When no one is watching in the early morning light, Toyo slips out to take photographs — including images of the guard towers and latrine buildings that Dorothea had been forbidden to photograph. At night, in pitch darkness, he develops film and prints photographs in his apartment.

The Manzanar Riot (December 1942): Tensions boil over. One prisoner is beaten by five others over a political disagreement. A suspected attacker is jailed. Word spreads quickly, and several thousand prisoners gather at the administration building to demand his release. They are fed up with everything: imprisonment, mass-cooked food, straw mattresses, dust storms, and now the cold seeping through thin walls. They light fires in barrels and sing Japanese songs through the night. Toyo stays inside — there is no light to photograph by, and his big camera would give him away.

The camp director calls in 135 Military Police, armed and nervous. An officer marches behind the line of soldiers shouting, *"Hold your line! Remember Pearl Harbor!"* When the crowd refuses to disperse, police don gas masks and lob tear gas canisters. Then shots ring out. **A teenager is shot and killed.** Nine more protesters are wounded, the bullets striking them in the backs and sides. Twenty-one-year-old Jim Kanagawa is severely wounded; the camp hospital has no antibiotics, no oxygen, no IV fluids. Medical worker Paul Takagi sits by Jim's bedside through the still nights, helpless, hearing Jim whisper *"I don't want to die."* Five days later, Jim dies of his wounds.

The Loyalty Questionnaire (early 1943): Two months after the riot, every prisoner over seventeen is required to fill out a loyalty questionnaire designed to separate "loyal" from "disloyal" prisoners. Two questions cause anguish throughout the camp:

- **Question 27:** Would you fight in the US military? Nisei were asked to serve in a segregated all-Japanese American unit, the **442nd Regimental Combat Team**. Archie feels bitter — the government that has locked them up now wants them to fight for it.
- **Question 28:** Would you renounce allegiance to the Japanese emperor and swear allegiance to America? For Nisei born in America, this makes no sense — they never had allegiance to the emperor. For Issei, saying yes means becoming a person without any citizenship, at grave risk after the war.

Families argue bitterly over what to answer. Archie wants to say "no" out of anger, but Toyo and Hiro fear he will be taken away from the family if he does. Reluctantly, pressured by his parents, Archie answers "yes." Those who answered "no" to both questions — the "no-nos" — are declared disloyal and transferred to **Tule Lake Relocation Center**, patrolled by tanks.

Toyo's Studio: Surprisingly, the camp director calls Toyo into his office. Toyo is terrified he has been caught. But the director says he knows how hard it is that prisoners have no photographs of weddings, birthdays, and funerals, and asks Toyo to open a photographic studio. Toyo is relieved and excited. He sets up a real darkroom in a barrack in Block 30.

There is one humiliating catch: because he is Japanese, Toyo is not allowed to press the shutter button himself. White American assistants are hired solely to click the camera. Toyo can set up the lighting, compose the shot, and pose his subjects — but the final act of taking the picture must be done by someone else. He sometimes loses his temper and yells at his helpers.

As the war goes on with fewer major incidents, rules are gradually relaxed. Toyo is eventually allowed to photograph freely outside the studio and, finally, to press the shutter himself. Because he is part of the community, people trust him with personal, unguarded moments.

Slipping Under the Fence: Toyo and friends discover a gully where the guards cannot see them and they can slip under the barbed wire. Above, mountain streams run with trout. The men make homemade fishing rods and smuggle hooks into camp, then sneak out to fish — a profound act of reclaiming dignity and freedom. Archie sometimes joins them. *"It was worth the risk. It feels so… free,"* he says.

Section 5: Ansel Adams Photographs at Manzanar (Fall 1943)

By fall 1943, some prisoners who had proved their loyalty have left Manzanar for jobs or schools in the interior of the country. President Roosevelt promises further resettlement, but rumors about Japanese Americans being spies continue. The camp director worries about how prisoners will be treated when released and invites his friend, famous landscape photographer **Ansel Adams**, to come document the camp.

Unlike Dorothea, Ansel has not opposed the incarceration itself, but he believes those who proved their loyalty on the questionnaire should be accepted as patriotic Americans. He drives to Manzanar in his big station wagon, full of camera equipment, and is struck by the "magnificent" desert and mountains.

Ansel's approach is very different from Dorothea's. Where Dorothea took candid shots, Ansel poses his subjects. He frames the Nakamura family — a mother and her two daughters, Joyce and Louise — on their apartment porch, working to make their end of a barrack look like a cozy bungalow. When Joyce complains the sun is in her eyes, Ansel keeps shooting. His framing deliberately leaves out the barbed wire, the guard towers, the desperate boredom of confinement.

Ansel focuses almost exclusively on photographing loyal Nisei and has all his images checked by the camp's Office of Reports to make sure no "no-nos" appear. He finds one exception — baby Fukumoto, listed as "disloyal" because his parents' transfer to Tule Lake had been delayed until after his birth. Above all, Ansel believes that earnest young Japanese American faces will convince other Americans of their trustworthiness and patriotism.

Because he is an outsider, a stranger, the prisoners do not let him see their sadness or anger. They smile for his camera under enormous pressure to appear as "good citizens." The book quotes a prisoner: *"Everything in a picture is not necessarily true."*

Section 6: The End of the War and Going Home (1945)

On **January 2, 1945**, the ban on Japanese Americans returning to the West Coast is lifted. People begin leaving Manzanar. By August 14, 1945, when Japan officially surrenders, only a few thousand prisoners remain at the camp.

Archie desperately wants to return to Los Angeles and asks Toyo how soon they can leave. But Toyo insists on staying to the very end so that his photographic record of Manzanar will be complete. By November, only a few hundred people remain and the cold is closing in. It is time to go.

The Miyatake family packs their belongings and drives home to Los Angeles — **free for the first time in two and a half years.** Many families have lost everything, but the Miyatakes still have their house. They immediately take in two other families who have nowhere to go.

Back Matter

After the War: Manzanar officially closes November 21, 1945. Most prisoners cannot return to their old lives. Many find their stored belongings vandalized or stolen. Some have lost homes and farms because they couldn't pay mortgages while imprisoned. People find work wherever they can — as gardeners, cooks, housekeepers. Some white Americans circulate petitions against the return of Japanese Americans to their old neighborhoods. Others provide jobs, housing, and financial help. In **1988**, President Reagan signs the Civil Liberties Act, awarding each incarcerated person $20,000 — a fraction of what was lost — and acknowledging the incarceration as a profound injustice.

Why Words Matter: This essay explains why the book uses accurate language: "forced removal" instead of "evacuation," "detention centers" instead of "assembly centers," "prison camps" instead of "relocation camps," and increasingly, "concentration camps" — a truthful term that fits the definition of imprisoning large numbers of civilians without trial based on their identity.

Citizenship Violated: A historical essay traces the long arc of anti-Asian discrimination in American law, from the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 to restrictions on Japanese immigration and land ownership. It explains why, despite being at war with Germany and Italy as well, the US detained only around 14,000 of the more than two million foreign-born Germans and Italians in the country — while imprisoning all 120,000+ Japanese and Japanese Americans on the West Coast. General DeWitt's 618-page report, which fabricated claims of sabotage and espionage to justify the incarceration, is examined — including how Justice Department lawyers called the key claims "incontrovertibly incorrect," and how DeWitt refused any corrections.

Civil Liberties and the Constitution: This essay covers the legal challenges Japanese Americans mounted against the incarceration during the war — more than ten challenges, four of which reached the Supreme Court, all of which the Court upheld. The landmark case of **Fred Korematsu** is detailed: he refused to be incarcerated, was arrested, and appealed to the Supreme Court in 1944, which ruled against him on grounds of "military necessity." In 1988, suppressed government documents proving DeWitt's justifications were lies were discovered, and a federal judge overturned Korematsu's conviction. In 2018, Supreme Court dicta strongly condemned the original ruling, though legal scholars debate whether it has been formally overruled.

Keeping Our Democracy Strong: A closing call to action, noting that today everyone carries in their pocket — a smartphone — the kind of tool for bearing witness that earlier generations never had. Unlike Dorothea's photographs, which could be stamped "impounded" and buried in a filing cabinet, images captured today can be shared instantly.

Biographies of the Three Photographers: Detailed profiles of Dorothea Lange (1895–1965), Toyo Miyatake (1895–1979), and Ansel Adams (1902–1984) trace their lives, careers, and legacies. Toyo's son Archie and grandson Alan both carried on the Toyo Miyatake Studio. Ansel donated his Manzanar photographs to the Library of Congress.

Author's Note (Elizabeth Partridge): Partridge explains that she is the goddaughter of Dorothea Lange, grew up seeing Dorothea's photographs on the walls of her living room, and was inspired to write the book by a photograph of an elderly grandfather carrying his young grandson through Manzanar — an image that hung in her office for years, the grandfather's eyes quietly asking: *"When will you tell our story?"*

Illustrator's Note (Lauren Tamaki) & The Damage of the Model Minority Myth: Tamaki, a fourth-generation Japanese Canadian, shares her personal connection to the incarceration — her grandmother was in a Canadian internment camp, her grandfather George Tamaki became the first Nisei to receive a law degree from Dalhousie University and fought for the rights of incarcerated Japanese Canadians. The essay examines how the model minority myth — which characterizes Asian Americans as uniformly hardworking and obedient — was actually partly *advanced* by the incarceration, as prisoners were pressured to perform loyalty and productivity to prove their worth. The myth was later weaponized to pit Asian Americans against Black Americans and to discourage dissent and organizing. It concludes that the myth is a tool of white supremacy, and that Asian Americans cannot avoid racism by being "perfect."