

OTHER SOLITUDES

CANADIAN
MULTICULTURAL
FICTIONS

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JOY KOGAWA b. 1935

Obasan

She is sitting at the kitchen table when I come in. She is so deaf now that my knocking does not rouse her and when she sees me she is startled.

'O,' she says, and the sound is short and dry as if there is no energy left to put any inflection into her voice. She begins to rise but falters and her hands outstretched in greeting, fall to the table. She says my name as a question.

I put my shoulder bag down, remove the mud-caked boots and stand before her.

'Obasan,' I say loudly and take her hands. My aunt is not one for hugs and kisses.

She peers into my face. 'O,' she says again.

I nod in reply. We stand for a long time in silence. I open my mouth to ask, 'Did he suffer very much?' but the question feels pornographic.

'Everyone dies some day,' she says eventually. She tilts her head to the side as if it's all too heavy inside.

I hang my jacket on a coat peg and sit beside her.

The house is familiar but has shrunk over the years and is even more cluttered than I remember. The wooden table is covered with a plastic table cloth over a blue and white cloth. Along one edge are African violets in profuse bloom, salt and pepper shakers, a soya sauce bottle, an old radio, a non-automatic toaster, a small bottle full of toothpicks. She goes to the stove and turns on the gas flame under the kettle.

'Everyone dies some day,' she says again and looks in my direction, her eyes unclear and sticky with a gum-like mucous. She pours the tea. Tiny twigs and bits of popcorn circle in the cup.

When I last saw her nine years ago, she told me her tear ducts were clogged. I have never seen her cry. Her mouth is filled with a gummy saliva as well. She drinks warm water often because her tongue sticks to the roof of her false plate.

'Thank you,' I say, taking the cup in both hands.

Uncle was disoriented for weeks, my cousin's letter told me. Towards the end he got dizzier and dizzier and couldn't move without clutching things. By the time they got him to the hospital, his eyes were rolling.

'I think he was beginning to see everything upside down again,' she wrote, 'the way we see when we are born.' Perhaps for Uncle, everything had started reversing and he was growing top to bottom, his mind rooted in an upstairs attic of humus and memory, groping backwards through cracks and walls to a moist cellar. Down to water. Down to the underground sea.

Back to the fishing boat, the ocean, the skiff moored off Vancouver Island where he was born. Like Moses, he was an infant of the waves, rocked to sleep by the lap lap and '*Nen, nen, korori*', his mother's voice singing the ancient Japanese lullaby. His father, Japanese craftsman, was also a son of the sea which had tossed and coddled his boatbuilding ancestors for centuries. And though he had crossed the ocean from one island as a stranger coming to an island of strangers, it was the sea who was his constant landlord. His fellow tenants, the Songhee Indians of Esquimalt, and the fishermen, came from up and down the BC coast to his workshop in Victoria, to watch, to barter, and to buy.

In the framed family photograph hanging above the sideboard, Grandfather sits on a chair with his short legs not quite square on the floor. A long black cape hangs from his shoulders. His left hand clutches a pair of gloves and the top of a cane. On a pedestal beside him is a top hat, open end up. Uncle stands slightly to his right, and behind, with his hand like Napoleon's in his vest. Sitting to their left is Grandmother in a lace and velvet suit with my mother in her arms. They all look in different directions, carved and rigid with their expressionless Japanese faces and their bodies pasted over with Rule Britannia. There's not a ripple out of place.

And then there is the picture, not framed, not on display, showing Uncle as a young man smiling and proud in front of an exquisitely detailed craft. Not a fishing boat, not an ordinary yacht — a creation of many years and many winter evenings — a work of art. Uncle stands, happy enough for the attention of the camera, eager to pass on the message that all is well. That forever and ever all is well.

But many things happen. There is the voice of the RCMP officer

saying, 'I'll keep that one,' and laughing as he cuts through the water. 'Don't worry, I'll make good use of her.' The other boats are towed away and left to rot. Hundreds of Grandfather's boats belonging to hundreds of fishermen.

The memories are drowned in a whirlpool of protective silence. 'For the sake of the children,' it is whispered over and over. '*Kodomo no tame.*'

And several years later, sitting in a shack on the edge of a sugar beet field in southern Alberta, Obasan is watching her two young daughters with their school books doing homework in the light of a coal oil lamp. Her words are the same. '*Kodomo no tame.*' For their sakes, they will survive the dust and the wind, the gumbo, the summer oven sun. For their sakes, they will work in the fields, hoeing, thinning acres of sugar beets, irrigating, topping, harvesting.

'We must go back,' Uncle would say on winter evenings, the ice thick on the windows. But later, he became more silent.

'*Nen nen.*' Rest, my dear uncle. The sea is severed from your veins. You have been cut loose.

They were feeding him intravenously for two days, the tubes sticking into him like grafting on a tree. But Death won against the medical artistry.

'Obasan, will you be all right?' I ask.

She clears her throat and wipes dry skin off her lips but does not speak. She rolls a bit of dried up jam off the table cloth. She isn't going to answer.

The language of grief is silence. She knows it well, its idioms, its nuances. She's had some of the best tutors available. Grief inside her body is fat and powerful. An almighty tapeworm.

Over the years, Grief has roamed like a highwayman down the channels of her body with its dynamite and its weapons blowing up every moment of relief that tried to make its way down the road. It grew rich off the unburied corpses inside her body.

Grief acted in mysterious ways, its melancholy wonders to perform. When it had claimed her kingdom fully, it admitted no enemies and no vengeance. Enemies belonged in a corridor of experience with sense and meaning, with justice and reason. Her Grief knew nothing of these and whipped her body to resignation until the kingdom was secure. But inside the fortress, Obasan's silence was that of a child bewildered.

'What will you do now?' I ask.

What choices does she have? Her daughters, unable to rescue her or bear the silent rebuke of her suffering have long since fled to the ends of the earth. Each has lived a life in perpetual flight from the density of her inner retreat—from the rays of her inverted sun sucking in their lives with the voracious appetite of a dwarf star. Approaching her, they become balls of liquid metal—mercurial—unpredictable in their moods and sudden departures. Especially for the younger daughter, departure is as necessary as breath. What metallic spider is it in her night that hammers a constant transformation, lacing open doors and windows with iron bars.

'What will you do?' I repeat.

She folds her hands together. I pour her some more tea and she bows her thanks. I take her hands in mine, feeling the silky wax texture.

'Will you come and stay with us?' Are there any other words to say? Her hands move under mine and I release them. Her face is motionless. 'We could leave in a few days and come back next month.'

'The plants. . . .'

'Neighbours can water them.'

'There is trouble with the house,' she says. 'This is an old house. If I leave. . . .'

'Obasan,' I say nodding, 'it is your house.'

She is an old woman. Every homemade piece of furniture, each pot holder and child's paper doily, is a link in her lifeline. She has preserved in shelves and in cupboards, under layers of clothing in closets—a daughter's rubber ball, colouring books, old hats, children's dresses. The items are endless. Every short stub pencil, every cornflake box stuffed with paper bags and old letters is of her ordering. They rest in the corners of the house like parts of her body, hair cells, skin tissue, food particles, tiny specks of memory. This house is now her blood and bones.

She is all old women in every hamlet in the world. You see her on a street corner in a village in southern France, in her black dress and her black stockings. She is squatting on stone steps in a Mexican mountain village. Everywhere she stands as the true and rightful owner of the earth, the bearer of love's keys to unknown doorways, to a network of astonishing tunnels, the possessor of life's infinite personal details.

'I am old,' she says.

These are the words my grandmother spoke that night in the

house in Victoria. Grandmother was too old then to understand political expediency, race riots, the yellow peril. I was too young.

She stands up slowly, 'Something in the attic for you,' she says.

We climb the narrow stairs one step at a time carrying a flashlight with us. Its dull beam reveals mounds of cardboard boxes, newspapers, magazines, a trunk. A dead sparrow lies in the nearest corner by the eaves.

She attempts to lift the lid of the trunk. Black fly corpses fall to the floor. Between the wooden planks, more flies fill the cracks. Old spider webs hang like blood clots, thick and black from the rough angled ceiling.

Our past is as clotted as old webs hung in dark attics, still sticky and hovering, waiting for us to adhere and submit or depart. Or like a spider with its skinny hairy legs, the past skitters out of the dark, spinning and netting the air, ready to snap us up and ensnare our thoughts in old and complex perceptions. And when its feasting is complete, it leaves its victims locked up forever, dangling like hollowed out insect skins, a fearful calligraphy, dry reminders that once there was life flitting about in the weather.

But occasionally a memory that refuses to be hollowed out, to be categorized, to be identified, to be explained away, comes thudding into the web like a giant moth. And in the daylight, what's left hanging there, ragged and shredded is a demolished fly trap, and beside it a bewildered eight-legged spinning animal.

My dead refuse to bury themselves. Each story from the past is changed and distorted, altered as much by the present as the present is shaped by the past. But potent and pervasive as a prairie dust storm, memory and dream seep and mingle through cracks, settling on furniture, into upholstery. The attic and the living room encroach onto each other, deep into their invisible places.

I sneeze and dust specks pummel across the flashlight beam. Will we all be dust in the end—a jumble of faces and lives compressed and powdered into a few lines of statistics—fading photographs in family albums, the faces no longer familiar, the clothing quaint, the anecdotes lost?

I use the flashlight to break off a web and lift the lid of the trunk. A strong whiff of mothballs assaults us. The odour of preservation. Inside, there are bits of lace and fur, a 1920s nightgown, a shoe box, red and white striped socks. She sifts through the contents, one by one.

'That's strange,' she says several times.

'What are you looking for?' I ask.

'Not here. It isn't here.'

She turns to face me in the darkness. 'That's strange,' she says and leaves her questions enclosed in silence.

I pry open the folds of a cardboard box. The thick dust slides off like chocolate icing sugar—antique pollen. Grandfather's boat building tools are wrapped in heavy cloth. These are all he brought when he came to this country wearing a western suit, western shoes, a round black hat. Here is the plane with a wooden handle which he worked by pulling it towards him. A fundamental difference in workmanship—to pull rather than push. Chisels, hammer, a mallet, a thin pointed saw, the handle extending from the blade like that of a kitchen knife.

'What will you do with these?' I ask.

'The junk in the attic', my cousin's letter said, 'should be burned. When I come there this summer, I'll have a big bonfire. It's a fire trap. I've taken the only things that are worth keeping.'

Beneath the box of tools is a pile of *Life* magazines dated in the 1950s. A subscription maintained while the two daughters were home. Beside the pile is another box containing shoe boxes, a metal box with a disintegrating elastic band, several chocolate boxes. Inside the metal box are pictures, duplicates of some I have seen in our family albums. Obasan's wedding photo—her mid-calf dress hanging straight down from her shoulders, her smile glued on. In the next picture, Uncle is a child wearing a sailor suit.

The shoe box is full of documents.

Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Vancouver, BC, March 4, 1942. A folded mimeographed paper authorizes Uncle as the holder of a numbered Registration Card to leave a Registered Area by truck for Vernon where he is required to report to the local Registrar of Enemy Aliens, not later than the following day. It is signed by the RCMP superintendent.

Uncle's face, young and unsmiling looks up at me from the bottom right hand corner of a wallet size ID card. 'The bearer whose photograph and specimen of signature appear hereon, has been duly registered in compliance with the provisions of Order-in-Council PC 117.' A purple stamp underneath states 'Canadian Born'. His thumb print appears on the back with marks of identification specified—scar on back of right hand.

There is a letter from the Department of the Secretary of State. Office of the Custodian. Japanese Evacuation Section. 506 Royal Bank Bldg. Hastings and Granville. Vancouver, BC.

Dear Sir.

Dear Uncle. With whom were you corresponding and for what did you hope? That the enmity would cease? That you could return to your boats? I have grown tired, Uncle, of seeking the face of the enemy hiding in the thick forests of the past. You were not the enemy. The police who came to your door were not the enemy. The men who rioted against you were not the enemy. The Vancouver alderman who said 'Keep BC White' was not the enemy. The men who drafted the Order-in-Council were not the enemy. He does not wear a uniform or sit at a long meeting table. The man who read your timid letter, read your polite request, skimmed over your impossible plea, was not your enemy. He had an urgent report to complete. His wife was ill. The phone rang all the time. The senior staff was meeting in two hours. The secretary was spending too much time over coffee breaks. There were a billion problems to attend to. Injustice was the only constant in a world of flux. There were moments when expedience demanded decisions which would later be judged unjust. Uncle, he did not always know what he was doing. You too did not have an all compassionate imagination. He was just doing his job. I am just doing my work. Uncle. We are all just doing our jobs.

My dear dead Uncle. Am I come to unearth our bitterness that our buried love too may revive?

'Obasan, what shall we do with these?'

She has been waiting at the top of the stairs, holding the railing with both hands. I close the shoe box and replace the four interlocking flaps of the cardboard box. With one hand I shine the flashlight and with the other, guide her as I precede her slowly down the stairs. Near the bottom she stumbles and I hold her small body upright.

'Thank you, thank you,' she says. This is the first time my arms have held her. We walk slowly through the living room and back to the kitchen. Her lips are trembling as she sits on the wooden stool.

Outside, the sky of the prairie spring is painfully blue. The trees are shooting out their leaves in the fierce wind, the new branches elastic as whips. The sharp-edged clarity is insistent as trumpets.

But inside, the rooms are muted. Our inner trees, our veins, are involuted, cocooned, webbed. The blood cells in the trunks of our

bodies, like tiny specks of light, move in a sluggish river. It is more a potential than an actual river—an electric liquid—the current flowing in and between us, between our generations. Not circular, as in a whirlpool, or climactic and tidal as in fountains or spray—but brooding. Bubbling. You expect to hear barely audible pip-pip electronic tones, a pre-concert tuning up behind the curtains in the darkness. Towards the ends of our branches and fingertips, tiny human-shaped flames or leaves break off and leap towards the shadows. My arms are suffused with a suppressed urge to hold.

At the edges of our flesh is a hint of a spiritual osmosis, an eagerness within matter, waiting to brighten our dormant neurons, to entrust our stagnant cells with movement and dance.

Obasan drinks her tea and makes a shallow scratching sound in her throat. She shuffles to the door and squats beside the boot tray. With a putty knife, she begins to scrape off the thick clay like mud that sticks to my boots.



JOY KOGAWA was born in Vancouver in 1935. She is part of the second generation of Japanese Canadians—the *nissei*. Her father, Gordon Nakayama, is an Anglican clergyman and her mother's Japanese background is also Christian. In 1942, during the Second World War, the family was evacuated to Slocan, BC where they lived until 1945, when they were moved to Coaldale, Alberta. After taking teacher training at the University of Alberta for one year, Joy Kogawa returned to Coaldale to teach in an elementary school for a year. In 1955 she moved to Toronto to study music, and the next year to Vancouver, where she married David Kogawa in 1957. With their two children, the couple moved frequently—from Vancouver to Grand Forks, BC to Moose Jaw, to Saskatoon, and finally to Ottawa—before divorcing in 1968. Since 1979 Joy Kogawa has lived in Toronto. Her works include *The Splintered Moon* (Fredericton: University of New Brunswick Press, 1968); *A Choice of Dreams* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974); *Jericho Road* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978); *Obasan* (Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1981) (translated as *Ushinawareta Sokoku* by Sari Nagaoka [Tokyo: Futami Shobo, 1983]; *Woman in the Woods* (Oakville, Ont.: Mosaic Press, 1985); *Naomi's Road* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1986).

MAGDALENE REDEKOP grew up on a farm in the Mennonite community of southern Manitoba. She did her undergraduate degree at the University of Manitoba and her graduate degrees at the University of Toronto. She has published articles on Canadian, American, and Scottish literature and a book on Alice Munro is forthcoming. She has also been involved in writing family memoirs and stories in dialogue with her sisters. In 1982-83 she lived in Japan, where she taught at Kwansei Gakuin University. She now teaches in the English department at Victoria College in the University of Toronto.

Since the publication of Obasan, you have been heavily involved in political activity within and for the Japanese-Canadian community. I'm curious whether you have any reservations about this role. Has it become a kind of tyranny, or do you happily choose it?

Well, life is a matter of being chosen and choosing at the same time. The primary thing for me is a sense of being aligned to something that makes me feel at peace. There's a sense of—for want of a better word—obedience. When I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing, then I can sleep at night. I've often felt that my primary calling is to write and that somehow I was erring in doing a lot of the political work. But I proceed with a kind of blindness, a kind of trust, fundamentally, that if it's the wrong direction I'll be prodded back. I'm therefore full of prod marks all over, and the book that I've just written [a sequel to *Obasan*] has been written in that fashion, with a lot of prod marks, in stops and goes.

Since you've become a voice for the Japanese-Canadian community, your poetry has gone into the background. Is poetry somehow less 'ethnic' than fiction?

I've always been curious about this very human thing we do which is to seek definitions. Ethnicity is a definition. We can view something when we can put it within that boundary. It's inevitable that we have these definitions put upon us like different articles of clothing. Ethnicity is something that got put onto me by the country. In those early days when I was writing poetry, I was not conscious of why I was wearing that particular kind of clothing. It's only people who would then point it out to me who made me aware of that. But I am now increasingly conscious of it.

The idea of a national literature is another boundary. What makes a story Canadian?

In the new novel, Aunt Emily tells Naomi that a Canadian is a hyphen and that we're diplomats by birth. Aunt Emily works for an organization called 'Bridge'. She experiences 'bridge' as a verb: a bridge is what takes you from one side to otherness.

I was living in Japan during the year after your novel Obasan came out and read it there first. I gave a public lecture in Kyoto—entitled 'Joy Kogawa and the Moving Mosaic of Canadian Literature'. I was being rather presumptuously proprietorial. You had done us proud and I tried to claim you by arguing that the hyphen—the bridging—was quintessentially Canadian. Have you travelled to Japan, and did that experience influence the writing of Obasan?

I went in '69 first and *A Choice of Dreams* came out of that. I travelled on my own and I was there for three months. The second time that I went was in 1984. I went with my Dad then and that was totally different. It was a lot of pizzazz, a lot of media stuff, and I didn't get any real sense of anything much except living in hotels and in front of cameras. I guess the thing was I felt a lot of discomfort in my own skin being in Japan. I was aware always of being rude and terribly uncomfortable with the fact that I was so rude.

I was thinking about Nagasaki and wondering whether your grandparents—their experience of being Christian in Japan—would have prepared them to prepare you for an experience of difference. There's so much that is frightening in Obasan and yet it is a deeply hopeful book. Is it Christian faith that is the secret of your strength?

I think that Christianity is possibly the deepest aspect of me. But I think the strength comes from a number of things. The *issei* generation were very powerful people and I think that the kind of parenting that was there is very strengthening to the child. You'll see in the new novel there's the negative side of Christianity which came out of Coaldale and that kind of fundamentalism.

That's interesting for me because Coaldale is a Mennonite town and I'm of Mennonite background. I find myself—largely as a result

of my emerging feminism—more and more in deep conflict with aspects of fundamentalist Christianity. There is a long history of struggles about whether or not you are Mennonite if you eat borscht or if you believe in the literal word of God. In your case, is there a different way that ethnicity and religion are in conflict with each other? The language of the Bible is an important aspect of Obasan, but are there ways in which being Japanese by cultural background is at odds with being Christian?

I know that there are some Japanese-Americans who feel that basically the Japanese-ness within them requires them to be Buddhists or Shintoists. I don't know that I experienced any conflict with it, perhaps because my parents were Christians and they were also Japanese, and so whatever they offered me, on that mixed plate which had rice *and* potatoes on it, wasn't strange to me. That was what came with the mix of who I am. So I don't know what is Japanese about me.

I was trying to relate you as a writer to, say, Endo—who explores the way the values of Japanese society sometimes are uneasily superimposed on Christian values. You haven't experienced those kinds of tensions?

I have not experienced the kinds of tensions that he has. I have very little consciousness of the Japanese reader. I'm connected to something from the past but I'm not sure that I feel connected to Japan today.

Do you find that you are ambivalent about your ethnicity? Sometimes when people call me Mennonite I like it; other times I don't. On the one hand, I like to think of myself as different. On the other hand, I resent being defined as different. Do you experience this?

Oh, yes. Almost all of my life I would have done anything to be white, I just wanted it so desperately.

I wondered if you have any reservations about the Canadian government's policy on multiculturalism. An argument can be made that the policy of multiculturalism perpetuates separateness and thus makes it more difficult for minorities to take their rightful place in Canadian society.

Well, I think that there is a need for people to feel a sense of strength in belongingness. Some people can get that by belonging to a community of writers. Some people get that by belonging to an ethnic community. Whatever it is, people get strength from belonging. So I think that whatever promotes places of belonging — choices of areas of belonging — is OK. And true, it could mean that some people would stay ghettoized — which is a negative way of saying that — rather than getting out into the mainstream. On the other hand, we might also say that because they have a voice there, then that can be put into the mainstream, whereas it might not otherwise have had a chance at all. I think it's like the existence of the family, a natural human grouping that exists whether there is government funding for it or not. Funding can have, certainly, very negative aspects. It can be used as a single pie that is meted out, and therefore it can be controlled and people can become bitterly separated and can become rivals.

Speaking of government money, how about the issue of redress? In your book there is a strong sense of forgiveness. How can healing and forgiveness be achieved in the real, political realm?

What is healing for a community is more than just a solution of a political kind. What heals is a process of empowerment, the process that heals is one where there is a striving for and an attainment of mutuality.

Why is the Japanese-Canadian community so deeply divided?

Depending on your point of view, one could say Japanese-Canadians are amazingly united. We have just one national association. In the circumstances, this is almost miraculous. Japanese-Canadians, as opposed to other groups, were dispersed across the country. The identity that we had given to us as we were growing up was that we couldn't associate with one another. In other words, we had to be 'the only Jap in town'. We had to be proud of not knowing each other. We were ordered to become betrayers; we were ordered to betray our own. It would have been the most natural thing for us to have been splattered and squished.

In terms of this division within the community, I was wondering how the Japanese-Canadian community here compares with groups elsewhere. We tend to be a little smug in Canada about our

mosaic. Do you know any Japanese-American writers, and do you think that maybe they're less ghettoized than Japanese-Canadian writers, less obligated to write from inside that painful hyphen? If you could just be an American writer, would that give you an extra freedom?

Isn't it interesting about Bharati Mukherjee feeling that she, that she . . .

. . . she feels more free there? How do you respond?

To her statement and to her experience? And to the Canadian reality? I don't know how to answer this. I'm thinking that during these last few years when it has been so hard to be a Japanese-Canadian I have wanted to leave Canada. Over and over again, I've just been thinking I can't bear it. . . . I have to get out. But I haven't really known where to go. I mean, I thought of going to Hawaii. There are so many Japanese-Americans there.

In a way, that speaks of the limitations of our so-called mosaic as a paradigm. If it causes such pain to live in the hyphen, is it worth it?

It's the redress movement. I think if everybody was involved in the hyphen, then we would all be together. Even if we are all in different hyphens, we could put a line through the hyphens and be connected as hyphenated people.

My impression is that your commitment is not just to the Japanese-Canadian people as a people but to certain values for which we think we stand in Canada. It's just such a burden to articulate them if you are a member of a visible minority. One of the things that I've done to respond to similar tensions is that I like to have it both ways. I wouldn't like to live inside a Mennonite community, but I like to have access.

I feel exactly the same way, and I think it's a situation of great privilege to be able to do this. But I think there are some people who don't have that choice, who are locked in, who cannot move out because they are too uncomfortable elsewhere. Sometimes I can sense a rage towards me because I'm able to leave.

I want to ask you a question about racism. My experience living in Japan made me aware of what it's like to be part of a visible minority. Of course it's very different if you're all of a sudden visible only for one year and you haven't been born that way, but it did sensitize me to the converse, to the reality of being an oriental woman in Canada. It happens that, since then, we've adopted two children and my daughter is oriental. How can I prepare my daughter for racism?

I can't defend against the hurt. The hurt comes. It's there. In fact, it feels like a disease within me that I'm on the look-out for. It's a kind of paranoia. If you touch the fire you're going to get burned. You walk around and sometimes you can look and the scar's not there. It's clean because nobody's hurt you for a long time. And then suddenly it's gushing because somebody stabs you. Well, I think that to be constantly aware that you're going to be hurt is to be scratching at the scab all the time. I think it's better not to even think about it. You've taken upon yourself a burden and you have accepted it. I think that's all you can do, accept the fact that you are going to be hurt when your child is hurt and simply love the child. My daughter is in Hawaii because she experiences the comfort of being part of a racial majority there.

Where does the Japanese-Canadian community go from here? What about the fourth generation? What will they be called?

Yonsei.

Will the policy of multiculturalism keep the yonsei aware of themselves as a separate and distinct group? Should it?

It's likely that there aren't going to be any Japanese Canadians. They'll just be all mixed up. I've seen grandchildren of *nisseis* . . . you can't see any Japanese-ness in their physical features at all. I imagine that's the way it's going to be in the future. There'll be the story of a people; something happened once, and it'll be part of their background. But I think that will be part of a new gathering of people with a growing identity. I think the Canadian identity is evolving.

So what will happen to those values, the values that you now are fighting to affirm?

The values that I personally want to see go on are really universal values: the struggle for justice, all these things, they are universal values and my hope, whether they're expressed through the Christian mythology or whatever. It seems to me it doesn't matter what the vessel is. The substance of what one takes in for nourishment has the same name whatever the vessel is that is carrying it.

There's an interesting dilemma raised by that. I think it was Achebe who said recently something to the effect that African literature wasn't going to go anywhere until we eliminate the word 'universal' and realize that what people had thought were 'universals' were really dominant white values. The word 'universal' often is used as a way of concealing what is in fact culturally biased, racially biased, gender biased. That's why I would be hesitant to end on the word 'universal'.

OK. All these abstractions. . . . What's another word?

Ultimately it is an act that you are affirming, is it not? An act of compassion that reaches beyond the cultural boundaries, beyond the abstractions and words.

Yes, I'd agree with that. In my new novel Aunt Emily feels called to where the struggle for justice takes place and because it's happening in her backyard, that's where she goes. Action is specific. Let's end with 'act'.