



Sylvia & Aki

Winifred Conkling

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Sylvia never expected to be at the center of a landmark legal battle; all she wanted was to enroll in school.

Aki never expected to be relocated to a Japanese internment camp in the Arizona desert; all she wanted was to stay on her family farm and finish the school year.

The two girls certainly never expected to know each other, until their lives intersected in Southern California during a time when their country changed forever.

Here is the remarkable story based on true events of Sylvia Mendez and Aki Munemitsu, two ordinary girls living in extraordinary times. When Sylvia and her brothers are not allowed to register at the same school Aki attended and are instead sent to a “Mexican” school, the stage is set for Sylvia’s father to challenge in court the separation of races in California’s schools. Ultimately, Mendez vs. Westminster School District led to the desegregation of California schools and helped build the case that would end school segregation nationally.

Through extensive interviews with Sylvia and Aki—still good friends to this day—Winifred Conkling brings to life two stories of persistent courage in the face of tremendous odds.

Sylvia & Aki Details

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Author : Winifred Conkling

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From Reader Review Sylvia & Aki for online ebook

Maira says

The 2012 Tomas Rivera Book Award was given to Sylvia & Aki along with another winner. I really enjoyed this book which told the stories of two young girls of different backgrounds and their challenge with segregation. This book would be a great read for students 3rd grade & up & also could be for teacher seeking to teach students about rights. Over the course of this class, I think this was my favorite book. This book would be appealing to students of different backgrounds that could possibly relate or have family members this story can relate to.

Penny Peck says

A charming book based on two true stories that are important to California history - perfect for 4th graders, relatively brief and easy to read chapter book fiction that would also make a great classroom readaloud. Sylvia and her brothers are denied admittance to the nearby school, and are told to enroll at the "Mexican" school across town (near the barrio). And Aki is at a Japanese American Relocation camp in Poston, AZ. Sylvia's family has leased their farm from Aki's family, and the girls' used the same bedroom (although not at the same time). They meet, and become friends, and their two parallel stories of injustice will help children identify with them. Sylvia's father sued the school district and won, in a case that helped set a precedent later used in Brown v. Board of Education. Backmatter helps fill in the factual information, but the fictional account is heartfelt without becoming maudlin or manipulative, told in alternating chapters from the point of view of each girl.

Noah says

I just finished reading this book to my 10 & 8 year old kids, and almost broke down reading the epilogue. I can't recommend it more highly.

The book explores the experiences of real-life children at the center of two vital moments in US history: a Japanese girl removed from her family's farm as part of the WWII internment of Japanese Americans and a Mexican girl whose family tends the farm but is not admitted to the local white school.

I'm grateful for the results of the Mendez case, which paved the way for Brown vs. Board of Education, and therefore has allowed my children to attend integrated schools with diverse student populations (in both Grand Rapids Public and Chicago Public Schools). And I'm grateful that this experience has shaped my children such that the arguments of the superintendent who was fighting to maintain segregation sounded completely ridiculous to their ears. I'm also grateful for a book that prompted my 8yo daughter to ask, "What does it mean to be white?"

This nation is on a journey, and if more children engage in that journey through literature like this, our future will be brighter when it comes to the hope for "liberty and justice for all."

Margo Tanenbaum says

In her first work for young people, author Winifred Conkling brings to light an important but little known story in our nation's civil rights history. Several years before Brown v. Board of Education, third-grader Sylvia Mendez wanted nothing extraordinary--just the right to attend her neighborhood school rather than a "Mexican" school near her family's farm in Westminster. Her family challenged the policy in court, leading the way to a landmark school desegregation case that would pave the way to the abolition of school segregation nationwide.

Conkling weaves Sylvia's story with that of Aki Munemitsu; Sylvia is living in Aki's house and farm, since Aki's family was sent away to an internment camp in Arizona because of the war. Sylvia discovers that Aki has left behind her beautiful Japanese doll, whom Sylvia names Keiko, and Keiko becomes the friend of Sylvia's Mexican doll Carmencita. Sylvia wonders if she will ever meet the girl who owns Keiko, and whether they might be friends some day.

The book's chapters alternate between telling the story of the two girls. We discover how Aki's world changes overnight with the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the beginning of whispers and prejudices from their neighbors. Aki has to hide her Japanese doll, hoping it will still be there when the war is over. Aki and her family are sent to Poston, 250 miles away in the Arizona desert where the flimsy barracks didn't keep out the summer heat or the winter chill.

Sylvia is forced to go to a second-rate "Mexican" school, rather than the beautiful school in her neighborhood. Her father was ignored when he complained and sent letters; but when he decided in 1945 to sue the school system, it was about more than just Sylvia and her family. Something bigger was underway, not just for Sylvia but for children she would never meet. "Her father said, 'Sylvia, there cannot be justice for one unless there is justice for all.'"

The author takes us inside the courtroom for the trial, as Sylvia's father's attorney questions one of the Orange County school superintendents. This section is drawn almost entirely from court records. His responses seem shocking to us now, but of course were indicative of the attitudes of many people at that time (i.e. he considered the Mexican children to be inferior to whites in regard to everything from personal hygiene to scholastic ability).

In the epilogue, Sylvia graduates from high school, proud of what her father had done not only for her but for Mexican students across California. An afterword provides additional notes about both the Mendez family and the Munemitsu family, Japanese internment camps, as well as on the end of school segregation in America and the nationwide impact of the Mendez case, particularly on Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka ruling in 1955. The book also includes a bibliography as well as suggestions for further reading.

This is a sensitively written novel that is well suited for elementary school students. The author covers not only the prejudice toward the Mexican American community in California, but also the prejudice toward Japanese Americans because of the war. These two themes dovetail very well together, and enrich the narrative as well as providing ample fodder for discussion if this book is used in class or for home schoolers. I loved the moving cover illustration from award-winning illustrator Raul Colon, whose distinctive style you may recognize from his many picture books (including Pat Mora's *Dona Flor* and Frank McCourt's *Angela and the Baby Jesus*).

L13F_Jana Wilkening says

This 2012 America's Award Commended title AND 2012 Tomas Rivera Award winning book tells the amazing true story of two third grade girls, Sylvia and Aki. The chapters alternate with each girl's point of view as we follow their journey during the 1940s. Aki tells the story of her family's forced relocation to a Japanese internment camp. Sylvia's family moves into Aki's family's farm where she tells the story of her father's fight to allow her and her brothers to enroll in the nearby school as opposed to the "Mexican school" where girls were taught homemaking skills and boys were taught trades. In a courtroom scene that will make your blood boil, Sylvia's father challenges the school district's separation of races. Her father's case, *Mendez vs. Westminster School District*, ultimately helped lead to the famous *Brown vs. Board of Education* case.

I had never heard of this court case before. This would be an incredible story to intertwine during a Civil Rights unit where the *Brown vs. Board of Education* case is frequently discussed. It would also work really well during a study of the Japanese internment camps. This book would fit well in grades 3-5. However, I think studying the true story behind the *Mendez* case should be used in grades 3-8. I am just shocked that in all of my classes on Civil Rights and school integration, etc..., this was never mentioned.

I loved the back and forth points of views of the two girls, although I did find myself most interested in Sylvia's story. I also loved how each chapter started with either a Mexican or Japanese proverb. The end of the book contains a great afterword and further resources. This is a powerful book that would work perfectly in bringing nonfiction to the upper elementary classrooms.

Krista the Krazy Kataloguer says

Prejudice is the theme of this historical novel set in World War II and based on the lives of two real-life young girls. Sylvia Mendez is living with her family on a farm in California, which they are renting from the Munemitsu family, who is interned in a relocation camp in Poston, Arizona. Sylvia finds a doll and a photograph on a shelf in the closet of her room that belongs to Aki Munemitsu, and the two girls eventually begin writing to each other. Both girls and their families are dealing with prejudice. In chapters alternating in point of view between the two girls, the author relates how the Munemitsus, though loyal Americans, are rounded up and sent to a relocation camp because they are Japanese, and how the Mendez family is fighting a legal battle to allow their children to attend a white school near their farm instead of an inferior school for Mexican children. I first learned about the Mendez family in Duncan Tonatiuh's picture book *Separate Is Never Equal* and I had read many other books about the treatment of the Japanese Americans after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. I liked Conkling's combination of the two stories, showing the parallels between prejudice against Japanese Americans and Mexican Americans at this time. Conkling does an excellent job of describing how both Sylvia and Aki felt and the attitudes of adults at the time. She provides additional information at the end of the book about the real-life Sylvia and Aki (including pictures), relocation camps, and the impact the *Mendez* case had on desegregating schools in California and, eventually, all of the United States. Conkling packed a lot into this short middle-grade novel, which I highly recommend.

The Library Lady says

The writing and dialogue are a bit stilted, but this is a nice little story about prejudice, about family and about friendship for younger readers.

Rilee says

Audience: Upper Primary-Intermediate

Appeal: The author personalizes the discrimination of the time in a way that today's readers will be able to relate to and they are able to understand the importance of the historic events. It is a little-known case that is a huge turning point in Latino history. It makes events seem real to the readers.

Award: Tomas Rivera Book Award

Emily Mateos says

Grade/interest level: Upper Elementary (4th-5th grade)

Reading level: No lexile level available but because of length, words used, and content I would say 4th grade

Genre: Information book, Multicultural

Main Characters: Sylvia and Aki

Setting: rural Westminster California on the family farm and at the school where Sylvia was turned away

POV: 3rd person narration

This book tells a story about a young Mexican American girl who is turned away from the closest school, Westminster, because of the color of her skin, and of Aki a Japanese American girl whose family was sent away to camps because of the war. When Sylvia goes to register for school with her aunt and her cousins, who are all fairer complexioned, she is turned away and is told that she must go to the Mexican school even though it is further away. Her family begins the fight to get her to go to the Westminster school. Aki's school year is over and on the new report she hears that the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Now anyone with Japanese ancestry had to be registered and moved to another centralized location. They left their farm where Sylvia's family rented several months later. Since the family is renting, they must deliver the rent to Aki's family in the internment camp they were sent to. There Sylvia and Aki meet and start writing each other and eventually become close friends.

I would use this book to bring about a discussion about civil rights and how the two girls' rights were extinguished because of circumstances not of their own making. I think this book offers two valuable perspectives in WWII: those of a Mexican American child and a Japanese American child.

Dona says

Discussion questions:

remember: From which foreign countries did Sylvia's parents come? (Ch.1, p.10)

From which over-seas country did Aki's parents come? (Ch.2, p.26)

What world event changed the lives of Sylvia and Aki? (Ch.2, p.20)

understand: How did WWII effect these two families?

(Ch. 1, p.4 Ch.2, p.19-24 Ch.13, p.126)

apply: Today the enemies of the United States are Iran and Pakistan and other countries in the Middle East.

What should the American government do to protect us from Iranian people who live in the United States?

Some Iranian people are citizens of the USA. Are the camps a good idea for protecting the citizens?

analyze: How are immigrant children treated today compared to the Mexican children in the story? (Ch.3, p.39-46 Ch.5)

Compare the treatment of the Mexican people in the story, to the treatment of our Black American citizens during the same time period of 1941-1955. (Ch.11, p.112-116)

evaluate: Mr. Ortega chose not to sign the letter to the school board asking for better schools for the Mexican children. Did he make a good choice? Would you have signed the letter? (Ch.5, p.61-64)

create: If people today were forced to leave their homes and live in a camp for security reasons, what should that camp look like?

(Ch.6, p.67-75)

audience: grades 4-8 intermediate

genre: historical fiction

The Reading Countess says

The girls in this story have much to teach modern day readers about social injustice, speaking out against said injustice, and how we are doomed to repeat our mistakes if we do not learn from them. Though the dialogue felt a little stilted, I think my fourth graders would benefit from reading this story in lit. circles when we read about immigration and migrant workers in the spring.

Sarah Nelson says

I'm a sucker for historical fiction like this. It's the teacher in me. When Aki's family is sent to an internment camp with other Japanese Americans, Sylvia's family rents their farm. But Sylvia and her siblings are denied access to the public school and her parents lead the fight to end school segregation in California public schools. Sylvia and Aki were real girls in the 1940s whose families' struggles against discrimination intertwined. Fascinating.

Dorothy says

Dorothy Schultz
TED 2360
Children's Lit.
7/15/13

"The blanket felt soft against Sylvia's head as she leaned back. She thought about Aki. How does she celebrate a holiday that's all about freedom when she's inside an internment camp? What can the word freedom mean to someone trapped behind a barbed-wired fence?" (Insert from page 97).

2012 (Honored) Tomas Rivera Award and Jane Addams Children's Book Award "Sylvia & Aki" by Winifred Conkling is a wonderful book about friendships that can build when we tear down the barriers of race. In her story Conkling describes in such expressive details of landmark events in the 1940's. She writes about the Mendez vs. Westminster School District case that segregated Latino children in California which set up the case for Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education. She narratives the account of how two lives intertwine to build a lasting friendship between Sylvia (a young Hispanic girl) who wanted an education and Aki (a young Japanese girl) who's family has to move to the Japanese Internment camps during WWII because of their nationality.

I had never read of the Mendez case concerning the segregation of Latinos in Southern California, I learned more about our country's past from this book. Most of us when considering segregation we think of the South and Topeka. "Sylvia & Aki" would be a great read for someone who enjoys historical fiction and books about friendships. It would be a book to choose for someone who wants to learn about segregation and internment camps of WWII.

The target audience for this book would be Intermediate readers. The genre is a multi-cultural chapter book with historical fiction.

Remembering: What was the main crop grown on the farm that both Sylvia and Aki lived on? What two states does this story takes place in?

Understanding: Overnight Aki world changed with the bombing of Pearl Harbor, how would you react to the suspicious looks and whispers she encountered by her neighbors and in town.

Applying: Sylvia and her brothers fear they are on the wrong school bus, why? Have you ever been in a circumstance where you felt unsure or out of place, how did you feel. How can you relate that experience to Sylvia and her brothers?

Analyzing: Considering the risk and opposition that Sylvia's father took for his cause, why do you think it was so important for Gonzalo Mendez to file a lawsuit against the school board.

Evaluation: Knowing the racist views of the surrounding community and that one could get deported. What choice would you have made if you were Gonzalo Mendez? Would you have the same courage to take this fight to the courts?

Creating: Towards the end of the story the author has Sylvia and Aki giving each other their prized possession, their dolls. How would you recreate this important interaction between the two girls? Would you

use the same symbol of friendship or use something else?

Laura says

This story chronicles the lives of two young girls & their families who faced racial segregation during World War II. First, there is Aki Munemitsu, a Japanese-American, and her family who owns an asparagus farm, but is sent to internment camps after the Japanese attack Pearl Harbor. Second, there is Sylvia Mendez, a Mexican-American, whose family takes over the farm from the Munemitsu family and the children are denied the ability to go to the local white school. Each chapter rotates between the girls' perspectives sharing their experiences of being denied their rights. The characters in this story are real life individuals who faced these exact battles. Even more so, the father of Sylvia Mendez was the man who filed the Mendez vs. Westminster School District of Orange County and won, paving the way for future lawsuits that ultimately affirmed the decision in Brown vs. the Board of Education Topeka. Appropriate for grades 4- 6, this book covers two large issues in American history, interment camps and racial segregation. The author used both Japanese & Spanish words that assisted in helping represent the two cultures in a positive, authentic light.

Kylie Svoboda says

Audience: 3rd-6th graders. Great for girls but boys would enjoy it too.

Appeal: The book is very good. One of the best books I have read this summer. The book would tie in perfectly when learning about World War II in social studies class. The book shows the racism and segregation that the Mexican Americans endured as well as the Japanese Americans during the Japanese internment camps. This novel would give students a perspective on the Japanese and Mexican American's living the 1940's. This book would especially appeal to children with Mexican and Japanese heritage because most of American history is taught from the white man view point and this story give the Japanese and Mexican viewpoints and tells their stories.

Award: Diego Rivera Children's Book Award
