

Ideas for English/Creative Writing classes, exploring the experience of internment in prison camps in the Far East during World War II...

Diaries

Many of the interned women, and some children, resolved to keep diaries of their experiences in the camps (e.g. *White Coolies* by Betty Jeffrey, *Diary of a Girl in Changi* by Sheila Allan – follow the link at the end of this sheet). In the BBC’s *Tenko* drama series British internee Marion Jefferson kept several diaries, two of which were destroyed by her captors, but a third she took with her to freedom. The keeping of diaries was forbidden by the Japanese but some of those interned felt compelled to do so despite the threat of punishment.

Class discussion:

Why do you suppose prisoners decide to keep diaries? Do any of you already keep diaries or (the modern-day equivalent) blogs? If so, are your reasons for keeping them the same? Do you write a diary (or blog) for yourself, in order to process your thoughts and feelings, or with a reader in mind? Were the diary writers in the camps recording their experiences in case they might not survive?

Activities:

Read out some extracts from the above books and ask questions about the passages.

- How are later diary entries different from those from earlier in their captivity?
- What do specific entries tell us about camp morale, the spirit of survival, friendship, conditions in the camps?

Ask class to start a diary as if they have just been imprisoned in a makeshift filthy prison camp, separated from their loved ones and everything they know.

Describe some early incidents in the camp that their diary entries should record:

- a first meal of rice and old vegetables;
- the first address by the camp’s commandant;
- the unhygienic huts in which you will have to live;
- meeting new people who you wouldn’t ordinarily mix with;

(these could be described to the class using actual diary entries from the above books).

Explore in class the different ways in which the pupils’ diaries record the incidents – exploring individual perspectives.

N.B. If you are also exploring the history of the vocal orchestra in a music class (see the separate music resource sheet) you may also want to ask the class to write a diary entry describing the performance of a vocal orchestra.

Postcards Home

During their internment in the Far East, prisoners were very occasionally permitted to send postcards home to their family, however they were only allowed to write 25 words in total. To their chagrin they also had to include an additional propaganda sentence. Examples provided to women internees included:

- ‘Our kind hosts allow us to dance, smoke and play Rounders and my happiness would be complete if you were here dearest one’;
- ‘Have no concern for us dear hearts we are living in a dreamland of joy and contentment with food in plenty and beautiful scenery’;
- ‘Since being interned here we have come to respect the numerous virtues of our kind and generous hosts. We are indeed most fortunate women.’

Postcards in which prisoners described the true and terrible conditions of internment were of course destroyed.

Activity:

Ask the class to write postcards home using no more than 25 words and one of the above three propaganda sentences. Ask them:

- To consider the reaction of their families should the postcard reach them;
- To think about how they would communicate their situation without having their postcard destroyed for spelling out the true conditions and treatment;
- What they should include about their situation in order not to upset their family;
- Would they attempt to use code to get real messages out?

You could suggest writing a postcard whereby the initial of each word formed the true message, or another type of code. The postcard writer could include something that would seem innocent or meaningless but would in fact clearly communicate to your loved ones that all was not well.

Also ask the class to think about why the Japanese chose to craft these propaganda sentences. What did they hope to achieve with them? What was the actual effect of their use?

Camp Newspaper

In the early years of their captivity (1942-43) the interned women used the scant resources they had to produce newspapers. The women interned in the Palembang 'houses' camp (who were later moved to the barracks camp where the vocal orchestra was created) devised a newspaper called 'The Camp Chronicle'. Using the one working typewriter they had, they met the prisoners' craving for news with two copies – a British and a Dutch edition, produced at regular intervals, which were circulated around the camp. Since they had been interned, as they were cut off from the outside world, rumours among the prisoners about the state of the war were rife, wildly inaccurate, and constantly changing. It was a situation that did little to improve camp morale. The Camp Chronicle sought to counteract this desperation for news beyond the camp by including in its pages news about life in the camp, trying to make it more interesting than conjecture about the outside world. An edition from September 1942 included poetry, a word-game competition, the third part of a series of articles on child care, and a recipe for soup using fish heads.

Activity:

Ask the class to, either individually or in groups, create a two-page newspaper about life in a prison camp. It could include poetry, puzzles, horoscopes, articles, profiles of people in the camp, inventive recipes, short stories. Ask the class to consider the purpose of the newspaper as they put it together (morale, building relationships, sharing expertise).

If you are also creating a vocal orchestra in a music class you could have the class produce an edition of the newspaper covering the concert – promoting the event or alternatively reviewing it.

Poetry

The internees wrote a great deal of poetry in the camps. Many examples are available in *Women Beyond the Wire*. Classes could be devised around writing and critiquing the poetry of captivity.

Written Resources

There are many references to relevant books, films and television programmes to supplement your class teaching on the Singing to Survive website: <http://singingtosurvive.com/links/>