



**Natural Destiny**

Written by Sherry Dixon.

Sherry Dixon Books, 2012, p. 203

ISBN: 978-1477675120

*I was sure that God hated me, and that he always had (p. 1)*

Eight-year-old Bernie's opening line in this historical novel plainly foretells a story filled with tragic events and hardships and the horrors that she and other Chamorros in Guam will endure at the hands of their Japanese captors. A semi-biographical novel, *Natural Destiny* gives one small voice to the Chamorros' life experiences in

Japanese-occupied Guam.

The novel opens up with Bernie, short for Bernadita, talking about how her parents died and she came to live with her godmother, Nina Maria, and her mother, Nanan Beha, in the village of Sumay, which also serves as a military installation in Guam. In the first chapter, Bernie decides to celebrate her eighth birthday by cutting her own hair, something that she has seen as a huge burden. Nanan Beha gets upset, explaining to Bernie that it is shameful for island girls to have short hair. Nanan Beha then punishes the eight-year-old by forbidding her from playing with friends until her hair grows out again and tells her that her hair will be cut short until after Christmas, three months away.

The haircut scene serves many purposes in setting up the characters, establishing the cultural norms, and moving the plot forward. Bernie is an excellent portrayal of a young Chamorro girl, one who (for the most part) is able to move efficiently between childhood folly and familial customs. Her desire to be free from the long hair that constantly gets in her way hints at her tomboy behavior and indicates that she is not in any hurry to grow up. Her inability to even fathom that cutting her hair was a bad idea after seeing the shocked looks and angry faces of the ladies of the village belies her naiveté. Yet, Bernie takes the punishment without argument (even though she felt she did nothing wrong), clearly defining her as a Chamorro girl who knows her place in the family structure. The haircut scene also clearly defines Nanan Beha's character and gives insights into the Chamorro family's authority structure. Nanan Beha is portrayed as a strict yet loving woman who has time for "hugs and kisses" but doles out spankings when needed. When Bernie's mother dies, Nina Maria steps in and claims Bernie as her own, according to the Chamorro custom. However, when Bernie cuts her hair, it is not Nina Maria but Nanan Beha who explains to Bernie that what she did was wrong, reminds her of what is expected, and finally lays down punishment. Nina Maria's deference to her mother in this instance gives the clear picture that Nanan Beha is the

true authority and mother figure in the house even for her children's children. These details and characterizations make this a believable story for Chamorro readers.

As the story progresses, Bernie's punishment becomes her saving grace. Bernie is just beginning to feel the weight of her punishment when she is sent home after church while the rest of Sumay (including her Nanan Beha and Nina Maria) stay to celebrate the Feast of the Immaculate Conception on December 8, 1941. Soon after, she hears an enormous blast and discovers that her entire village, including the church where her family and friends were celebrating, has been literally erased by Japanese bombs. Mistaken for a boy, Bernie is assigned to the men's work party, a vantage point that allows her to watch her Japanese captors and the other villagers' acts of betrayal, heroism, and resistance.

Throughout the novel, Bernie learns about living in the Manenggon camp, working in the rice paddies, stealing in order to survive, silently enduring the Japanese soldiers' cruelty, and remaining hopeful with help and advice from her new family, Grandma Lilly and Uncle Herman. When Bernie starts to become bitter over her losses, Grandma Lilly's reminds her that she needs to look for the good. Similarly, Uncle Herman tells her candidly what will happen and what Bernie must do (and not do) in order to survive witnessing her first execution. Grandma Lilly's reminder to Bernie that "everybody takes care of everybody" particularly stands out because it explains why a man would put himself at risk to pretend to be a strange woman's husband or why Uncle Herman would volunteer to translate for the Japanese. This phrase explains the Chamorro value of inafa'mao'lek in much broader terms than today's "I make it good for you/you make it good for me." This broader definition demonstrates that the Chamorros' commitment to community over individual is more than its modern interpretation of reciprocity.

*Natural Destiny* may not have the storytelling flair of Jerry Spinelli's (2005) *Milkweed* or Ruta Sepetys' (2011) *Between Shades of Gray* but the voice in the story is uniquely Chamorro. The simplicity of word choice is reminiscent of the matter-of-fact narrative voice of Chamorro folklore. The choices that characters make (e.g. Grandma Lilly and Uncle Carlos pretending to be married and Bernie's relative shielding her from the comfort house) demonstrate how the Chamorros relied on their value systems in order to survive extraordinary ordeals.

Another unique feature about the work is that it brings a village to life that was literally erased by World War II. Just as Bernie remarked that the only reminder of Sumay was the cross outside the church, in real life, the villagers moved into the nearby areas of Santa Rita and Agat and Sumay was never rebuilt. Instead, Sumay became a part of Naval Base Marianas. Today, that area is an open field punctuated only by the church cross. *Sumay: A Legacy for our Children* (James Perez Viernes, 2013) is a wonderful companion piece because it not only gives the history of the village from the villagers' point of view but includes a map of the prewar village with the names of the villagers' homes.

*Natural Destiny* instantly draws in readers to Bernie's story, making it a quick read. This book would make a wonderful addition to a wartime experience book set but is better served as the cornerstone to a cross-curricular experience by combining this book with *Sumay: A Legacy*

for our Children and the U.S. Population Census of 1940. Students reading this book and then studying the historical documents of the village of Sumay can engage in research to figure out where Bernie lived, where she was and who she encountered as she moved through the village as well as the names of the other villagers, wondering what their stories were, whether or not they survived. Natural Destiny shares one story of World War II experiences in the Pacific Theater, drawing attention to one of the most significant turning points in Guam's history, and brings a village that was erased by war back to life.

### References

Viernes, J. P. (2013). *Sumay: rikuetdo para i famagu'on-ta, a legacy for our children*. Santa Rita: Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church; Hagatna, Guam: Guam Preservation Trust.

Monique Storie, University of Guam, Latte Heights, GU

© 2014 Monique Storie



WOW Review, Volume VI, Issue 3 by World of Words is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. Based on work by Monique Storie at <https://wowlit.org/on-line-publications/review/volumevi3/7/>