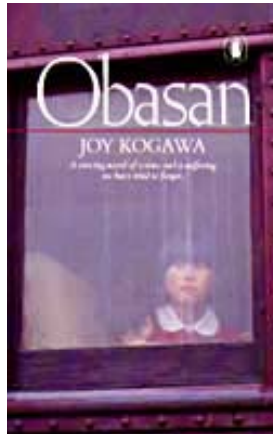




Reader's Guide to Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*



Introduction

One Book, One Community is a reading program for the entire city and surrounding area. Adults and teens are invited to read a selected book and then come together for a weekend of discussion and activities surrounding the book. The book we have selected for Medicine Hat's first community-wide read is *Obasan* by Joy Kogawa. Copies of the book are available at the public libraries of the Shortgrass Regional Library System, the Vera Bracken Library (Medicine Hat College), Coles The Book People (Medicine Hat Mall), and at the Medicine Hat College Campus Store.

Obasan "is the first novel to trace the internment and dispersal of 20,000 Japanese Canadians from the West Coast during World War II. The narrator, a schoolteacher, was a child when her family was exiled to an interior BC ghost town; after the war ended, the fractured family was again shunted, this time to southern Alberta . . . it is a moving, powerful, and truthful story of human rejection and suffering." (Donna Coates in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 1999).

Awards for *Obasan*

First Novel Award - *Books in Canada*

Book of the Year Award - Canadian Authors Association

Best Paperback Fiction Award - Periodical Distributors of Canada

The American Book Award - Before Columbus Foundation

Joy Kogawa is a member of the Order of Canada.

Reviews of *Obasan*

“*Obasan* is a tour de force, a deeply felt novel, brilliantly poetic in its sensibility.” - *The New York Times Book Review*

“*Obasan*’s power comes from the beauty of the writing, the stark imagery and vivid symbolism, and from the calm recitation of events that destroyed families, a culture, and a way of life.” – *The Globe and Mail*

“Joy Kogawa’s accomplishment is that she put human flesh on the familiar bones of one of the sorriest skeletons in Canada’s closet. – *Canadian Book Review Annual*

“Kogawa’s novel must be heard and admired...” – *Los Angeles Times Book Review*

“This quiet novel burns in your hand.” – *Washington Post*

Joy Kogawa – Biographical Timeline



1935 Joy Kogawa born 6 June, Vancouver BC, daughter of Lois (Yao), kindergarten teacher, and Gordon Goichi Nakayama, Anglican minister; she is a second-generation Japanese Canadian (nisei)

1942 Nakayama home in Marpole, Vancouver, confiscated and, along with thousands of other Japanese Canadians, the family ordered to move inland to Slocan BC; Kogawa attended elementary school in internment camp in Slocan

1945 After war, Nakayama family required to move to Coaldale, Alberta, and work as field labourers; Kogawa graduated high school in Coaldale

1953 Teacher training at University of Alberta

1954 Taught elementary school in Coaldale

1955 Studied music at Royal Conservatory of Music, Toronto; subsequently studied also at Anglican Women’s Training College and University of Saskatchewan

1956 Moved to Vancouver

1957 Married David Kogawa; two children; Kogawa family lived in Vancouver, Grand Forks, BC, Saskatoon, Moose Jaw, Ottawa

- 1967 *The Splintered Moon* published; poetry collection, many of the poems had been published in early 1960s in *Fiddlehead*, *Canadian Poetry*, *Alphabet*, and *Canadian Forum*
- 1968 Kogawas divorced
- 1969 Visited Japan
- 1974 *A Choice of Dreams*, collection of poetry, published
- 1974-76 Worked as writer for the Prime Minister's office
- 1977 *Jericho Road*, collection of poetry, published
- 1978 Short story "Obasan" published in *Canadian Forum* (March); writing article on Coaldale and searching for photographs, Kogawa discovered correspondence of Muriel Kitagawa, her inspiration and model for character of Emily
- 1981 *Obasan* published
- 1982 *Obasan* won *Books in Canada* First Novel Award and selected as Canadian Authors' Association Book of the Year
- 1983 *Ushinawareta* ("The Lost Motherland"), Japanese version of *Obasan* for children, published
- 1983-85 Worked with National Association of Japanese Canadians
- 1985 *Woman in the Woods*, a collection of poetry, published
- 1986 Publication of *Naomi's Road*, a children's version of *Obasan*
- 1988 Brian Mulroney's Conservative Government gave official apology and authorized redress to Japanese Canadians for the treatment they endured before and after war, actions for which Kogawa, among others, had campaigned; *Naomi no Michi*, a Japanese version of *Naomi's Road*, published
- 1992 *Itsuka*, a sequel to *Obasan*, published
- 1995 *The Rain Ascends* published
- 2001 *A Song of Lilith*, a book-length poem, published

Fuller information can be found in the following sources, which were used for this biographical timeline.

Beeler, Karin. "Biography of Joy Kowaga."
http://quarles.unbc.ca/kbeeler_html/research/kog4.html

"Joy Kogawa." www.writersunion.ca/k/kogawa.htm

Knutson, Susan. *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada*. Ed. W.H. New. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002.

Stevens, Peter. *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*. Ed. Eugene Benson and William Toye. Toronto: OUP, 1997. 605.

Voices from the Gaps: Women Writers of Color.
<http://voices.cla.umn/newsite/authors/KOGAWAjoy.htm>

Issei, Nisei, or Sansi?

In *Obasan*, Kogawa refers to the different generations of Japanese Canadians by the terms Issei, Nisei and Sansi. This is a quick guide to those terms and their meanings.

The first generation of Japanese Canadians – those who emigrated from Japan – are the **Issei**. Most of the Issei men came to Canada between 1877-1907, and most of the women came after 1908.

The **Nisei** are the second generation of Japanese Canadians whose parents are the Issei. Joy Kogawa is of this generation. The Nisei were born in Canada.

The **Sansi** are the third generation of Japanese Canadians, many of whom were born during the 1940s and 1950s.

Adapted from Miki, R.A., & Kobayashi, C. (1991). *Justice in our time: The Japanese Canadian redress settlement*

What Do I Remember of the Evacuation

by Joy Kogawa

What do I remember of the evacuation?
I remember my father telling Tim and me
About the mountains and the train
And the excitement of going on a trip.
What do I remember of the evacuation?
I remember my mother wrapping
A blanket around me and my
Pretending to fall asleep so she would be happy
Though I was so excited I couldn't sleep.
(I hear there were people herded
Into the Hastings Park like cattle
Families were made to move in two hours
Abandoning everything, leaving pets
And possessions at gun point.
I hear families were broken up
Men were forced to work. I heard
It whispered late at night
That there was suffering) and
I missed my dolls.
What do I remember of the evacuation?
I remember Miss Foster and Miss Tucker
Who still live in Vancouver
And who did what they could
And loved the children and who gave me
A puzzle to play with on the train.
And I remember the mountains and I was
Six years old and I swear I saw a giant
Gulliver of Gulliver's Travels scanning the horizon
And when I told my mother she believed it too
And I remember how careful my parents were
Not to bruise us with bitterness
And I remember the puzzle of Lorraine Life
Who said "Don't insult me" when I
Proudly wrote my name in Japanese
And Tim flew the Union Jack
When the war was over but Lorraine
And her friends spat on us anyway
And I prayed to God who loves
All the children in his sight
That I might be white.

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Historical Context for *Obasan*

Japanese Internment: Banished and Beyond Tears

<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=ArchivedFeatures&Params=A241>

From Racism to Redress: The Japanese Canadian Experience

http://www.crr.ca/en/MediaCentre/FactSheets/eMedCen_FacShtFromRacismToRedress.htm

Japanese Canadian Timeline

<http://www.nikkeiplace.org/timeline.html>

Relocation to Redress: The Internment of the Japanese Canadians

http://archives.cbc.ca/IDD-1-71-568/conflict_war/internment/

Vanishing British Columbia (photographs and text about Japanese internment in B.C.)

<http://www.michaelkluckner.com/bciw4slocan.html>

Kogawa.Homestead.Com: Help Preserve the Home of Obasan for Future Generations

<http://www.kogawa.homestead.com/>

Related Books and Videos at the Vera Bracken Library, Medicine Hat College (MHC) and in the Shortgrass Regional Library System (SHO).

Books

Non-Fiction

Bittersweet Passage: Redress And The Japanese Canadian Experience by Maryka Omatsu (MHC, SHO)

A Child In Prison Camp by Shizuye Takashima (SHO)

Concentration Camps, North America: Japanese In The United States And Canada During World War II by Roger Daniels (MHC)

The Enemy That Never Was: A History Of The Japanese Canadians by Ken Adachi (MHC)

Justice In Our Time: The Japanese Canadian Redress Settlement by Roy Miki and Cassandra Kobayashi (MHC, SHO)

Mutual Hostages: Canadians And Japanese During The Second World War by Patricia Roy (MHC, SHO)

Nikkei Legacy: The Story Of Japanese Canadians From Settlement To Today by Toyo Takata (MHC, SHO)

The Politics Of Racism: The Uprooting Of Japanese Canadians During The Second World War by Ann Gover Sunahara (MHC, SHO)

Stone Voices: Wartime Writings Of Japanese Canadian Issei by Keibo Oiwa (SHO)

This Is My Own: Letters To Wes And Other Writings Of Japanese Canadians, 1941-1948 by Muriel Kitagawa (SHO)
Wild Daisies In The Sand by Tom Sando (MHC, SHO)
Within The Barbed Wire Fence: A Japanese Man's Account of His Internment in Canada by Takeo Ujo Nakano (MHC, SHO)
Years Of Sorrow, Years of Shame: The Story Of The Japanese Canadians In World War II by Barry Broadfoot (MHC, SHO)

Fiction

Daruma Days: A Collection Of Fictionalized Biography by Terry Watada (SHO)
The Electrical Field by Kerri Sakamoto (MHC, SHO)

Videos

In Freedom's Name: The Internment Of Japanese Canadians During World War II (MHC)
The Last Harvest (MHC, SHO)
Obachan's Garden (MHC, SHO)
Sleeping Tigers: The Asahi Baseball Story (SHO)
The War Between Us (SHO)

Books by Joy Kogawa

Obasan (1981) (MHC, SHO)
Woman In The Woods (1985) (MHC)
Naomi's Road (1986) (MHC, SHO)
Itsuka (1992) (MHC, SHO)
The Rain Ascends (1995) (MHC)

Books and Videos in School District 76

Non-Fiction

A Dream Of Riches: The Japanese Canadians, 1877-1977
The Enemy That Never Was: A History Of The Japanese Canadians by Ken Adachi
Justice In Our Time: The Japanese Canadian Redress Settlement by Roy Miki

Videos

Enemy Alien
Minoru: Memory Of Exile
Throwaway Citizens
Tides Of War: The Story Of Japanese Canadians In World War II

Online Forum

See what other community members think about *Obasan* and add your own comments at our online forum. Visit the One Book One Community forum at: www.mhc.ab.ca/forums

To keep up to date on the discussion groups and activities planned for *Obasan*, visit our web site at: www.mhc.ab.ca/library/oboc

Scheduled Book Discussions and Activities

All activities will take place in the Medicine Hat College Theatre and adjoining rooms.

Weekend of 11-12 February 2005

Friday, 11 February

5:00-6:00 PM Movie: *Last Harvest*
6:00-8:00 PM Japanese Dinner/Discussion of *Last Harvest*
8:00-10:00 PM Guest Speaker: Art Miki & Discussion

Saturday, 12 February

9:00-9:30 AM Coffee
9:30-10:30 AM Book Discussion: Topic TBA
10:45-12:00 AM Guest Speaker: George Takashima
12:15-1:30 PM Lunch & discussion with George Takashima
1:30-2:30 PM Book Discussion: Topic TBA
2:45-3:45 PM Book Discussion: Topic TBA
4:00-5:30 PM Panel Discussion

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www.mhpl.info



www.city.medicine-hat.ab.ca/

Medicine Hat College



www.mhc.ab.ca

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www.sd76.ab.ca/

Medicine Hat Cultural Alliance



Coles, The Book People



www.chapters.indigo.ca