

# A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

## AMY LEE-TAI

**Q: What inspired you to write *A Place Where Sunflowers Grow*?**

A: I had been toying with the idea of writing a children's book about my maternal grandmother Hisako Hibi, whom I view as a pioneer in her own right. After surviving the internment and my grandfather's passing, she was left alone and poor to raise two children. Yet she continued to follow her calling to be an artist. I wanted more people to know about her courageous story as well as her artwork.

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Then I was approached by Children's Book Press to write a manuscript centering on the Topaz Art School, which my grandfather helped establish; he and my grandmother

both taught and painted there, and my mother and uncle were also students. What resulted is a work of historical fiction inspired by my family's internment experience.

**Q: What do you find compelling about the internment camp art schools?**

A: The art schools, which most Americans are not aware of, offered internees an invaluable opportunity to express themselves in an otherwise oppressive environment. I decided to write a story about a young girl, Mari, whose life is changed dramatically by the internment. The art school helps her come to terms with these overwhelming changes, and provides her with support from caring individuals and the chance to express herself. Mari draws what is important to her (i.e. her old house and backyard), which gives her a sense of pride and a connection to her lost past. This, in turn, gives her the courage to speak and move ahead.

**Q: Why did you incorporate sunflowers into the story?**

A: While Mari is a fictional character, sunflowers really did bloom at Topaz. My mother and grandmother planted sunflowers seeds, and they grew to the top of the barrack wall. To me, there is something so lovely in that act of planting seeds in the barren desert behind barbed wire. It was such an act of hope. Besides serving as a metaphor for hope, the sunflowers also represent the internees who managed to survive—with dignity and grace—the harsh circumstances of the internment.

**Q: What would you like young readers to learn from *A Place Where Sunflowers Grow*?**

A: There is so much I'd like young readers to take away from the book, more than I have room to express here! Most importantly, I want readers to know about this chapter of American history, to know that the internment – with all its injustice and hardships – did in fact happen. By creating a main character that readers might relate to or feel empathy for, I hope this book will plant some seeds in readers: to steer clear of racial and ethnic targeting in their individual interactions with others, and to work towards a world that will not commit other atrocities targeting entire races or ethnicities. These are lofty goals that one book alone can't reach, but I hope this book will work towards that peaceful end.



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