



# Mitsuye Yamada

“

*Freedom at last  
 in this town aimless  
 I walked against the rush  
 hour traffic  
 My first day  
 in a real city  
 where  
 no one knew me. No one except one  
 hissing voice that said  
 dirty jap  
 warm spittle on my right cheek. I turned and  
 faced  
 the shop window  
 and my spittle face  
 spilled onto a hill  
 of books. Words on display.*

— “Cincinnati,” in *Camp Notes*

”

## Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1923
- \* Japanese-American poet, short story writer, and academic
- \* Author of *Camp Notes* and *Desert Run*

## Biography

Mitsuye Yamada is a poet, educator, and founder of Multicultural Women Writers of Orange County. She was born on July 5, 1923 in Fukuoka, Japan. Her father, Jack Yasutake, was the founder and president of the Senryu (Japanese poet) Society in Seattle and an interpreter for the U.S. Immigration Service. He was arrested due to potential spying on the U.S. right after the Pearl Harbor attack. At the time, Japanese society did not offer the opportunity to women to decide how to live their lives; they were unable to obtain higher education or choose a husband on their own. Yamada’s own ordeal during World War II and observations of her mother’s way of life bring anti-racist and feminist attitudes to her works.

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# Mitsuye Yamada

## Biography continued

Yamada spent most of her childhood and youth in Seattle, Washington, until she and her family were incarcerated at the relocation camp in Idaho in 1942. She was allowed to leave the camp with her brother because they renounced loyalty to the Emperor of Japan; she went to the University of Cincinnati in 1944. Her remaining family members joined them later. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree from New York University in 1947 and a Master of Arts degree from the University of Chicago in 1953. Yamada taught ethnic and children's literature and creative writing at several universities and colleges and is currently a professor of English at Cypress College in Seattle, Washington. In 1950, she married Yoshikazu Yamada, a research chemist, and later settled in Irvine, California. The couple has two children, Jeni and Kai.

Yamada's first publication was *Camp Notes and Other Poems*. The book is a chronological documentary, beginning with "Evacuation" from Seattle, moving in the camp through "Desert Storm," and concluding with poems recounting the move to Cincinnati. "Cincinnati" illustrates the visible racial violence and "The Question of Loyalty" shows the invisible humiliation of the Japanese during World War II. She wrote the book to promote public awareness about how the Japanese were discriminated against during the war and to open discussion of the issue.

The poems were written during and soon after World War II; however, the publishing of *Camp Notes* was postponed because Japanese-American writing was excluded from publication during the time when Americans were steeped in their wartime victory. Another reason for the postponement, as described by Susan Schweik, Adrienne Munich and Susan Squier, is that the content of the poems reveals the "domestic, protective silence both docile and subversively secretive" of Japanese American woman. The author broke one of the Japanese traditions which demands silence from the female when she tells of the realities of internment - what suppresses and shapes the Japanese to force them to abandon their Japanese identity.

In 1981, Yamada joined Nellie Wong in a biographical documentary on public television, *Mitsuye and Nellie: Two Asian-American Woman Poets*. The film tells of actual events that happened to the speakers, their parents, grandparents and relatives. They especially emphasized their parents' hardships. Yamada told of her mother's immigration story: her first arranged marriage and her remarriage in order to get financial support for her children's education ("I Learn to Sew").



# Mitsuye Yamada

## Biography continued

She also read “The Question of Loyalty” and “The Night Before Good-Bye,” describing her mother’s internment life and heart-breaking separation from her children because she was not allowed to leave the camp due to her refusal to renounce loyalty to the Emperor in Japan. Yamada’s mother had a harder life than the author did during the war because she would not abandon her Japanese identity. Thus, Yamada says in the film, she has to live to fulfill what her mother wanted to have: a higher education, and equality and human rights as an American citizen and woman.

Her latest volume, *Desert Run: Poems and Stories*, returns to the unforgettable experience at the internment camp. Also, Yamada is searching for her cultural heritage in her poems by visiting and communicating with her relatives in Japan. In finding her heritage, she also discovered that her identity involves a cultural straddle between Japan and the US, which she describes in “Guilty on Both Counts.” Some poems, especially “The Club,” indicate that Yamada expanded her point of view to include feminist as well as racist issues because they recount sexual and domestic violence against women. Some of her poems are revisions of earlier versions in *Camp Notes*. The book contains the history and transition of the Japanese American in the U.S., including Yamada’s perspective on gender discrimination.

In an interview with Helen Jaskoski, Yamada said that her poetic method had been objective and distanced from the pain that she wanted to write about until she met Carolyn Kizer, whose poetry closely reveals her feelings about personal events. We can see this influence in her books, *Camp Notes* and *Desert Run*, which have a personal and emotional style focusing on race and gender issues. *Camp Notes* focuses more on expanding public awareness of the reality of discrimination against the Japanese in the US during World War II. *Desert Run* tells more about effects on the identity of Japanese American experiences during that war and introduces feminist issues that Yamada will likely focus on in future works.



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## Selected Bibliography

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