



# Voices from the Gaps

# Wakako Yamauchi

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*My stories are about immigrants. There have always been immigrants. We were there in prehistory, travelers from another place, another continent, or just stragglers from a larger society. We are a tribe of wanderers remembering a garden we'd left or looking for an Eden that waits.*

*Immigrant stories have a certain commonality. Just as all dogs snarl, bite, hunger, and circle the nest before they rest, we as a species have common traits. We yearn for a more forgiving land, a truer love, and we huddle together for comfort and protection. We spring from this source and return to it for intimacy and warmth.*

— Songs My Mother Taught Me

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## Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1924
- \* She is a Nisei, a second-generation Japanese American
- \* Playwright, memoirist, and short story writer

## Biography

Wakako Yamauchi is one of the most distinguished contemporary Asian American women writers. Though she paints and writes prose as well as poetry, she is especially known as a playwright and for her love of the theater.

This page was researched and submitted by: Dr. Christine G. Berg



# Wakako Yamauchi

## Biography continued

A Nisei (second generation Japanese American) born on October 24, 1924 to two Issei (first generation immigrants), Yamauchi grew up in California. Her parents and three siblings faced considerable discrimination as farmers, required to move from town to town in California's Imperial Valley due to the existing Alien Land Law (which forbade Japanese to own real estate). Moreover, when she was seventeen and in her senior year of high school, Yamauchi and her family were forced to evacuate to internment camps established by the outbreak of World War II.

She spent a year and a half in the camps before being allowed to leave for Chicago, where she worked in a candy factory and attended all the play performances she could. Later, once the camps were officially dismantled, she took painting classes at the Otis Art Center. When she married Chester Yamauchi in 1948 and began a family, she turned her attention to raising her only child, Joy.

Yamauchi's talent was not something that she discovered in formal training, though she did study screenwriting briefly with the Writers Guild of America's Open Door Project. Instead, Yamauchi developed a love of language from the stories her mother told her about her Japanese heritage, and her writing began as an effort to pass the stories along to her own daughter. She was also inspired by the many stories and poems she read in her youth. Ultimately, she chose playwrighting as a form of creative expression because "she enjoys watching the audience respond to art" (Houston 35-36) and because plays "offer the opportunity to connect with human beings in the theater" (Houston 37). In fact, her first play, *And The Soul Shall Dance*, was originally published as a short story; later, encouraged by the artistic director of the East West Players, Yamauchi adapted the story into the now-popular play.

Like many other American women writers of color, Wakako Yamauchi weaves pieces of her own experience into her work. *And The Soul Shall Dance* tells the story of two farming families who are challenged with surviving the Great Depression. In several interviews, Yamauchi explains that she had only to remember and re-envision her own experience with farm life to craft the details of the lives of the characters in the play. The two mother-father-daughter families struggle with adjusting to American life without forsaking their Japanese traditions. Likewise, the setting for *The Music Lessons* (based on her short story "In Heaven and Earth") is a farming community, where a mother and her adolescent daughter negotiate their own relationship and their feelings for a newly arrived itinerant worker.

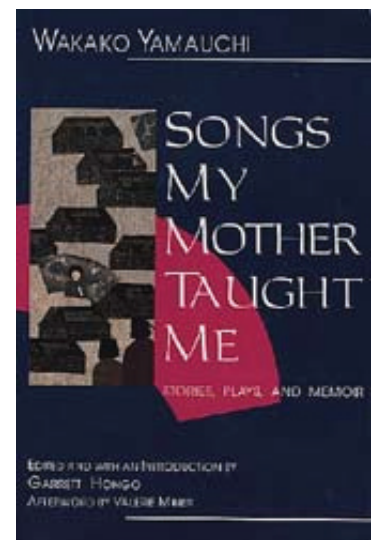


# Wakako Yamauchi

## Biography continued

In *12-1-A*, Yamauchi is concerned with bringing the experience of the World War II Japanese internment camps to the stage and to the American consciousness. The play follows the Tanaka family, to whom Yamauchi assigns the same camp (Poston, Arizona) where she and her family were interned. The detainees are confused about the tenets of democracy, fearful for their lives, and uncertain of their future, as Yamauchi delicately portrays their humanity under such circumstances. In spite of their incarceration, however, the human spirit prevails, and the characters seem hopeful even as they realize the reality of their tenuous position in America. Finally, whereas Yamauchi has focused on the lives of ordinary, but by no means simplistic, people in her earlier plays, *The Chairman's Wife* chronicles the life of Chiang Ching, the widow of Mao Tse-tung. Set against the backdrop of the Tiananmen Square uprising, the play moves back and forth in time to explore Madame Mao's rise to power and subsequent fall. Yamauchi successfully ties past and present together as she explores the effects Madame Mao's career has had on present-day China.

Read together, all of Yamauchi's writings -- stories, plays, and memoirs -- illuminate three periods in the timeline of Japanese American history: immigration and rural farming in the early 20th century, World War II imprisonment, and postwar readjustment. For her poignant portrayals of Japanese American acculturation and for her ability to inspire her readers, many writers (like Garrett Hongo), have been prompted to value her as a "cultural treasure."





# Wakako Yamauchi

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