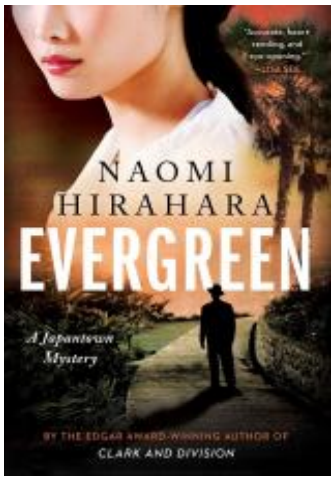
Evergreen: A Japantown Mystery

by Naomi Hirahara



About the Book

A Japanese American nurse's aide navigates the dangers of post-WWII and post-Manzanar life as she attempts to find justice for a broken family in this follow-up to the Mary Higgins Clark Award?winning CLARK AND DIVISION.

It?s been two years since Aki Ito and her family were released from Manzanar detention center and resettled in Chicago with other Japanese Americans. Now the Itos have finally been allowed to return home to California --- but nothing is as they left it. The entire Japanese American community is starting from scratch, with thousands of people living in dismal refugee camps while they struggle to find new houses and jobs in over-crowded Los Angeles.

Aki is working as a nurse?s aide at the Japanese Hospital in Boyle Heights when an elderly Issei man is admitted with suspicious injuries. When she seeks out his son, she is shocked to recognize her husband?s best friend, Babe Watanabe. Could Babe be guilty of elder abuse?

Only a few days later, Little Tokyo is rocked by a murder at the low-income hotel where the Watanabes have been staying. When the cops start sniffing around Aki?s home, she begins to worry that the violence tearing through her community might threaten her family. What secrets have the Watanabes been hiding, and can Aki protect her husband from getting tangled up in a murder investigation?

Discussion Guide

1. Aki takes a lot of risks in this book to figure out who killed Mr. Watanabe. Why do you think she pursues this specific case with such determination? Would you have done the same if you were in her shoes, or do you think she was acting recklessly?

2. How do grief and trauma (both collective and personal) affect Aki as she settles back into her new life in California? What about Art?

3. Do you see any parallels between how AAPI people are treated in America today and how they were treated in the years following WWII? How so?

4. Interracial tension plays an omnipresent role in Aki?s Los Angeles. A critical housing shortage has created ruthless competition between two dispossessed groups: Japanese Americans, who were forced to abandon their homes during the wartime incarceration, and Black Americans who have arrived in the city in large numbers in the last two decades. How do these two communities? respective difficulties differ, and how do they overlap? What do you think of Aki?s attempts to navigate them? In what ways has racism united the Japanese American and Black communities, and in what ways has it pitted them against each other?

5. The *Rafu Shimpo* newspaper, where Art works, has played an important role in disseminating information to a largely Japanese audience for decades. How do you stay informed in your neighborhood and community?

6. Aki has a conversation with a Jewish man as she is looking for a new home for her family. Speaking about his own experience, he says, ?Too bad it took the gas chambers for *them* to see that we are also human? (p. 17). And as Aki leaves, he tells her, ?I think it?s awful what *they* did to you people? (p. 18). Why do you think he uses non-specific ?them? and ?they? pronouns? Do you think there is still a prevailing us v. them mentality, or has the ?them? become more clearly defined in recent years?

7. Japanese residents were forcibly removed from their homes and, as a result, had to start their lives over in many ways. Do you support reparations for communities that have been exploited, mistreated, forced to relocate and even killed? Have any stories about reparations in the news recently caught your eye?

8. From Willie Mae to Babe to Mr. Watanabe, Aki is forced to rethink some of her preconceived notions about people. Which character arcs in the book were you surprised by?

9. Although Aki navigates a lot of hardships in this book, there are also moments of hope. What scenes gave you a sense of hope? What events give you hope in your community today?

Author Bio

Naomi Hirahara is an Edgar Award-winning author of multiple traditional mystery series and noir short stories. Her Mas Arai mysteries, which have been published in Japanese, Korean and French, feature a Los Angeles gardener and Hiroshima survivor who solves crimes. Her first historical mystery, CLARK AND DIVISION, which won a Mary Higgins Clark Award, follows a Japanese American family?s move to Chicago in 1944 after being released from a California wartime detention center.

A former journalist with *The Rafu Shimpo* newspaper, Naomi has also written numerous non-fiction history books and curated exhibitions. She has also written a middle-grade novel, 1001 CRANES. EVERGREEN, her follow-up to

CLARK AND DIVISION, released in August 2023 and was on the *USA Today* bestseller list for two weeks. Her latest book is CROWN CITY.

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