



Classroom Guide for **HEROES**

by **Ken Mochizuki**
illustrated by **Dom Lee**

Reading Level

Interest Level: Grades 1-5

Reading Level: Grades 2-3

(Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula)

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 3.7/.5

Lexile Measure®: 670

Scholastic Reading Counts!™: 3.7

Themes

War, Prejudice, Heroism, Fathers & Sons, Fitting In, Japanese Americans

Synopsis

Donnie is tired of playing the bad guy every time he and his friends get together to play war. According to the other kids, Donnie should play the enemy: after all, as a Japanese American, he looks like "them."

When he argues that his family served in the U.S. Army, Donnie's friends dare him to prove it. But when he asks his father and uncle for proof, they tell him that kids should play something besides war. "Real heroes don't brag," Uncle Yosh says. "They just do what they are supposed to do."

Set against the backdrop of the 1960s, and a new conflict in Vietnam, this story explores how one family deals with the painful legacy of war. In their powerful follow-up to *Baseball Saved Us*, Ken Mochizuki and Dom Lee once again present readers with American heroes they won't usually find in history books, but who they can always hold in their hearts.

Background

Americans of Japanese and Asian descent are known to have served in the U.S. armed forces since the Spanish-American War. During World War II, about 33,000 Americans of Japanese descent served in the U.S. military. The most famous were the members of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team.

In 1943, young Japanese American men volunteered to serve in the U.S. armed forces, though they and their families were imprisoned in American concentration camps. They were in these camps because they were not considered Americans, many of these young men reasoned, and fighting for their country would prove they

were as American as anyone else. About 20,000 volunteered from the camps. Some became members of the Military Intelligence Service, in which they served as interpreters and interrogators for U.S. forces in the Pacific. But many were sent to and trained at Camp Shelby in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Since the U.S. Army was still segregated, they became the all-Japanese American 442nd.

In 1944, the 442nd was sent to Italy, where they joined the 100th Battalion, a unit composed entirely of Japanese Americans from Hawaii. They fought some of the toughest battles against the Germans in Italy, and are most remembered for rescuing the "Lost Battalion," a U.S. Army unit from Texas trapped by the Germans in the mountains of northeastern France. During that mission, the 442nd suffered 1,400 casualties to rescue 270 of the "Lost Battalion."

The 442nd received 18,143 individual decorations, including one Congressional Medal of Honor, and seven Presidential Unit Citations, making it one of the most highly decorated units in U.S. Army history.

BEFORE READING

Prereading Focus Questions

Before students read the story, you might want them to discuss one of the following questions as a motivation for reading.

1. Can you think of some people you consider to be heroes? What characterizes a hero?
2. Have you ever played role-playing games with friends? How do you decide who gets to be which part?
3. Do you know anyone who has served in the military? Have they ever shared their experiences with you?

AFTER READING

Discussion Questions

After reading, discuss the story. Some questions that can be used to generate discussion are:

1. The other children taunted Donnie and made him play the part of the enemy. Why? Was this fair or unfair? Why? Is looking like an enemy enough to make someone an enemy?
2. Donnie's friends did not believe that Donnie's father and uncle could fight in "their" army. Why did they think that it was "their" army, to Donnie's exclusion?
3. Some people agree on fighting in a war and others do not. Would you fight in a war? Why or why not? Why do people go to war?
4. Does someone have to be a hero to be valuable or important?
5. Do you think Donnie's friends were good friends? Why or why not?

Reader's Response Journal

To promote active reading, you might want students to keep a reader's response journal as they read the story. This journal will help students personalize what they are reading.

1. Do you ever feel picked on at school? For what? What do you do about it? Do you pick on someone? For what?
2. Have you found that other people expect you to behave a certain way because of the way you look? What ways? How do you respond?
3. Are you surprised by the way that Donnie was treated? Why or why not?
4. Donnie and his friends looked up to war heroes. Who do you look up to? What about that person or those people do you admire?
5. How do you choose your friends? What traits do you consider important in a friend?

Other Writing Activities

Ask students to respond to one or more of the following activities:

1. Let's say someone from another country was interviewing you and asked you to describe what Americans were like and how you could tell who was an American? How would you respond?
2. Ask the class to illustrate and describe someone they consider to be a hero and why. Then, compile these papers and present them together. More specifically, students can opt to write biographies of war heroes.
3. Write a letter of appreciation to someone you admire.

Vocabulary

Having located pertinent books and information, give students the opportunity to learn technical military terms, i.e., different parts of the uniform, different medals, ranks in the armed forces, different branches of the armed forces, etc. By the same token, allow them the opportunity to learn terms of peace and reconciliation, e.g., armistice, peace treaty.

ESL Teaching Strategies

1. You might first have the students look at the pictures of the story only and discuss what the story could be about. Have them then identify the conflicts and resolutions as they read the story.
2. Have students get in pairs and orally retell the story to one another.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

In order to integrate students' reading experiences with other subject areas, you might want to have students complete some of these activities.

Social Studies

1. Study the wars mentioned in the text: World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, including why the wars were started and how long they lasted, and what the results of the wars were. Also, locate the area in which the above-mentioned wars were fought and study the geography. Be sure to chronologically place each war in a larger context. The class might even compare and contrast the wars, their reasons for being fought, where they took place, their duration, etc.
2. Have a guest speaker from the military (retired or currently enlisted) talk to the students about how and why they joined. Also, they might share stories and participate in a question and answer time.
3. Make available quotations on (various aspects of) war by different people, including generals, politicians, artists, or musicians for students to peruse.
4. Find out the procedure for how America decides to go to war or to quit a war.
5. Listen to a debate as to why a nation ought to or ought not to go to war and list the reasons given. Divide the class into two groups: one group that is in support of a possibly imminent war and one that is opposed to it. The class can choose what war they will be rallying for or against. Then, ask the groups to gather data and articulate their reasons for why the country must or must not go to war, depending on the side they are on.

Mathematics

Calculate the amount of time that various wars lasted as well as the interim time between wars. What war lasted the longest? The shortest? As a result of wars, there are many casualties. Having gathered the appropriate information, compare population sizes before and after wars. War also causes much damage and are costly. Build a bar graph of approximated damage costs per country per war as well as of other war expenses, such as weapons.

Science

Animals also fight and go to "war". Examine the following areas:

1. What do animals fight over, i.e., territory, food, mates?
2. What defense mechanisms or predatory tactics do different animals display? In different illustrations of animals fighting, locate the predator and prey.

Art

Observe monuments and paintings depicting or commemorating wars or war heroes, e.g., the Vietnam Memorial. Are there any war memorials located in your area?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR

Ken Mochizuki is a native of Seattle, WA, where he currently lives. Having received his bachelor's degree in communications from the University of Washington, he went on to spend five years as a professional actor in Los Angeles. For the past ten years, he has worked as a newspaper journalist, with a special interest in the history and current issues of Americans of Japanese and Pacific Islander descent.

Heroes is his second picture book after the award-winning *Baseball Saved Us*, which is about a Japanese American boy who discovers hope and self-respect at an internment camp during World War II. Unlike Donnie, Mochizuki admitted that he never had to play the "bad guy." He dedicates *Heroes* to those above-mentioned people who "served in the U.S. armed forces and defended America with little or no recognition."

Dom Lee was born in Seoul, South Korea and now lives in New Jersey with his wife and their two children. He received his bachelor's degree in fine arts from Seoul National University and his master's degree from the School of Visual Arts in New York City.

Heroes is Lee's second picture book. As in his first picture book, *Baseball Saved Us*, the illustrations for *Heroes* were rendered by applying encaustic beeswax on paper, then scratching out images, and finally adding paint and colored pencil for color.

Mochizuki and Lee teamed up again for their third book, the award-winning *Passage To Freedom: The Sugihara Story*, which tells the true story of Chiune Sugihara, the "Japanese Schindler," who, with his family's encouragement, saved thousands of Jews in Lithuania during World War II. Also to Dom Lee's credit is *Journey Home*, which he illustrated with his wife, Keunhee Lee.

Awards & Reviews

Children's Book-of-the-Month Club Selection

Notable Children's Book, *Smithsonian*

"Dignified and effective." –*The New York Times Book Review*

"This book evocatively recreates a time when the war was still fresh in the minds of young parents, and ably shows how subtly prejudice was passed on to their children. But *Heroes* is also a tribute to the 442nd Regiment Combat Team, an all-Japanese-American regiment, and serves as a reminder of their important contribution." –
Kirkus Reviews

Resources on the Web

Learn more about *Heroes*:

<http://www.leeandlow.com/books/61/pb/heroes>

Other books by Ken Mochizuki and Dom Lee

***Baseball Saved Us*:**

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/17/hc/baseball_saved_us

Passage to Freedom: The Sugihara Story:

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/89/hc/passage_to_freedom_the_sugihara_story

Passage to Freedom: The Sugihara Story in Spanish:

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/154/hc/pasaje_a_la_libertad_la_historia_de_chiune_sugihara

Be Water, My Friend: The Early Years of Bruce Lee:

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/18/hc/be_water_my_friend_the_early_years_of_bruce_lee

Other books by Dom Lee:

Journey Home at:

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/74/hc/journey_home

Booktalk with Ken Mochizuki about *Be Water, My Friend*:

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/brucelee.mhtml>

Ken Mochizuki also participates in a Booktalk discussion on creativity at:

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/create1c.mhtml>

Booktalk with Dom Lee and Keunhee Lee about *Journey Home* at:

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/domkeun.mhtml>

View other **Active Reader Classroom Guides** at:

http://www.leeandlow.com/p/teachers-asian_american.mhtml

Book Information

\$7.95, PAPERBACK

ISBN 9781880000502

\$16.95, HARDCOVER

ISBN 9781880000168

32 pages, 10" x 8"

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