



## Barbed Wire Baseball

*Marissa Moss , Yuko Shimizu (Illustrations)*

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## **Barbed Wire Baseball** Marissa Moss , Yuko Shimizu (Illustrations)

As a boy, Kenichi “Zeni” Zenimura dreams of playing professional baseball, but everyone tells him he is too small. Yet he grows up to be a successful player, playing with Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig! When the Japanese attack Pearl Harbor in 1941, Zeni and his family are sent to one of ten internment camps where more than 110,000 people of Japanese ancestry are imprisoned without trials. Zeni brings the game of baseball to the camp, along with a sense of hope.

This true story, set in a Japanese internment camp during World War II, introduces children to a little-discussed part of American history through Marissa Moss’s rich text and Yuko Shimizu’s beautiful illustrations. The book includes author and illustrator notes, archival photographs, and a bibliography.

## **Barbed Wire Baseball Details**

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Author : Marissa Moss , Yuko Shimizu (Illustrations)

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## From Reader Review Barbed Wire Baseball for online ebook

### Dov Zeller says

Marissa Moss once again scripts a great kids picture book about a relatively unknown historical player and not-adequately-honored cultural hero. She and Yuko Shimizu team up on this one and hit it almost out of the ball-park.

I'll start with what I like about this book. The art is gorgeous. The story is captivating. Kenichi Zenimura aka Zeni's early determination to play baseball is, seemingly, indomitable and Moss seems to really relish the fabulist nature of the tale. Things that could be huge obstacles seem to melt in Zeni's presence like snowflakes on a hot sidewalk.

Zeni, as he is called throughout the book, the "father of Japanese American baseball", is thrown one of his biggest curve balls just after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, when he and his family are sent to an interment camp. After his internment, the book documents, page after page, his dogged construction of a playing field in the camp. Once again, seemingly daunting obstacles are easily overcome, and Zeni oversees the building of field, bleachers, the ordering of uniforms. He organizes a whole, spirited culture of baseball in the camp and likely improved the quality of life for a lot of people. (I can't help but wonder if there was any room for girls in this league.)

What do I have to complain about? Mainly this: we don't really understand from the story what is emotionally and otherwise at stake here. It's pretty happy go lucky all the way though, maybe even a little pollyanna, and while I don't think a kid's picture book is the place to stress the horrors of internment, there's just something a little too singularly focused in here. It makes me think of a soup that is lacking some grounding, earthy element. It works okay, but some ingredient is needed to bring out its fullness.

Another goodreads reviewer had a similar response to the book and recommends "Baseball Saved Us" as an alternative or complement. I look forward to reading it.

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### Susan says

Marissa Moss does such a wonderful job of presenting little known people who made a big impact on history in some way. She's done it again in sharing the story of Kenichi "Zeni" Zenimura, the "father" of Japanese American baseball. This picture book biography would pair nicely with Kathryn Fitzmaurice's historical fiction title, *A Diamond in the Desert*. The illustrations, afterward, and bibliography add to the strength of this book.

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## **Teresa says**

Before reading Michael Cunningham's *A Wild Swan: And Other Tales*, I noted the bio of its artist, Yuko Shimizu, on the outer flap: it mentions this book. Anyone who knows me well knows that I am interested in books about baseball, even if they are children's books, maybe even especially if they are children's books.

When I got to the story's third two-page illustration (page 7), with a grim Zeni in the forefront while roiling maroon war-clouds swirl in the background, I was nudged by how familiar the art seemed. Not until I finished the book and then looked up the artist's website did I realize I first saw her work on the covers of the graphic series that starts with *The Unwritten*, Vol. 1: *Tommy Taylor and the Bogus Identity*. I should've realized and I can only excuse myself by saying I'm not really a visual person.

Kenichi Zenimura is now considered the father of Japanese baseball. Barely five-feet tall, he'd become a star player in Fresno (California) leagues; been chosen to play in exhibitions with Lou Gehrig and Babe Ruth, as well as organizing a 1934 tour to Japan for Ruth. After Pearl Harbor, Zeni, his wife and two sons were forced into one of the interment camps in the Arizona desert. There they had to stay, for four long years.

This book is the story of how Zeni built a real baseball field within the camp's confines, including bleachers that sat 6000 fans. Anyone who has experienced the thrill of walking into a baseball stadium will understand how it felt when the project was completed. The power Zeni must've felt as he finally hit the ball for the first time on his own playing field is depicted in one perfect picture. As he rounds the bases, his joy is now in the forefront of swirling clouds, this time of white.

Zenimura, with Gehrig on one side and Ruth on the other, is the man in the middle:

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## **Kate says**

The title page with a game ticket, the baseball image on the back echoing the Japanese flag, and the front cover with Japanese writing in the style of Japanese baseball cards from mid-twentieth century complete the package of this well-crafted, inspirational story. The artwork, done with Japanese calligraphy brush and ink, is a perfect match to this story of a man who continued his love of an all-American game while America imprisoned him.

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## **The Reading Countess says**

A Japanese internment camp becomes a beacon of hope when a baseball field, players in crisp uniforms, and a stand full of cheering fans mimic normalcy. In a world spinning out of control then, as now, we look for the helpers.

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Hopeful, yet still punching you in the gut for what should have never been.

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## **Kristin Nelson says**

Intriguing story about the father of Japanese baseball and his life in an internment camp. Fantastic illustrations.

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## **Judith says**

This is a great picture book to use when introducing the U.S. internment of Japanese Americans.

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## **Lori says**

Barbed Wire Baseball

### 1)Text-to-World

What does this remind you of in the real world? Students should be given a chance to relate this story, based on the real life story of Zenichi Zenimutra to current happenings and past history. Connections could be found with war stories of WWII the students have heard, prison stories, stories of people surviving and thriving during difficult circumstances, and baseball stories.

### 2)Perspectives and Values:

- a)Japanese Americans during WWII-Zeni's family was placed in a prison camp at Gila River, Arizona where "he felt he was shrinking into a tiny hard ball" (p. 9);
- b)Life and feelings in a prison-living within a fence "not allowed outside after dark...guards light swept across the yard" (p. 23) so no one would escape;
- c)Conquering oppression using what you have, within yourself and around you—"He knew he was still behind a barbed wire fence, but he felt completely free, as airy and light as the ball he had sent flying" (p. 34);
- d)Even though Zeni was small in stature compared to other big league baseball players "he felt ten feet tall, playing the game he loved so much. Nothing would ever make him feel small again" (p. 36).

### 3)Remembering: When did the story (based on real events) take place?

Applying: If you were imprisoned, even though you were innocent, what could you do to help others imprisoned with you, like Zeni helped his fellow prisoners?

Evaluating: Do you think that Japanese Americans should have been imprisoned during WWII?

Why do you feel that way?

Understanding: How would you characterize Zeni's actions during his imprisonment?

Analyzing: How would you contrast how America felt about and treated Japanese Americans during WWII and now?

Creating: Using half the class in the Japanese American roles and half as the prison guards, act out the story.

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### **Jo Oehrlein says**

The story of a Japanese-American man who played baseball. After he and his family were sent to an internment camp, he rallied his family and the camp together to build a baseball field and setup a league. He gave the people a sense of purpose and normalcy in a time when nothing else was normal.

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### **Mary Ann says**

Kenichi Zenimura fell in love with baseball as a boy, moving to Fresno in 1920 to pursue his dreams of playing with the pros. But after Pearl Harbor, Zeni and his family were sent to an internment camp, imprisoned without trial. Moss tells the story of how Zeni organized baseball teams in the camps, bringing his fierce sense of hope and justice to the hardships Japanese Americans faced during WW2.

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### **Amy says**

Zeni finds himself behind barbed wire in the Gila River War Relocation Center with his family and other Japanese-Americans during World War II. He decides to build a baseball field in the Arizona desert. The ingenuity this took to "do it right" is inspiring. The book, a true story about a dark point in American history, is actually fun and hopeful. The illustrations capture the feeling of each point in the story. You don't have to love baseball to be a fan of this book.

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### **Cathy says**

As a boy, Kenichi "Zeni" Zenimura dreams of playing professional baseball, but everyone tells him he is too small. Yet he grows up to be a successful player, playing with Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig! When the Japanese attack Pearl Harbor in 1941, Zeni and his family are sent to one of ten internment camps where more than 110,000 people of Japanese ancestry are imprisoned without trials. Zeni brings the game of baseball to the camp, along with a sense of hope.

This true story, set in a Japanese internment camp during World War II, introduces children to a little-discussed part of American history through Marissa Moss's rich text and Yuko Shimizu's beautiful illustrations. The book includes author and illustrator notes, archival photographs, and a bibliography.

As always a good historical fiction separates the history from the fiction and the author does a nice job at the end of the book of filling in the details of a long ago historical period that most would like to forget happened. It seemed to drag in the details of making the ball field, but came together well in the end.

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### **Rachel Lee says**

I found a text-to-text in "Barbed Wire Baseball" by Marissa Moss. While I can't remember the name of the book I am thinking of, I remember learning about World War II in middle school. Our history book for that year mentioned a lot of things about the Japanese camps when America went to war with Japan. I remember

being very sad and surprised by this because I had only heard of the concentration camps for Jews in Germany during that time. However, the text did mention that the Japanese would try to find ways to keep themselves busy and happy while imprisoned: but my history book didn't mention anyone building a baseball field like Zeni built in the camp he was sent to! I didn't know how much the Japanese would be able to do something like build a baseball diamond. I find it very interesting how much history there is in the world that is unknown and not in history books. I would have found that class a bit more interesting if our history book included the story of Zeni and his baseball diamond! :)

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### **Alex (not a dude) Baugh says**

From the time he was a young boy and saw his first baseball game, Kenochi "Zeni" Zenimura wanted to play baseball - he wanted that more than anything. And he was well on his way towards living his dream when he was old enough, managing local teams and playing with the Fresno Nisei League and the Fresno Twilight League, going to exhibition games in Japan, even playing with star players of the New York Yankees. It seemed Zeni was on top of the world, at least until December 7, 1941 when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor.

By now married with two teenage sons, Zeni and his family were forced to move to an internment camp just because they were of Japanese descent. Located on the Gila River Indian Reservation, it was hot and dry desert with too many people crowded into barrack after barrack, each containing row upon row of cots.

While families tried to make a home out of their allotted space, putting up curtains and decorating with all kinds of personal mementos, Zeni still dreamed about baseball and decided he was going to play - right in the desert!

And so he picked a spot and began to clear the grass and rocks, hard work in the desert heat. Yet before he knew it, others joined in to help, including his own sons. Using his ingenuity, his power of persuasion and any other means possible, little by little, Zeni and his helpers began to turn the desert into a baseball field, right down to bleaches for people to sit and watch games. And while the men worked on building a field, the women sewed uniforms out of potato sacks. Lastly, equipment was purchased with funds collected from among the detainees.

Barbed Wire Baseball is an excellent introduction to both Japanese American baseball and the internment of Japanese American in World War II. Marissa Moss gives the same attention to detail in her text that Zeni gave to creating his baseball field. And the beautiful illustrations by Yuko Shimizu bring the whole story together. This is the first children's book that Shimizu has illustrated and for it, she used a Japanese calligraphy brush and ink, then scanned and colored the illustrations with Photoshop, so that the colors give a real sense of the time.

At the end of Barbed Wire Baseball, there is an Afterword about Kenichi Zenimura life, as well as an Author's Note and an Artist's Note, which you may not want to miss reading. Moss has also included an useful Bibliography for further exploration of Japanese American baseball.

I had never heard of Kenochi Zenimura before, probably because I'm not much of a baseball person, but I really was impressed with his perseverance and dedication to creating a place where he and his fellow detainees could enjoy playing or watching baseball in an otherwise desolate place and that would give them all a sense of accomplishment and community. And having lived in Phoenix, AZ for 4 years and being somewhat familiar with the desert around it, I really understood what an accomplishment it was.

This book is a Picture Book for Older Readers and is recommended for readers age 7+  
This book was borrowed from the NYPL

This book was originally reviewed at The Children's War

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### **Nole says**

I loved this book. I think that our hero is an inspiration to all those that were told they were too small to achieve what they wanted which is a common thing most students will have experienced. This is also a great story to show making the best of your situation and lastly a History lesson to discuss 1940's America.

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