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A CONVERSATION WITH ALMA KATSU

What inspired *The Fervor*? Can you discuss your personal connection to the events in the book?

My mother was born in Japan. She married my father, a GI, after the war and came to America. While she wanted her children to be proud of their heritage, she also experienced hostility from Americans who had lost someone in the war or were angry over Pearl Harbor. It affected her, and her experiences stayed with me, too. Then I married into a Japanese American family that had been interned at Topaz in Utah. Up until this point, the internment was something I'd heard about in history class but not something I'd personally experienced. Listening to the Katsu family's stories and watching documentaries, I learned that the internment was not as cut-and-dried as we'd been told.

People who lived through the internment tend to have a strange relationship with it. They hold on to their memories of that singular time, but they hold them at arm's length, too. Many refused to discuss it. Some would only talk about it cheerfully, as though it had been no big deal to be removed from their homes and sent to live in hastily built dorms in the middle of nowhere. I came to understand how this experience shaped them for the rest of their lives. Shame and embarrassment of this magnitude—even if you were innocent, contributed in no way to the crime for which you were being punished—leave deep scars in a person.

The Fervor is a period story, but are the events of the story still resonant today? What was it like, writing these pages from a modern-day context? In what ways does the historical-fiction structure allow you to explore current-day concerns?

As a member of a minority, you want to think that the atrocities of the past are over. Then, as a writer, you see that, no, history is actually repeating itself. When Asians in America started to be attacked in 2020 following politically motivated allegations that China had deliberated leaked the coronavirus, it seemed eerily familiar. Did you know that the executive order that put Japanese Americans into the camps was rescinded in 1944, but many internees were afraid to go back, fearing violence from neighbors who still blamed them for Pearl Harbor? Or that white nationalist groups targeted Asians: the Loyal Sons of the Republic in my book is modeled on the Native Sons of the Golden West, whose members believed California had to be protected "as a paradise of the white man for all time"?

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Why do you think the history of Japanese internment camps wasn't (isn't) taught regularly in public schools?

I'm not sure that its full value is being taught today. It's an important civil-rights lesson, showing how easy it is for misinformed mob mentality to take hold. Emotions were running high after Pearl Harbor. The argument for internment, at the time, was the prejudiced belief that Japanese, and those of Japanese descent, were likely to spy for the enemy because it was part of the Asian character. That it is in our nature to be sneaky and untrustworthy. But, after the war, the government reported there had not been even one case of spying by a person of Japanese descent.

The Fervor is different. For one thing, it's not built around a historic event (an actual event is the trigger, but what happens after that is speculative). I already knew a lot about the internment but needed to do a deep dive on the fire balloons and the historical context. Why would Japan launch this campaign so late in the war, when it had no chance of changing the outcome? My favorite piece of research came about when a neighbor whose family had been at Minidoka (where the book is set) lent me her family's invaluable collection of documents: camp newsletters, rosters, photographs, and more. It was like getting to hold the artifacts from the *Titanic* in your hand! It made the camp come alive for me.

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What's not widely known—what's not mentioned in history books—is there were other reasons for public support for the internment. White businessmen had been concerned about economic competition from Japanese farmers for a long time. If you look at violent acts perpetrated against Asians in this country, you see that they're usually over economic fears. But we don't talk about this in the classroom. We don't lay out the real reasons why minorities are targeted.

You're known for your process of meticulous and thorough research before each book. What was the research like for *The Fervor*? How was it different from research for your other books?

The previous two books required a lot of research. I wasn't very familiar with the *Titanic* before I started *The Deep*, so it meant I had to learn about every aspect of the event—in particular, the people, as there were 2300 passengers and crew on the ship. With *The Hunger*, which is about the Donner Party, it was a case of learning (in great detail) a historic event that followed 100 people over hundreds of miles for months and months.

Your book is threaded with elements from Japan's rich culture of ghosts and demons. Which Japanese fairytales are your favorites? What do demons reveal about the deeper evils of society?

I think it's hard for Westerners (and I include myself here) to really understand the Japanese view of the supernatural because it's so vast, and because it's different from how we think of the supernatural in the West. Now, having said that, it's interesting how the same motifs we see in European fairytales come up in Japanese ones. *Urashima and the Turtle*, one of my favorites, shares some elements with *The Little Mermaid*. Ditto for *Peach Boy* and its European doppelganger, *Thumbelina*.

As for what demons might reveal about the deeper evils of a society, that's an interesting question when you consider how broad the supernatural world is to the Japanese. In America, there's a limited number of types of monsters. Demons are usually reduced to the Devil and his minions (unless you're into black magic, then you have a bigger vocabulary), and it may be because our view of evil mostly comes from a religious context. Whereas in Japan, there is

an army of demons, with variations on most every type. Too, their character tends to be more fully formed, capable of regret or caprice, of being both helpful and harmful to the humans who cross their path, and of having their own motivations and desires. It's less the good versus evil, God and the Devil, struggle we have in America, and more nuanced.

This is your third historical horror novel, after *The Hunger* and *The Deep*. What interests you about the cross-section of these two genres? How do supernatural elements change what we know about a point in time?

As I write these books, I'm always struck at how history does tend to repeat itself, and it's usually because we haven't really addressed underlying problems. The past is like a ghost looking to be avenged: it's going to come back and haunt you if you don't make things right. Ironically, by adding an untrue element—the fantastical, the supernatural, the magical—we end up reexamining the real part and see where there's unfinished business. Maybe we're still coddling billionaires who prey on the working class (*The Deep*) or listening to charlatans who will only lead us into disaster (*The Hunger*). The supernatural seems to be the spoonful of sugar that helps the medicine go down.

What interesting trends are you seeing in the horror genre these days? How do you see *The Fervor* fitting in with these popular interests and concerns?

One of my favorite trends in horror is writing from an underrepresented perspective, which seems to be having a moment in the literary world writ large, too. It's made for great storytelling that gives readers an authentic view into a world they may not have seen through an insider's perspective, stories that will make you reconsider what you think you know about the lives of others. Two of Stephen Graham Jones's recent novels, *The Only Good Indians* and *My Heart Is a Chainsaw,* did this with Native American culture; Silvia Moreno-Garcia did this for Latin culture with *Mexican Gothic*; and one of my favorites is Kayla Chenault's *These Bones*, which looks at the effects of racism. I hope that I can make a small contribution to this brave and worthy body of work with *The Fervor*.

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What's next for you?

I'm alternating between historical horror and an espionage series, so my next novel will be *Red London*, the second in the Red Widow series. CIA officer Lyndsey Duncan is tasked with recruiting a British aristocrat to help keep her Russian oligarch husband's vast fortune from falling into the wrong hands. I've been fascinated with the situation in the UK after the Skripal poisoning, waking up to find that the rich foreigners you invited into your country to save your economy are now acting like they own the place. I also thought it would be fun to give readers a chance to imagine what it's like to be crazy rich—but the catch is, it's all dirty money.

READING GROUP GUIDE

1.

As author Alma Katsu notes in the afterword, *The Fervor* feels quite different from her previous two works of historical horror, *The Hunger* and *The Deep*. How does *The Fervor* both classify as and defy this genre?

2.

Especially knowing the historical period this story is set in, how did you feel when Meiko was separated from her daughter, Aiko? To what extent were you able to empathize with this loss? How did their separation make the tragedies of this period feel more visceral?

3.

Throughout the story, we see glimpses of Meiko's father's journals. What impact did his writings have on you? How did they inform your understanding of Meiko? Did they offer a kind of reprieve from the violence? Why or why not?

4.

The struggle to preserve family amidst grave danger is a big theme in the novel. How is parenthood portrayed—for Meiko, for her father? Can someone go too far in preserving those whom they love?

5.

Archie and Elsie uphold their role as Meiko's friendly neighbors until Elsie's miscarriage causes her to blame Meiko. Do you think Elsie's hatred toward Meiko is truly about the miscarriage? What does Archie and Elsie's subversion of the "good neighbor" archetype tell you about the sociopolitical climate during this period?

6.

From the beginning, we see how Archie considers his wife, Elsie, as God's gift to him. Discuss why Archie perceives Elsie in such a pure light. Why doesn't his opinion of her falter even after he witnesses Elsie's aggression toward Meiko?

7.

Archie is portrayed as a man with a largely good moral compass, trying to do what is right while being pressured by his community to do what he knows to be wrong. But his greatest flaw was the blind spot he held for Elsie. What do you think helps Archie regain his sense of his empathy? Can we view Archie's allyship with Meiko and Aiko near the end as a chance for him to return to family?

8.

Despite Archie's influence, Elsie decided that the presence of internment camps was a matter of public safety. Many of her neighbors agreed with her. Discuss your reaction to characters like Elsie and the citizens of Bly. Did their views shock you? Why or why not?

9.

The cure to the fervor, the scientists realize, lies in Meiko, who shows herself to be immune to the disease. What do you make of the fact that Meiko was made to be both a prisoner and a "prized object"?

10.

Meiko is not only taken to an internment camp, but also, to her detriment, is used for a scientific experiment. Discuss other instances in the story through which individuals like Meiko and Aiko were dehumanized.

11.

Meiko's father started brewing his tea to protect his family against the venom of the spider demon. Tea, again, is the alleged cause of Elsie's miscarriage. Discuss how tea acts as a symbol for foreignness.

12.

Discuss how fear is the greatest sickness, "the most powerful of contagious elements" of the fervor. What point is Katsu trying to make? How do you think this "illness" sheds light on current events?

13.

Reading the novel through our modern-day lens, to what extent do you think the fervor still exists? What do you think is our best cure?

14.

Has today's sociopolitical climate primed you to react to characters like Elsie in a certain way? To what extent can you blame these characters' behavior on ignorance? Do you think "ignorance" can often excuse a person from truly taking accountability?

15.

The Fervor, despite being a work of fiction, is based on the fact that the US government did imprison its own citizens in internment camps. To what extent can you fathom that internment camps were once a reality? How much progress have we made—or not made—since that time?

16.

Did this story change your perspective on the historical period? Did you learn anything new from the afterword? Does this story make you reconsider how we have learned—and continue to learn—from history?