Title: Joy Kogawa
Known As: Kogawa, Joy Nozomi; Nakayama, Joy Nozomi; Kogawa, Joy
Canadian Novelist (1935-)
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Introduction

One of the earliest works of fiction to describe the experience of Japanese Canadians who were interned during World War II, Obasan has exerted a profound impact on Canadian cultural politics. At the center of the novel is Naomi Nakane, a second-generation Japanese Canadian whose recollections of her family's forced relocation and its aftermath offer a complex picture of the relationship among personal, racial, and political identity. Naomi's story, closely resembling Kogawa's own, has been appropriated by various sides in the debate concerning the responsibility--past and present--of the Canadian state to people of Japanese descent and to minority groups in general. Adopted as a standard text in Canadian school curriculums, Obasan is credited with mapping the official state policy of multiculturalism onto Canadian literary and academic discourse. Kogawa's achievement was recognized with numerous literary prizes, including the Books in Canada First Novel Award (1981), the Canadian Authors Association Book of the Year Award (1982), and the Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award (1982). Obasan was also highly influential in the Redress Movement, the organized effort of Japanese Canadians to secure compensation for their loss of liberty and property during World War II, a subject treated more fully in the sequel to Obasan, Itsuka (1992), and in that work's revision, Emily Kato (2005). When the Redress Settlement was announced in the Canadian House of Commons on September 22, 1988, parts of Obasan were read aloud in acknowledgment of its role in eliciting the government's apology.

Biographical Information

Kogawa, a Canadian of Japanese descent, was born Joy Nozomi Nakayama in Vancouver, British Columbia on June 6, 1935. Her father was an Anglican clergyman
and her mother a kindergarten teacher. Much of Kogawa's literary output has been the result of first-hand experience. During World War II, after Canada declared war on Japan, twenty-one thousand Japanese Canadians were forced to move into labor and detention camps in the interior of British Columbia. All of their property was confiscated, and many families were separated. When Kogawa was six years old, her family was evacuated to Slocan, British Columbia, an abandoned mining town, and then later put to work on a sugar beet farm in Coaldale, Alberta, where they labored long after the war was over. Kogawa attended the University of Alberta, studying literature and music, and also trained to be a teacher. She pursued graduate studies and taught intermittently while raising two children with David Kogawa, whom she married in 1957. The couple divorced in 1968, a year after she brought out her first collection of poetry, *The Splintered Moon*. In 1974 Kogawa accepted a job composing correspondence for the Office of the Prime Minister in Ottawa, Ontario, and continued to pursue a career as a poet. *Obasan* was published when Japanese Canadians were becoming increasingly vocal in their demands for reparations from the Canadian government. Prior to the publication of *Itsuka*, Kogawa herself became actively involved in the Redress Movement. She continues to be highly regarded for her championing of minority rights. In 2004 the city of Vancouver declared November 6 Joy Kogawa Day, and a successful campaign was launched to preserve her childhood home there. In 1986 Kogawa was named a member of the Order of Canada and in 2006 she was made a member of the Order of British Columbia. In 2008, Kogawa was the recipient of the George Woodcock Lifetime Achievement Award for an outstanding literary career related to British Columbia.

**Plot and Major Characters**

*Obasan* is told from the first-person point of view of Naomi. The story starts in 1972 with the death of Isamu, Naomi's beloved uncle, and evolves from the series of memories this event triggers in the mind of Naomi, now a thirty-six-year-old schoolteacher in Cecil, Alberta, who up until this point in her life had been haunted by the past but unable to recall, let alone process, it. Although the events of the story take place over a three-day period, Naomi's memories span a lifetime, switching back and forth between the past and the present, formed of isolated scenes and conversations, dreams, and fairy tales. Naomi takes the reader back to before the Second World War, when her childhood was forever altered by the departure of her mother, who never returns from a trip to Japan in 1941 to visit relatives. Naomi's father is also absent, a victim, she later learns, of a tuberculosis outbreak at one of the camps. Naomi and her brother, Stephen, are raised by her father's half-brother, Uncle Isamu (Uncle), and his wife, Obasan (Japanese for aunt), who never speak of the disappearance of their mother, an event Naomi comes to associate with her molestation by their neighbor in Vancouver, Old Man Gower. Naomi's memories recount the squalor of the camps, the
chicken coop in which she lived, and the long hours in the fields well after the end of the war. Naomi's meditations are in part prompted by the presence of her mother's sister, Aunt Emily, at the wake. Aunt Emily, an activist seeking justice for internment victims, urges Naomi to review historical documents about the Japanese relocation in order to understand what happened to her family and its lingering effects, which Naomi confronts on a daily basis in the form of her estrangement from both Canadian mainstream society and traditional Japanese culture.

Naomi's identity conflict is formulated through comparison of her two aunts: the restrained, silent sufferer, Obasan, an *issei* (first generation) who cherishes tradition, and the forceful agitator for redress, Emily, a fifty-six-year-old *nisei* (second generation) and feminist who lives alone in Toronto. At times Naomi appears to remain ambivalent about both of their approaches to the past: "I can cry for Obasan, who has turned to stone. But what then? ... What is done, Aunt Emily, is done, is it not? Or are you thinking that through lobbying and legislation, speechmaking and storytelling, we can extricate ourselves from our foolish ways? Is there evidence for optimism?" The struggle of Japanese Canadians to adapt in a predominantly white culture is further explored through the character Stephen, a successful musician and world traveler who rejects his Japanese heritage, preferring to assimilate fully. In the final chapters of the novel, Naomi is attempting to incorporate her memories into her present self, but nagging questions remain about her mother. Finally, she asks that Grandmother Kato's letters from Japan be translated for her. She learns that, at her mother's request, Naomi and Stephen were shielded from her horrific fate: trapped in Japan by the war, she was burned beyond recognition when the atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki, and she died a few years later. The novel ends with a postscript, an extract from a document sent to the Canadian Houses of Parliament in 1946 on behalf of Japanese Canadians.

**Major Themes**

In a 1989 interview with Magdalene Redekop, Kogawa recalled the inspiration for one of the most prominent themes in *Obasan*, the nature of truth: "I'm finding that so many 'facts' are an encumbrance to the fiction—but still they insist on being present. Documents and facts are intended to direct our prejudiced hearts but rarely provide direction by themselves. ... [What] I need is vision and vision comes from relationship." Kogawa's "vision" is realized through the mediation of official history--government committee reports, newspaper clippings, and national records--with the personal accounts of the Japanese Canadians. This juxtaposition of personal and official history is further layered by questions relating to the reliability of memory recovered through dreams and historical information subjected to bias. Critic Mary Ellen Byrne notes how Kogawa's formal technique underscores the blurring of fact and fiction: "While acknowledging that her 1981 novel *Obasan* is based on ...
historical events, Kogawa contends that her main characters are fictional. ... This experimental prose work impersonates autobiography, is composed in poetic language, and uses historical documents."

Closely related to the theme of truth in Obasan is the theme of memory. Naomi (and the reader) is forced to consider whether it is better to act on her memories of the past or to forget them, whether Aunt Emily's constant talk about righting wrongs is a healthier response to bigotry and racism than Obasan's silence--or Stephen's complete assimilation, or Grandpa Nakane's Buddhist practices, to which he steadfastly clings even though the rest of the family has adopted Christianity. The different personalities that emerge in Naomi's family are representative of the Japanese community as a whole, which Kogawa portrays as still struggling to find meaningful identity in a predominantly white culture. The task of establishing a unified personal and collective identity is compounded because the characters in Obasan have not only lost their adopted home but their ancestral home as well.

Critical Reception

The criticism on Obasan is characterized by intense debate concerning its efficacy to cultural politics in Canada. The controversy has issued from the character's varied responses to victimization, which have invited equally varied critical response. Institutionalized by the Canadian state as an instrument of multiculturalism, the official reading of Obasan took a humanist perspective, praising the novel as nationalist for attempting to heal old wounds by suggesting that the internment of Japanese Canadians should be forgiven, and then forgotten in the name of progress. Yet some critics, notably Roy Miki, have exposed the official approach to the novel as self-interested, arguing that it perpetuates a hegemonic state by equating Kogawa's position with that of Obasan, a helpless victim of second-rate status. Other critics, including Guy Beauregard, have found the humanist approach hypocritical because it allows the white majority to exonerate itself for past, present, and future racist practices by admitting to one, supposedly isolated episode. As Eva C. Karpinski ironically asks, "After all, what better proof of Canada's liberalism do we need to invoke than the very fact of Obasan's publication and celebrated status?" Julie McGonegal, on the other hand, resists these dualistic interpretations that argue the incompatibility of reconciliation with resistance. In her opinion, Kogawa equates forgiveness with empowerment because a resolution of tensions would provide an opportunity for open dialogue between the victim and the victimizers. In yet another interpretation, Jane Naomi Iwamura contends that, by flanking the story with a biblical epigraph and a pro-Japanese document, Kogawa links the salvation of the Japanese people to their active protest. Addressing the inclusion of multiple viewpoints in the novel, Apollo O. Amoko remarked, "I mean to emphasize ... the ambivalence that would allow a putatively dissident and disruptive minority text to
become a much-acclaimed national text.” Aside from the cultural politics surrounding Obasan, the novel has been the subject of New Historicist criticism on the basis of its blending of literary and nonliterary texts, feminist interpretations by virtue of its focus on women characters, and psychological readings because of its recurrent dream sequences. Despite the controversy surrounding the didactic intent of Obasan, or perhaps because of it, the novel created an unprecedented awareness of the historic plight of persons of Japanese descent in Canada. Kogawa has frequently reworked the material of Obasan in order to keep the fight for minority and ethnic rights in the public eye. In addition to the sequel and its revision, Kogawa adapted the novel into two children's books, Naomi's Road (1986) and Naomi's Tree (2008), and wrote a screenplay for a movie, The Pool: Reflections of the Japanese-Canadian Internment (1992). Naomi's Road was in turn adapted by the Vancouver opera for a production that toured the United States and Canada in 2005.

WORKS:

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

- The Splintered Moon (poetry) 1967
- A Choice of Dreams (poetry) 1974
- Jericho Road (poetry) 1977
- Obasan (novel) 1981
- Woman in the Woods (poetry) 1985
- Naomi's Road (juvenile fiction) 1986
- Itsuka [published in revised form as Emily Kato, 2005] (novel) 1992
- The Pool: Reflections of the Japanese-Canadian Internment [screenwriter] (film) 1992
- The Rain Ascends (novel) 1995
- A Song of Lilith [paintings by Lilian Broca] (poem) 2000
- A Garden of Anchors: Selected Poems (poetry) 2003
- Naomi's Tree (juvenile fiction) 2008

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CRITICISM

Places Obasan and Hiromo Goto's Chorus of Mushrooms within the tradition of ethnic testimonial literature.


Compares the exploration of trauma and its relationship to identity in Obasan with John Okada's No-No Boy.


Contrasts use of the Book of Genesis as a source text by Kogawa and Canadian writer Thomas King.


Examines the theme of silence and the symbolic motif of the stone in Kogawa's Obasan.


Analyzes the motif of home as a metaphor for nature in Obasan.

Explores the place and significance of *Obasan* in establishing collective historical memory of the internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II.


  Contends that *Obasan* challenges conventional notions of history and historical veracity.

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