

“Free-Falling” and “Serendipity”: An Interview With Joy Kogawa

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Résumé: Dans ses romans tels *Obasan* et *Itsuka* et son seul récit destiné à la jeunesse, *Naomi's Road*, la romancière Joy Kogawa a voulu sensibiliser le public à la difficile situation des citoyens d'origine japonaise durant la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Dans cette entrevue, elle évoque les problèmes d'identité que sous-tend son oeuvre romanesque.



Summary: In this interview, Joy Kogawa produces a fascinating commentary on the construction of personal identity. She sets this discourse within three generations of her own family, talking about her perception of herself as white in her own childhood, about how her writing of and response to the reception of *Obasan* has changed her, and about how their perception of racism has affected her own children. She also provides commentary on the crafting of *Naomi's Road*, her children's version of *Obasan*, her internationally acclaimed novel about the experience of the Canadian-Japanese during World War II. As well, she gives insight into how personal memories, archival work, and creativity all coalesce in the production of art.

Joy Kogawa is the author of the acclaimed novel *Obasan* (1981). It is the first novel to tell the story of the internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II. Winner of many awards such as the Books in Canada First Novel Award, and the Canadian Authors' Association Book of the Year Award, *Obasan* has been praised for its moving combination of poetry and prose and its remarkable lack of bitterness. Although the protagonist is “Naomi,” the novel was inspired by the experiences of Kogawa herself, whose family was forced from an elegant home in Vancouver. They lived in a two-room shack in Slocan, British Columbia, before moving to the town of Coaldale, Alberta. Kogawa's second and most recent novel, *Itsuka*, portrays an adult Naomi coming to terms with the events of her childhood as she becomes involved in the redress movement. *Obasan* itself served as the catalyst for Kogawa's own involvement with the redress movement and was instrumental in the Canadian government's decision to provide compensation for Japanese Canadians. *Naomi's Road*, Kogawa's only book for children, aims the *Obasan* story at a much younger audience.

DONOHUE: When you were a child, were you exposed to white, Western mythology through fairy tales as well as Japanese mythology, in the same way

that Naomi is in *Naomi's Road*? For instance, just as Naomi delights in the story of Momotaro, the peach-boy, she also compares her hut in Slocan to the home of the three bears.

KOGAWA: I got Eastern folk tales from Mom, and I read the Western folk tales and fairy tales as soon as I could read. I had a lot of both. The more stories a kid gets, the better, I think.

DONOHUE: What did you read to your own children when they were growing up?

KOGAWA: I read all the nursery rhymes, the Narnia tales and C.S. Lewis's other children's books, and *The Hobbit*, among other things.

DONOHUE: Did you expose them to any Eastern literature at all?

KOGAWA: I didn't because I didn't have any. But once in a while I'd come across a book of fairy tales or something like that and I'd get it for them. But I never read them myself. At the time when my kids were small I mostly read them Western stories.

DONOHUE: *Anne of Green Gables* was mentioned in both *Obasan* and *Itsuka*. I'm wondering why you chose to include Montgomery in this way and what impact she has had on your writing.

KOGAWA: Well, when we were in Slocan there was no library. The only books I had were the school textbooks and *The Book of Knowledge*. But when we moved to Coaldale, Alberta (and I was ten years old at the time), there were books in the school. The public library sent us their discards, so I read a bunch of those. Things like *The Secret Garden* and *The Prince and the Pauper*—I read them all. As far as L.M. Montgomery is concerned, I read those when I was in about Grades 6 and 7, and I just loved them. I could see this young person [the "Story Girl"] who told lots of stories and I was like that: I would gather kids around me and tell them lots of stories. I haven't read those stories since then but I was affected by them. At that stage in your life there's a growing idealism about things.

DONOHUE: At the L.M. Montgomery Symposium in June 1994, Adrienne Clarkson spoke about having immigrated to Canada at a young age, and how reading Montgomery as a child introduced her to the cultural and psychological heritage of Canada. As a member of a minority and unfamiliar with Western culture, she found that Montgomery told her a great deal about British Canadians. Did Montgomery or any of the other Western authors you read as a child affect you in this way?

KOGAWA: Well, I didn't develop a consciousness of myself as Asian. I know it was there but it was very severely suppressed and denied, because the prejudice was so fierce. In my conscious mind I did not identify with "them": the "other," the "slant-eyed," the "yellow peril." They were the enemy and I was not them. I was white and I was proud to be a British subject. The fact that I didn't have red hair or golden hair or brown hair—all these were painful things that I accepted about myself, but were not part of everyday consciousness unless someone pointed them out to me. So when kids *would* point out these things, there was a very fierce reaction within me ...

DONOHUE: ... of denial?

KOGAWA: Yes, the denial was in place so firmly that when somebody would break through it was like an arrow going in. It was so painful. Any of those kinds of remarks were excruciating. Nevertheless, when it was over I was back again to being this white person. So my earliest writings were identifications as a white person.

DONOHUE: Montgomery was one of those writers who made her readers identify strongly with the characters.

KOGAWA: People identify with whatever is beautiful, whatever is the hero or heroine. We certainly don't identify with the enemy, and if the enemy is presented as looking like us, well that's not us.

DONOHUE: Speaking about having to confront realities when other children mention them reminds me of how Naomi's life in both *Obasan* and *Itsuka* might compare to your own. I have read that Nakayami-Sensei [the local minister and family friend] was modelled after your father, and *Obasan* reminded you more of your mother. And that Muriel Kitagawa's letters to her brother provided the inspiration for Aunt Emily's letters. Could you tell me more about that? Also, on electronic mail you told me that Naomi was more of a "wimp" than you were.

KOGAWA: [laughs]. Well, I used to be more like her than I am now. In *Obasan* I think I was working through these two identities, the *Obasan* character and the Aunt Emily character, the inner person and the outer person, the activist and the spiritual person. I think that I had chosen the *Obasan* character as the main model primarily because I never ever knew anybody like Aunt Emily throughout my life. There were no feminists or activists that I knew — when I was younger, that is — but there was that part of me, I guess, that needed to ask myself those questions and confront them. I worked them out in *Obasan*. There I veered more towards the *Obasan* person, Naomi's identification being stronger with her than with Aunt Emily. In *Itsuka* it went the other way. I think in my own life that definitely happened: I was more of a subterranean person in *Obasan* than in *Itsuka* and I became more like Emily. I judged that attitude, both in *Obasan* and in *Itsuka*, as being more shallow.

The consciousness of one's activities can so take over oneself that if you lose touch with the other dimension you can become like a cut flower. Right now, what I feel is that life spirals. One doesn't go around in a circle so much as one goes around in a spiral. I seem to be spiralling back, although in a different way. I'm not Naomi who wrote *Obasan* or who was described in *Obasan*; that's not who I am any more.

DONOHUE: And what about the Naomi of *Itsuka*?

KOGAWA: Well, the Naomi of *Itsuka* was always a problem for me because I was no longer her. I was, in fact, more like Aunt Emily. I had become that way through, actually, the success of *Obasan*. It flung me into another way of being and I was able to get up and talk, which I was *never* able to do before.

DONOHUE: Isn't that exciting!

KOGAWA: It's amazing to me how that kind of change happened. I guess one does change in life.

DONOHUE: In terms of "spiralling back," at one point over electronic mail you talked about how you are grappling with questions of evil again, now, the way you did once before. Can you expand on that?

KOGAWA: When I was writing *Obasan* I wasn't really dealing with questions of evil consciously. But I was in my life. In 1964, before I began publishing, I was really confronted with the problem of evil. It was a problem simply because I had faith in a loving God. It seemed to be too much of a contradiction. So, I grappled with it at the time and came to certain insights about that which enabled me to continue with my faith more or less intact. The basic part was that I could entrust myself to a benevolent universe. That seemed to be some kind of baseline that I could have without it being intellectual — more experiential. And right now, I am back again with the problem of evil but in a different kind of way.

DONOHUE: I wonder if your future writing will change you somehow, too, the way your other writings have.

KOGAWA: I hope so. I believe that people do change when they engage in their struggles. Life presents us with all kinds of things, and if we don't run away from them, or don't keep repeating them and just tackle them, I think they change us. There are so many many ways to change, and ways in which we stay stuck forever I think, too.

DONOHUE: It's wonderful to hear this from someone like you who has gone through such a traumatic experience in your childhood. As to your faith struggle and belief in a loving God: In an interview in 1991 you described yourself as a "closet Christian." Is that still an apt description of you?

KOGAWA: Well, one of the problems I've had with Christianity in the past, and still do, is that it seemed to me inappropriate to be a Christian and be a militant one, that is to be triumphalist. If one considers the history of Christianity, especially in relation to the Holocaust and its silence at the time, I think that Christianity's failure to be a loving faith was massive at that point. It was so horrific that I would like to know more, actually, about what [Dietrich] Bonhoeffer meant when he spoke of "Nonreligious Christianity." At any rate, all my upbringing had to do with Christian mythology, and since I came out of that, that's what's in my head.

I don't know any of the other faiths really. I believe in a spiritual dimension to people. That is, I think all that we know isn't all that there is, let's say. I don't know what else to call all of that.

DONOHUE: Has the Bible been a major influence in your thinking and your writing?

KOGAWA: Well, the Bible was in my house from the beginning, since I come from a minister's family. Reading it was what one simply did. I went to Dad's church and Sunday school, but I also went to a hall down the street which was very evangelical. One of my early memories is of being lifted up onto a stage and

reciting John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in Him would not perish but have everlasting life.” I felt terrible standing there. That was in my early days in Vancouver. Then in Slocan I remember listening to some evangelical people talking about the power of the Bible, and I read the entire book. I was maybe eight years old. I found it quite a chore.

When we moved to Coaldale, Alberta, a Mennonite town, I was immersed in an environment of deep bibliolatry. The book was a magic tool. I memorized huge chunks of it. I read and understood and studied the book. Today I’m not sorry I went through all that, but things are different now.

DONOHUE: You haven’t rejected all of your upbringing, have you?

KOGAWA: I reject aspects about it, but there are all kinds of things that I don’t reject about it. I don’t reject the notion that God is love, but if you asked me what I meant by that I’d have a hard time. I’m curious about your own beliefs...?

DONOHUE: Well, I’m a Christian, as you are. I see a distinction between the institution of Christianity, how painful that has been at times in the world, and the personal faith dimension, which I think can be quite separate. I do struggle, however, with maintaining my personal faith when confronted with problems that Christianity has created in the world. But, it hasn’t only created problems, has it?

KOGAWA: No, it solved a lot of problems too. But I think that the arrogance that has been associated with it has been so damaging.

DONOHUE: I guess there are different kinds of Christianity, aren’t there?

KOGAWA: There certainly are.

DONOHUE: You have two adult children. Did you draw on your own experiences as a mother in recounting Naomi’s story where she loses her mother, or did you draw more on your own experiences of internment?

KOGAWA: I didn’t in fact lose my real mother, but one of my friends told me that the reason she thought I had included the Obasan character plus Naomi’s mother was that my own mother went through such traumatic changes as she was moved from her elegant home in Vancouver to Slocan and then to Coaldale. There, she deteriorated. My friend felt that I couldn’t cope with that, so I wrote the idealized mother that remained that way, and the Obasan character. In point of fact I don’t know. I know that in writing *Obasan* it was my mother I was thinking about. As far as the disappearance of the mother is concerned, that was fiction. Where that came from, I don’t know.

DONOHUE: In *Naomi’s Road*, you do not answer the question of what happens to the mother. Have you had any feedback at all from kids or from other adults who have read it, concerning how they react to the unsolved mystery of why she doesn’t return to Naomi? My eleven-year-old sister, Sarah, read the book and this was one of the first questions she asked about it.

KOGAWA: I get all kinds of letters from kids, and they ask me about the mother. I guess they do wonder.

DONOHUE: How do you respond to those letters?

KOGAWA: Well, since I get so many letters, I don't really go into it. Probably it's better for me to write form letters in answer to the common questions rather than to dash off the little notes that I send, which are so inadequate in response. I guess if I were to sit down and have a conversation with a child about the question, I would talk to her about Naomi's later dream in *Itsuka*, where she has a sense of contact with her mother even though she has died.

DONOHUE: Reading about Naomi's experiences of racism leads me to wonder how you prepared for and reacted to your own children's experiences of racism, if they indeed did experience it.

KOGAWA: When they were little I was more white than anything else. I don't think I ever said anything to them. I don't think I have *ever* said anything to them about racism. They've picked up whatever they've picked up without my saying anything. And they both feel more comfortable not to be in Canada: one is in Hawaii and one is in Japan.

DONOHUE: Why is that?

KOGAWA: They say that they can feel the racism in Canada. My son said he was afraid of the shock to some of his people and his friends if they were to come here. He felt this because if they were raised in Japan they would never know what racism was like. But I've found that when recent immigrants from Japan experience racism, they're oblivious to it. It doesn't hurt them in the same way because they weren't infected with it when they were children. It's different when you've got the disease. When it hurts, you feel it forever. So I didn't properly inoculate my children. I didn't know how and I still wouldn't know how.

DONOHUE: I'm sure that they picked up a lot through osmosis the way children often can from parents. You've talked about when you were seeing yourself as a white person and then came to a new understanding. Did it correspond with when you started to write?

KOGAWA: I think that when you're in denial you're living parallel lives. One part of you knows that there's racism all around you and you're picking it up, and the other part of you is in denial about it and you're not that person at all. These things go back and forth, a little bit like Robert Louis Stevenson's "Jekyll" and "Hyde." It goes on and on, and at some point it comes together. I think the part of me that was in denial came out much more after I wrote *Obasan*, not during it, or before it.

DONOHUE: Why?

KOGAWA: The part of me that knew about racism knew about it and wrote it. It didn't come into my being in any conscious way until afterwards, which is very odd. I always quote this saying that's in the Gnostic Gospels about Jesus saying "If you bring forth that which is within you, that which you bring forth will save you. That which you do not bring forth will destroy you." So I think that for me it took the effort of writing the book and then having things reflected back to me. It took all that work to come out of denial.

Denial is an extraordinarily powerful thing, and if it takes that kind of huge effort

to come out. I imagine that a lot of people, the Niseis (second generation Japanese Canadians) like myself, are still in denial. Then there was that whole endeavour with the redress movement and that's when the denial was really gone.

DONOHUE: You write in *Itsuka* about Naomi's experience with the redress movement. You've mentioned how you felt more like Aunt Emily at that point.

KOGAWA: I was sort of both. In *Obasan* I was Naomi and Obasan; in *Itsuka* I'm Naomi and Aunt Emily. They're both part of me. There was that part of me which was just done in by community politics. It was so horrific and I found it unbearable. But it was the Naomi part of me that found it unbearable. By the time I got to the end of it all, my skin was a lot thicker, more like Aunt Emily. And I can now see how thick-skinned you have to be if you're going to do it. You'll die if you're not.

DONOHUE: Was part of acquiring thicker skin just confronting your former denial and who you really were, similar to how Naomi has to do that before she can get involved?

KOGAWA: I think of the thick skin as confronting not so much the denial but the pain that there was within the community itself. And it was the community's denial that was so painful. So, during the number of years that we were involved in it, I wasn't. As I made myself do one thing after another which was harder and harder, that forced effort created calluses over my soul, calluses over the trepidation. It's sort of like free-falling. You fall and you find you land, and lo and behold, you're not dead, so you get up again. I don't know if I would use the word "denial" to describe all of that. It was just all stormy.

DONOHUE: Can you tell me why you started to write *Obasan* and how that came about?

KOGAWA: After *Jericho Road* came out and I got a bad review — I'm so affected by reviews — I thought, well, I can't write poetry any more because they don't think I'm any good. So I thought maybe I would start writing prose. I got a grant to go to the United States to meet some Japanese-American writers. It's not something I'd really thought of doing particularly, but it was a way to get a grant. I'd written an article about Coaldale. And when I was there, wondering what to do, I asked my dreams what I should be doing. That night I was told to go to Ottawa and work in the Archives. I thought I'd go to Ottawa, as I had lived there before, but not work in the Archives. When the article about Coaldale got accepted, the magazine wanted to have some photographs. So I went to the Archives after all. There I was shown Muriel Kitagawa's letters to her brother and I knew that I had to do something with them. In the meantime I'd written a short story, called *Obasan*. I needed a character; I actually called her "Aunt Muriel" for a while, I think for the whole first draft. Then she became Emily. I really wanted to honour Muriel by editing her work, but I didn't; I used her material for a novel instead.

DONOHUE: Can you talk a little bit more about how your dreams affect you and your writing?

KOGAWA: Well, they affect me a great deal, actually. I used to have a dream diary, to think about them a lot. There are certain dreams that have been very significant in my life, and have affected how I feel about the universe, the world, and so on. My dreams seem sometimes to be almost like guides.

DONOHUE: This has carried over into your writing as well, with the use of dreams. Even at the end of *Naomi's Road*, Naomi dreams about the rose and a bowl of mushrooms, which symbolizes her mother's death.

KOGAWA: Yes, *Naomi's Road* has an interesting story surrounding it.

DONOHUE: Could you tell it, please?

KOGAWA: In *Obasan*, Naomi's mother dies. I didn't think that would do for a children's book. There had to be a problem and a resolution. As I thought about that, I remembered the little blond girl in Slocan who is referred to in *Obasan*. It seemed to be a good idea to make friendship the main issue. I vaguely remembered a little girl in Slocan called Mitzi Hufty. I hadn't written to her or had any reason to think of her except that she was one of the children I'd played with. So I decided to call the little girl Mitzi. Well, wouldn't you know it, the day that I wrote that out, making Mitzi into Naomi's friend and finishing the book, I got a letter out of the blue from the real life Mitzi. I couldn't believe it. She wrote and said I probably wouldn't remember her but she was the spoiled kid who had all the toys, etc. That serendipity kept me happy for half a year. When things like that happen I get the feeling that something is working — some not understood law.

DONOHUE: That must have been an incredible experience for you.

KOGAWA: Do you know that "Mitzi" in Japanese, "Michi," means "road"?

DONOHUE: No ...

KOGAWA: ... Yes, and then at the beginning of the book it's dedicated to "Michiko," that was "the way." She was the one who translated *Naomi's Road* to Japanese.

DONOHUE: So it all comes together, doesn't it? The tone and style of *Naomi's Road* is different from *Obasan*. Yet, reviewers have really praised your ability to maintain the same overall effect in the children's book that you created with the adult book. And I'm wondering, how difficult was it for you to go from one to the other?

KOGAWA: When I was asked to write it, I just thought I was going to be basically doing captions to pictures. I thought it was going to be a very simple thing for very small children. But then it came to address older and older children. I had a Radio Shack model 100 computer and wherever I'd go, I'd be tapping it out. It came out very fast, a chapter a day almost. It's the easiest thing I've ever written, just like walking down the street for me or getting on a bike. It's a very easy thing to think about little stories for children, because when I was a child I did that all the time. I was always telling stories to kids. Maybe I should do more children's books.

DONOHUE: You must have a good memory, to be able to remember what it was like to be a child, telling stories that appealed to children. You must

remember how you responded to different stories as well.

KOGAWA: I think the main thing for a writer is to have a great well of feelings, not to be cut off from feelings, because the power comes from that.

DONOHUE: How did you decide to remove Aunt Emily from *Naomi's Road*?

KOGAWA: If it was to be a children's book it had to be simplified, and the fewer characters the better. So I just didn't add her. I don't think I really thought about it that much. It's very odd to think of this book in Japan, because the *Naomi's Road* there is different from the *Naomi's Road* here. It's a combination of *Obasan* and *Naomi's Road*. But it doesn't have Aunt Emily in it, so it's a very strange book I think [laughs].

DONOHUE: How else does it differ from the edition we read here?

KOGAWA: Well, they started off by doing a translation of *Naomi's Road*, and then the editor wanted more. So, I made little additions here and there, bringing in the grandfather and the grandmother and taking out this and that. It just evolved as the editor kept asking for things. By the time it was done, it was a book for junior high kids.

DONOHUE: I'd like to ask you a couple of questions about censorship. I know this is always a difficult issue for authors. In a class at the University of Guelph last year, Jean Little explained how she has difficulty including the practice of Christianity in her books because her publishers don't want to alienate or offend non-Christian readers. Did you have any experiences like that? Or were you thinking about that kind of censorship when you were writing *Naomi's Road*?

KOGAWA: No, I never thought about censorship at all. I thought about libel when I was writing *Itsuka*, but I never ever thought about censorship. I did write about Christianity, but rather negatively I think, in *Itsuka*. I can't imagine somebody wanting to censor it out, unless it's written in a tract kind of way.

DONOHUE: You mean using the book as a means to preach one's own belief system?

KOGAWA: Yes. In trying to evangelize people or something like that, I can see people taking offence.

DONOHUE: But maybe children's books are generally more censored than adult ones, especially with respect to religion and "political correctness."

KOGAWA: I think one ought to be able to write about what one believes, unless one needs to think more carefully about whether one is being offensive. It's an interesting debate.

DONOHUE: And a heated one as well.

KOGAWA: What is it that is offensive about any person's faith? I mean, if the Ku Klux Klan were to propound their faith or their racial hatred that would be quite a debate.

DONOHUE: Yes, it would. Jean Little points out that at the present time, other, non-Christian faiths are more readily accepted in children's books. Publishers seem to feel that, these days, the practice of non-Christian faiths in a book for children is somehow less likely to offend than the practice of Christianity.

Obasan is a very political book, but it also is very personal and poetic. Whatever the message is, the reader is not being bombarded with it. Then at the beginning of *Naomi's Road*, the message to the children implies that there are certain things that children should understand after reading it. Annette Goldsmith talks about how the prefatory letter does give a good historical context, but says more of it could have come from the book itself. She cites Stephen, for example, who reads the "hard parts" of the newspaper. How do you respond to that?
KOGAWA: Right now, I wish that letter weren't in there. It bothers me. I don't like reading prefaces myself and I don't like being told what I'm going to be told, either. If that was important to the editor, I think it would have been better if I had put it into the text.

DONOHUE: Have you received any feedback, proving that it bothers other readers?

KOGAWA: No, but I notice sometimes that when children send pictures they draw a picture of a child with a face shaped exactly like a heart, because that's mentioned in the preface.

DONOHUE: So you know that they're paying attention.

KOGAWA: Yes [laughs]. It's amazing to me that nobody asked me to rewrite or to do anything with it.

DONOHUE: I'd like to talk about autobiography. Sandra Odegard wrote in *CCL* that Naomi is a little girl who *may* be based on your memories of yourself as a child, but who emerges as a fictive creation quite separate from you, the adult author. Would you consider *Naomi's Road* to be autobiographical at all? Or would we be talking about *Obasan* at the same time?

KOGAWA: They both seem to me to be autobiographical to quite an extent, although they're both fictional, too. I get confused sometimes about what's what [laughs]. Of course there are things that are made up, but there are things that really happened as well, and I think that almost all fiction is like that.

DONOHUE: Recent theories about writing are claiming that life writing and autobiography involve a construction of reality in the same way that fiction does. I wonder, how would you respond to these kinds of claims in light of what you have written?

KOGAWA: I do think that we create meaning, and I guess that what that school of thought is saying is that we can't ever fully describe reality. We can only put a frame around certain aspects of something and sketch it. Even if we take a photograph of it, we haven't really captured it in its completeness — we don't have the smells there, we don't have dimensions there, and so on. It depends on what they mean by "autobiography." We can't totally recreate the past in any way. We always do look from a point of view. I think some people try to create as much of the historical, factual, emotional realities as they can, but I don't know ... What do you think?

DONOHUE: Take books like *Obasan* and *Itsuka*. These novels ask us to recognize a certain level of undebatable truth. They try to get us to expand or

change our thinking. If you say that everything is a construction, you just have to be really careful.

KOGAWA: Yes, but if everything is a construction, so is the official story a construction, and nobody's got a handle on the truth — it's sort of a mix of everything and nothing. I guess it's the old question of what is the truth.

DONOHUE: How has feminism affected you and your writing?

KOGAWA: One of the tenets of my Christian faith has been that you stand with the oppressed. In the story of the lost sheep, God is out there to rescue the perishing and to get that last lost lamb out of the gully. That marches alongside of feminism and political, social justice. It all makes sense to me. The act of the oppressed and the exodus out of Egypt towards liberation, towards freedom — that great march of humanity is what I see these movements to be a part of.

I don't see any contradictions; I see it as just part of who I choose to be. Although, it's interesting how these movements change, how that which was once liberating can become destructive in one way or another, and how, for example, even Christianity after many centuries was no longer a marginalized faith, but became the dominant faith. It needed the crossover. When you come to that crossover time in any movement, whether it's feminism or social justice or Christianity, there comes a time when one needs to know that one is no longer the victim. The danger is that then one can become part of the victimizer. To be able to critically assess that crossover point, both politically and personally, is very important.

I think people choose whatever urgency they feel about something. And since the urgency about race has been on the forefront for me, I've put a lot more energy into that than I have into feminism. But that could easily change. One of my feminist friends who is a lesbian puts most of her energy into the politics of lesbianism, even if she's an Asian woman writer. That's the most pertinent thing for her. It's where she feels the most pain.

DONOHUE: So you haven't perceived a clash between your identity as a Christian and your identity as a feminist, or between Christianity and the struggle against racism?

KOGAWA: I would say that I am not identified with fundamentalist Christianity as much as I know what fundamentalist Christianity is like. What I appreciate about it is its passion and zeal. But what I don't like about it is the arrogance and its attitudes towards women. I see these as inconsistent with the model of love that's presented to us in Christianity. I think that there's a static nature in the mind and we need the security in fundamentalist Christianity which serves those kinds of needs. And those kinds of needs are served by the Ku Klux Klan, too. So, my identification belongs with liberation-theology Christianity. That form of Christianity is not at odds with feminism.

DONOHUE: In the past, you've spoken about the victimization and marginalisation of different people. I was wondering, how do you view children?

KOGAWA: I never thought of them as victimized or marginalized. In that sense

I think of them as creatures like us, but more open to wonder than we are. And less scarred and less callused. Their souls are less callused, so in that sense I see them as very privileged creatures, easily harmed by the callused adults. They are very easy to victimize. But children are part of society. The children of privileged people are part of a privileged society and therefore part of a victimizing society too, imbibing the values of their group. So I haven't separated children out as a weak group or anything like that. But maybe I should. I do believe that the love and respect we give children is the single most important matter for the future of the species. Political advocacy for them is of paramount importance.

DONOHUE: Through your writing you recognize children's vulnerability at the same time as you've talked about their privileged status. You've talked about the dangers of television, or exposing children to Bugs Bunny cartoons and similar programming. What kids must derive from those kinds of cartoons is a little bit scary, isn't it?

KOGAWA: Oh, it's terrifying. I feel horrific about how kids are making up the world in their minds by what they're offered.

DONOHUE: It must be hard for adults to introduce reading and the value of literature to kids who are continually tantalized by a manipulative television media.

KOGAWA: It must be confusing to kids, but maybe they're able to stick it up on shelves and to compartmentalize it in a way.

DONOHUE: A review of *Naomi's Road* mentions the dream sequence at the end. Sandra Odegard points out "this sequence, which presumably symbolizes Naomi's mother's death in Japan, might be confusing to a child" and she writes that "it might be that Kogawa wants the child to turn to an adult for help." Did you have in mind the idea of children dialoguing with adults when you wrote the book?

KOGAWA: No, I wasn't conscious of that. I might have thought that this image would make some sense to a child. But if kids are talking to adults and adults are talking about it, that's great.

DONOHUE: That notion touches on parents' and teachers' roles in children's reading. What do you perceive that role to be?

KOGAWA: The most potent thing for a child is to see the adults engrossed in reading. So, if parents are readers, and teachers themselves are readers, and if you delight in the voyages of the imagination that are taken, then the children can go on the same trips and can get into their own books.

What I really believe about kids and adults is that if adults are as unobtrusive as possible, that's the best thing that they can do: Neither blame nor praise, but allow children to experience whatever they experience for themselves. The praise and the blame should come from within the child, not from somebody outside. That makes the child strong, makes the child confident, makes the child know that he or she sees the world. So often children have to look to adults for approval, have to look to adults to know what to know. But I don't think they need to do that. I think they can know what to know by themselves. I have been

intruded upon in many, many ways, and the intrusions were damaging.

DONOHUE: Yet as you've come to terms with those intrusions, you've turned your experiences into insightful and moving works of poetry and prose. Thank you so much for speaking with me today and over electronic mail.

KOGAWA: I'm glad we did this. Thanks a lot.

Although this interview began with communication over electronic mail, the majority was finished over long-distance telephone between Guelph and Vancouver on September 12, 1994.

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Joy Kogawa has published several volumes of poetry, including *The Splintered Moon* (Fiddlehead, 1967), *A Choice of Dreams* (McClelland and Stewart, 1974), *Jericho Road* (McClelland and Stewart, 1977) and *Woman in the Woods* (Mosaic, 1985). Her novels are *Obasan* (Lester and Orpyn Dennys, 1981) and *Itsuka* (Viking Penguin, 1992). *Naomi's Road* (Oxford, 1986; Stoddart, 1996) is her only book for children. The Toronto Young People's Theatre recently toured with a stage production of *Naomi's Road*.

Kathleen Donohue completed the MA English program at the University of Guelph and took teacher training at the University of Western Ontario. She now teaches in a private school in Keswick, Ontario.

