

*Citation read on the occasion of the granting of the degree of
Honorary Doctor of Letters to
Joy Kogawa
by the Senate of the University of Victoria
June 12, 2017*

Madam Chancellor, it is my privilege to introduce Joy Kogawa, one of Canada's most celebrated literary figures.

Novelist, poet and activist, she is particularly special to us because of her deep connections with the West Coast. Among her many awards and honours are the Order of Canada and of the Order of British Columbia but probably just as significant to us is the naming of her beloved home in Vancouver. Joy Kogawa House is a heritage building now operating as a centre for cultural studies.

Joy's career as a writer began with several volumes of poetry, but it was her first novel, *Obasan*, which burst upon the scene to international acclaim. In 1981, it won the Books in Canada First Novel Award, and is now essential reading for anyone seeking to deepen their understanding of Canadian literature, politics and history. The way in which *Obasan* has been adapted into books for children, an opera, a sequel, shows how powerfully the story reverberates across generations.

In *Obasan* Joy drew extensively on her own experience, as well as letters and documents of the time. Born to Japanese parents in Vancouver, she learnt early the difficulties of being both Canadian and Japanese. She understood what racism was when most Canadians were asleep to the idea. The painful reconciliation between her two cultural realities was never easy, but what she would later record in *Obasan* was far worse, one of the darkest episodes of Canadian history. In her Memoir she reminds us:

After Japan attacked Pearl Harbour in December 1941, the government of Canada interned the entire Japanese-Canadian population along the British Columbia coast. Twenty-two thousand of us were suddenly "enemy aliens," a security threat, potential fifth columnists, a breath away from barbarity. We were removed on trains to the British Columbia mountains.

Restrictions against Japanese-Canadians were only lifted in 1949, but even then, nothing of the houses and property confiscated at the outbreak of war was ever returned. Joy was active in the long fight for redress of this terrible wrong, undertaking political involvement despite the conflicts and difficulties it entailed. The effort would be rewarded at last - though not until forty years later - when Prime Minister Brian Mulroney apologized in 1988 for "past injustices." In 2010, the Japanese government

bestowed upon Joy the Order of the Rising Sun in recognition of her “contribution to the understanding and preservation of Japanese Canadian history.”

Joy has mined her experience, not just as material for her books but so that she can achieve peace. Writing has been a rock to which she has clung in her darkest moments. “What you cannot bear will either kill or save you” she has said.

We, her readers, enlarge our own horizons by sharing her struggle with the existential problem that everyone at some time faces: how to comprehend the interdependence of good and evil. Joy encountered it not only in the cruel racism of the world outside, but also within her own family, in the person of her father, to whom she was devoted. Resolute and honorable, she speaks the truth even when it costs her dear. In the poem called “Rooster,” she rejoices in her perpetual source of comfort:

*Spear or smirk what does it matter
what the weapon is the wounds
need tending need tenderness
what does it matter where the
error lies
these days i
hear the rooster calling
its feet rooted in the night
its wings in the morning this is
still the time
to forgive, to be forgiven*

Here, today, we can be glad Joy can say that what she calls her “old years” are “the best years of my life.” “I am,” she says, “incredibly lucky to have got to this place.” And we too feel incredibly lucky in our turn that she has agreed, despite a preference for quiet and a dislike of limelight, to allow us to celebrate the achievements in all spheres of her life.

Madam Chancellor, I have the honour to present Joy Kogawa for the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.

Written and presented by
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