We LOVE the Library, Episode 7

A: Hello, and welcome to *We LOVE the Library*, a twice-monthly podcast brought to you by the San Luis Obispo County Library Foundation. I'm your host, Rachel Duchak. In this seventh episode, we will learn more about graphic novels from the San Luis Obispo County Library System's Adult Services Coordinating Librarian, Monique Matta. Monique likes the varied genre of graphic novels as much as I do, which led to an interesting conversation. Then, we'll speak with Joy Yamaguchi from the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles about George Takei's graphic novel-style memoir, *They Called Us Enemy*. Mr. Takei's book takes us into camps where he and his family were incarcerated by the United States government after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Thanks for supporting your public library. We are here today with Monique Matta, the Adult Services Coordinating Librarian for the San Luis Obispo County Library System. Hi, Monique.
B: Hi.
A: Nice to see you again.
B: It’s good to be here. Thank you for having me again.
A: You are the expert on so many things. Chris Barnickel keeps directing me to talk to you. Today, we're going to talk about graphic novels.
B: This is a topic that's kind of close to my heart, actually.
A: Tell us about that.
B: I started reading, I want to say, graphic novels when I was a teenager. I really enjoyed *Illustrated Classics*. I think that was my first exposure to some of the classic titles from history.
A: For younger people who might not be familiar with *Illustrated Classics*, can you tell us what that is or what it was?
B: It was kind of a book series that adapted classic stories like, say, *Pride and Prejudice* or Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*.
A: *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* by Twain.
B: Sort of made it more accessible to a younger audience by including a lot of illustrations.

It just makes it more inviting than seeing a bunch of text on a page. It was my first exposure to some of the major classics, like I said, of history. Then I sort of branched off into the different genres, because there are so many genres, as people will know. There are people out there a lot more knowledgeable than me, I know, so I'm going to be careful to be very accurate with what I say. I became interested in the Japanese form of the medium, which is known as manga. I read a lot of those, you know, *Akira* and *Death Note*. There's a lot of really good ones out there, *Blade of the Immortal*. What I noticed was that it really is not a medium that's geared just to a particular age group. You can really find any genre or any reading level as far as the content of a graphic novel.
A: Yes, for example, I stopped in yesterday at the Los Osos Library, and I have something, *Science Comics*. This one is about cats, one of my favorite animals, and it is obviously targeted towards kids and young people, but we also have *MAUS* by Art Spiegelman,
B: which is a classic,
A: and it's the story of Spiegelman's parents as survivors of Auschwitz, and so it's a lot heavier than this Newberry Award-winning *New Kid* by Jerry Craft.
B: Yes. So there's such a range of things targeted towards kids and things that are more appropriate for adults. I know people just have historically associated anything with illustrations as being for kids, but that really is no longer the case. You have to, in fact, when I was just a front, public-facing librarian, I was always having to reshelve things because an adult graphic novel would end up in the children's section, and I'd be like, oh, I need to get this out of here because the labeling, sometimes people don't, they miss the labeling, and they just stick it in the wrong place. But yeah, there is definitely more mature content. A really famous title, a comic's title, is *Watchmen*, which was an 80s comic by Alan Moore, and I think that was when a lot of people started to realize that you could actually make political

commentary, and you could make an actual statement with an illustrated format.
A: And the other thing about an illustrated format is that there are images from *MAUS*, or I recently read this book called *Apollo* by Fitch, Baker, and Collins, and that's a different Collins than Mike Collins, I believe, and it is a graphic novel about the landing on the moon by the Apollo 11 mission, and there are images from the way that the artist presented things that have stuck with me, and certainly the same is true for MAUS as well, in a way that reading words on the page and creating it in my own mind, and what it looks like, and what that setting looks like, is, it's a different step. It's not making it easier for you, it's just making it more, I think.
B: That's a good point because I know that some educators and maybe even some parents are hesitant to have graphic novels be the main type of reading that their kids do, and I certainly understand that, but I do think it still counts as reading. It's unlocking their imagination, and it's getting them to focus on a page, and just because, you know, you have words and imagery, I don't think that discounts all of the words part. I think it's still very important, it gets people interested in reading, and it unlocks a particular part of their brain.
A: Yes. We had a conversation with Sammy, who was one of our library power users.
B: Excellent.
A: And he went to your Comic-Con that you had here recently, and at the San Luis Obispo Library, and he was talking about how *Dog Man and Cat Kid* is a type of graphic novel, but that's a little bit more like a comic.
B: I would say so.
A: Comics… But they're related.
B: They're very related. Comics is kind of the catch-all term for any format that is presented in, you know, like an illustrated narrative style, but there are different sub-genres, like you have, like I said, manga, you have graphic novels, you have the different age groups, like the children's comics, and then the teen

fare, and so, yeah, comics is a very inclusive term. So graphic novel, I think, is traditionally associated with things that are a little bit more mature.
A: Yes, I would agree. And Art Spiegelman produces comics, but he's also produced this very famous graphic novel, which is a story of his family, a true story, that is helping to deal with the difficulty of the story, but also making you face the difficulty of his parents' experience and his own experience by looking at these images on the page.
B: The actor George Takei did a similar thing.
A: Oh, really?
B: Yes, he composed this graphic novel called *They Called Us Enemy*, which is about his family's experience in a Japanese internment camp.
A: I am so impressed with that man.
B: Yes, he's a wonderful, very intelligent and talented individual, but he clearly understands this is a really great way for me to convey my experience and make it in a way that a wide range of age groups and readers can access it.
A: Yes. Similarly, we have a three-volume series called *March* by John Lewis, representative John Lewis.
B: Oh, yes.
A: And he grew up in Alabama, and he was not allowed to get a library card. He was told that the libraries are just for white people. And so some decades later, he and his co-authors, Andrew Aiden and Nate Powell, forgive me if I'm mispronouncing that, they produced this three-book series called *March*, and they won the National Book Award. And he was, as a man who was not allowed to get a library card, to write a book and receive the National Book Award is, it's just huge.
B: Yes.
A: But it's a challenging book. There's challenging images, and it's hard information to absorb.
B: But it's very evocative, right? The union of the images and the spoken word.

A: A hundred percent. And sometimes you don't even need the words there because you're just seeing these images, and it says everything that you need to know.
B: And we have it available in the library.
A: People want to check it out.
B: Yes.
A: And I was speaking with one of the librarians in my library in Los Osos yesterday, and she said it's a little challenging of where to shelve these books.
B: Yes.
A: So right now, I was able to get *March* from the teen section. And that's where all the manga is and all these other similar books. And so if you can't necessarily find what you're looking for in the catalog or know exactly where to go, the librarians can help direct you. They know where these things are.
B: It's true. That's one of the things about working in a library is you're trying to make it easy for people to find, but there's no perfect system. So sometimes you're like, if we had just this catch-all graphic novel section, then we would have, you know, kid stuff and adult stuff, you know, in the same place. So we don't necessarily want that. But yeah, if you're having trouble finding something, you can always ask your librarian, and they can show you the different sections for you to check out.
A: Cool. And before we started recording, we were talking about this range of books, of different kinds of stories, and you had talked about how there's just this possibility of the medium with graphic novels.
B: I think it really does, and we touched on it a little bit, I think that having imagery there to sort of augment the written narrative, I think it has a really unique power to it. And it really can help unlock people's imaginations. And also, I think there are certain things like, oh gosh, how would I phrase this? But there are certain concepts that are difficult to put into words that you can sometimes convey more easily with an image.

And for instance, if you watch a Miyazaki movie, like *Spirited Away* or something, that we look at the expressivity of the character's faces. It doesn't necessarily look like, you know, an everyday person, how our expressions work, but it conveys such heightened emotion. And there's something really powerful about that, almost like you're watching a representative of humanity itself go through this, and not just one character. And I really enjoy, I don't know if that makes sense, but I really enjoy that heightened emotional quality, and the way that they can just, like if a character's happy, they can just illustrate the person walking up into the air. I remember seeing a scene like that in a Miyazaki movie. The girl's singing a song, and she's walking out of her classroom, and she's slowly walking up into the sky, because she's feeling so happy. And I mean, that's not something you can necessarily do in any other format.
A: The words, “she was really happy,” don't really capture the same message.
B: It’s not the same.
A: That’s great. Well, if you are interested in checking out any of these graphic novels that are at the library through the San Luis Obispo County Library System, any of the librarians will be able to help direct you. You can do a search on the internet, and find out if there is a book of interest to you,
B: and SLOLibrary.org.
A: Check it out. Thank you, Monique.
B: My pleasure. Now that we have a foundation with graphic novels in general, let's explore a specific one, with help from Joy Yamaguchi, Director of Public Programs from the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles. Hello, Joy.
C: Hi, how's it going?
A: Good. Before we begin to discuss George Takei's graphic novel style memoir, can you give us a little background about the Japanese American National Museum, also known as JANM?
C: Yeah, so JANM, as you mentioned, is in Little Tokyo in Los Angeles.

And we, you know, use the museum to promote understanding and appreciation of, you know, the U.S.'s cultural and ethnic diversity by sharing the Japanese American experience. So we have exhibitions, as well as public programs, which is what I'm involved in. We also create documentary films and educational curricula, and extend even beyond Los Angeles, as we are a national museum, to both around the U.S. and internationally through various projects. You know, we're excited to be talking with you in SLO, and hope that we'll be able to get up there and be involved in your community, as well.
A: Oh, we would love to welcome you here to the Central Coast, for sure. Now, before we begin our discussion, let's preface this conversation with some language guidance. Although Franklin Delano Roosevelt called places like Camp Thule Lake and Manzanar internment camps, that was normalizing language designed to hide the truth. Please tell us how you and JANM recommend referring to these camps and this period in our nation's history.
C: So, officially, the camps were often called relocation centers, and we usually heard the term internment camps or evacuation used. And so, you know, we acknowledge that there's folks who write these first-person narratives, like the one we'll talk about today, who maybe will use their own language to describe what feels most accurate to their own story. But at the museum, we use the term concentration camp to refer to these 10 main WRA camps because concentration camp means that people are imprisoned not because of a specific crime they committed or were accused of but simply because of an identity that they hold. So yeah, the government during World War II actually did also use the term concentration camp to refer to these places but in addition to what we acknowledge now are euphemisms like internment or relocation. So you know we know that concentration camp is often associated with the atrocities of the Holocaust and so we call what happened to the U.S. America's concentration camps and often we even use the term death camp to refer more accurately to what happened in Europe just

to also refuse the use of euphemisms. So internment you know was an experience that was detailed in the book as well as the detainment of non-citizens especially after Pearl Harbor but for camps like Rohwer that George talks about in the book or Tule Lake or Manzanar like you mentioned yeah we use the term concentration camp.
A: Okay and one more thing before we get started, I have been in your neighborhood of Little Tokyo where your museum is and I was so struck by this art installation that is inset into the sidewalk. Can you tell us about this history-based art installation that's embedded into the sidewalks of Little Tokyo?
C: Definitely, so yeah it's actually right up to the against the historic building of JANM as well as across and around the historic first street north block of Little Tokyo. So Little Tokyo is actually 141 years old so the artwork that you're mentioning was actually a community redevelopment agency project from the 90s that was a revitalization effort for the neighborhood but it's really important to us at the museum and in the neighborhood because it tells the really specific history of the physical place that we're in which includes our historic building which we actually often call our largest artifact in our collection which was formerly the Nishi Hongwanji Buddhist Temple and was also the space outside the museum was where folks were taken during World War II to go to camps as well so you know this timeline that's on the ground details that history as well as the history of the businesses some of which still exist today after over 100 years and other just important facts about the community and for the community.
A: It’s fascinating stuff, lots of history and important for us not to forget. So let's talk about George Takei's graphic memoir *They Called Us Enemy*. Mr. Takei's book takes us into camps where he and his family were incarcerated by the United States government after the bombing of Pearl Harbor as you mentioned. Can you speak to the tensions at work in Mr. Takei's graphic memoir?
C: Yeah I mean I think that there's a lot with how the story is told from a child's perspective but also an adult's perspective.

George has been really outspoken in talking about how he was a child in camp at the time and so had a very different experience from his parents who as older adults whose lives were uprooted in a really different way. Yeah, they experienced incarceration really differently and I know he's talked a lot about he wanted to write this graphic novel and also his children's book *My Lost Freedom* in specifically to be accessible to many ages. And so I think that that's really shows the form kind of influences the content in that way. So yeah the differences of experience of children who had maybe actually an exciting time being within community where there was many folks that looked like them and shared their experience versus the adults who maybe lost all their homes and their work and where suddenly the family structure was uprooted. And I think we see that through yeah many of the uses in the book as well as just I think as George gets older and looks at his family history and tries to talk to his parents about it also the tensions and the misunderstandings between him intergenerationally which was also found in a lot of many family stories and was a huge part of the redress movement and getting folks to speak up and speak out about their experiences.
C: Oh yes his father sounds like he his father comes across as someone who I would have loved to have met: he's a complex interesting nuanced person who was in a very difficult position to try to protect his family his young family so it was—it's interesting to see the journey that George himself goes through starting as a child then as a angrier young man and then as an older man who seems to have come to understanding with what his parents were doing. I love that image on page 123 where there's four different sections on the page of the kinds of choices that Japanese Americans made and essentially the suggestion is all the choices that Japanese people made were brave whether they went into the camps with their families because they were pregnant and expecting another child or if they went off to fight for the U.S. government or went to prison. It's a really amazing image.

C: Yeah absolutely I think that that's been a big discussion within the community of many years because there was so many tensions and outright hatred for a long time between say folks who enlisted versus folks who resisted the draft. And I think it's only been in more recent years where this understanding of the many different ways of reacting to a situation and folks doing what they thought was best in the moment and acknowledging that across different lines has finally kind of become more accepted and more understood throughout the community. And there still is the tensions you know and we're still working through that but yeah I appreciate that he was able to provide that perspective that there are so many different ways to react. And it was such a horrible and life-altering experience so just giving grace to people for where they were at the time.
A: 100% it's hard to know what to do in the midst of all this trauma exactly what the right decision is and it's it's easy to judge after the fact. It feels like in this memoir he's doing a lot of therapeutic work by retelling his story.
C: Yeah I mean I think we find that a lot of first-person narratives are so powerful and important especially to the work we do at the museum just because it allows people to tell their truth and tell their story and there is really nothing more important and powerful for us than the preserving these stories. So we're really grateful that his is in this is you know preserved in this graphic memoir but also he's you know such a huge part of our museum. He was a founding member and a trustee for many years, our board chair and his items are in our collection. We've done an exhibition with him and you know he just one of our story files will be an immersive and interactive way to ask recording of him questions and get answers back so it'll be you know we just really want to make sure that his story of that he's told in many ways over many years is preserved.
A: That's so great and the piece that we heard just before we started talking from Monique the adult services coordinating librarian for the SLO County library system she mentioned how graphic novels and memoirs can include illustrations that express

more feeling than just words alone on the page. I'm struck by the slow motion view from a little Japanese American girl on pages 20 and 21 who you can see on her face and her mother's face that something has changed for the worst in the world and she and her mother passed exclusionary signs with slurs and the angry face of a store owner. It's almost like in a graphic novel format, time is slowing down as she's taking in this new information and it really struck me. Are there any images in *They Called Us Enemy* that stand out for you as telling the story better than the words could?
C: What a good question. I think yeah I think the one you pointed out is definitely so important and I think just there are throughout other images of kind of the differences between generations like we were talking about before and just being able to yeah I think the emotions are so nuanced being able to see it on the faces is so powerful compared to just necessarily being able to read the words so I guess I'm not giving a specific thing but it is making me think of you know just this history of like photographic and illustrative remembrances and recordings of the experience that I think George's book is so uniquely situated within.
A: So great and you had mentioned and when we spoke earlier this week you had mentioned a number of other books and artists that also speak to this traumatizing experience for Japanese Americans can you tell us about these briefly?
C: Yeah Tōyō Miyatake is kind of one of the most famous photographers within the concentration camps he actually snuck in parts to create a camera and camp because it was considered contraband and then was able to record what happened in his own viewpoint which I think is a really important thing to exist as an archive because the government sent in photographers actually like Ansel Adams and Dorothea Lange names that we know well but ultimately those were still funded and they tell the story but they're still funded and by the WRAA and the government so having these Japanese Americans taking their own photographs and telling their own stories I mean Tōyō Miyatake, Jack Iwata who has many of his photos in our

collection both of them do is so so important to knowing actually what happened and I think outside of just photography Miné Okubo was an artist who was an artist before camp and then when she was taken into I believe Topaz she immediately started drawing illustrations of what she saw around her and I think similarly to what you're saying about images being able to tell the story so poignantly she has herself in most of her images of camp kind of reacting to the experience but it's everything from gathering straw in a sack to make a mattress to the mess hall to art school and then after camp she's created more art and we actually have an exhibition about her and two other female Japanese American artists it's on display and traveling around the U.S. right now and will come back to the museum in I believe 2027 but I think it's actually in about to open in Monterey or it's in Monterey right now so closer to you and then I think more contemporarily in that lineage also in in conversation with George's book is *Displacement* by Kiku Hughes who's also a queer graphic novelist. Kiku's book also ties in kind of an imagined inserting time travel narrative kind of like a Octavia Butler kindred type drawing on those ideas bringing this main character into this history past and there's also kind of queer themes and acknowledgments which I think George maybe acknowledges a little bit in this book but definitely gets into more in *It Rhymes with Takei* his other graphic novel that just came out this last year about coming out so I think that there's all these different ways in which people are telling these first person narratives of this experience or you know maybe a third person but like remembrances and bringing themselves in more contemporarily so yeah lots of lots of connections to this book and things to explore from elements of it.
A: And you had said also that there are some educational materials that accompany this book that your museum has put together where can listeners go to find more about JANM and these educational resources associated with *They Called Us Enemy*?

C: Yeah we have actually our education department developed a educator's guide so it goes through the California state standards but obviously could be applicable outside of California to provide activities and different questions and ways for students to approach the book from the like analyzing the cover to getting into the really specific passages and moments and that's available on our JANM website and that was again developed the publishing team for the book as curricula to help educators of across many different ages and we also have other resources on our JANM website janm.org j-a-n-m.org. If you want to dive in more to like what we're talking about about language or other aspects or whatever exhibitions or even JANM on the go which is our initiative as our museum's currently closed to the public for a exhibition spaces but we're doing a lot in other spaces both in LA and outside so we actually are hoping to host our second annual Nikkei Children's Book Festival so last year we actually featured George and his children's book hopefully in this upcoming spring as well as some other books like Satsuki Ina's book we're talking with Satsuki Ina and Adrian Tomine another graphic novelist in the upcoming months so still really you know the museum's hoping to outreach to many many communities so we hope you folks will come and join us.
A: Oh that sounds wonderful that sounds wonderful and I wanted to finish our conversation by asking you what do you love about the library?
C: Yeah I mean I think when I you emailed me I said I love the library I love the title of this podcast I think just and it's similar to the reason why I love working in the museum and being in the museum world is but it's just this access to information that extends beyond a classroom beyond maybe a more formal kind of sit down learning space which is so important but you know libraries just are such an incredible way for people to learn new things and kind of escape and also get access to resources and a free third space where people can just be together and I just think they're so crucial to to making sure that we are all just

continuing to learn and grow and build community together so I love libraries Libby's my most used app.
A: So that is so wonderful well Joy Yamaguchi thank you so much for speaking with us. We really appreciate it and getting your insight into this wonderful graphic memoir *They Called Us Enemy* by George Takei and I see that you have a podcast and so I'll be following what's going on with your social media and we would love to come down and see some of these exhibits you your museum is an amazing place.
C: Well thank you so much and yeah we're looking forward to hearing more of the work that you do.

A: What an honor it was to conduct this interview especially as a *Star Trek* fan. I haven't seen much of the original series but I have heard George Takei's rich voice in the animated series and in other *Star Trek* shows and projects. In his graphic memoir Mr. Takei highlights many stories of racist behavior and hostile language from white Americans such as politicians or a grade school teacher however he also takes time to tell the story of other white Americans who tried to help and support Japanese Americans people like Quaker missionary Herbert Nicholson who brought books for Japanese Americans to Manzanar and other concentration camps as well as Star Trek creator and producer Gene Roddenberry who actively hired a multi-racial cast for his sci-fi show. I appreciate that despite his anger and confusion as a younger Japanese American person during and after World War II, older Mr. Takei channels the *Star Trek* Vulcan concept of "Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations." Indeed, multiculturalism is a force for good in the galaxy. We hope you're learning more about your public library and enjoying our *We LOVE the Library* podcast next time we'll learn more about the slow maker space and its collaboration with the SLO County library system at certain hours of the week your SLO County library card provides access to the SLO MakerSpace. It's like the library of much larger things where your library card allows you to use big less portable tools. We had planned to include this

segment in episode 7 but there was just too much to say about graphic novels and memoirs. Also we'll meet local writer Alicia Gale and learn about her books her background, and her writing process she writes what she calls “Sapphic mysteries” and deploys identity as a crucial tool in solving the mystery. We'll also discuss LGBTQ+ art and literature more generally. Finally we'll learn more about one of our generous SLO County library foundation supporters. Dr. Sarah Day, a regular user of the Morro Bay Library, left a generous bequest to the SLO County library system with a stipulation that a portion of the funds should support enhancing LGBTQ+ materials in the library collections. If you want to participate in our pro library podcast send us an email: podcast @ slo library foundation.org. If you want to learn more about the SLO County Library Foundation, if you want to buy some merch, or if you want to make a donation in the spirit of Sarah Day, visit our website at SLO library foundation dot org. The next episode drops in two weeks. Thank you for listening and for helping support the public library, the people's champion.

Tōyō Miyatake
Jack Iwata
Miné Okubo, author of *Citizen 13660*
Kiku Hughes, artist and writer of *Displacement*
Satsuki Ina
Adrian Tomine

https://www.topshelfcomix.com/guides/They-Called-Us-Enemy-teachers-guide.pdf

https://www.janm.org/education/resources

The recording of a JANM Book Club event last year on George's children's book, *My Lost Freedom.* He talks about the graphic novel in his first answer: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=prSFWqEr3N4