

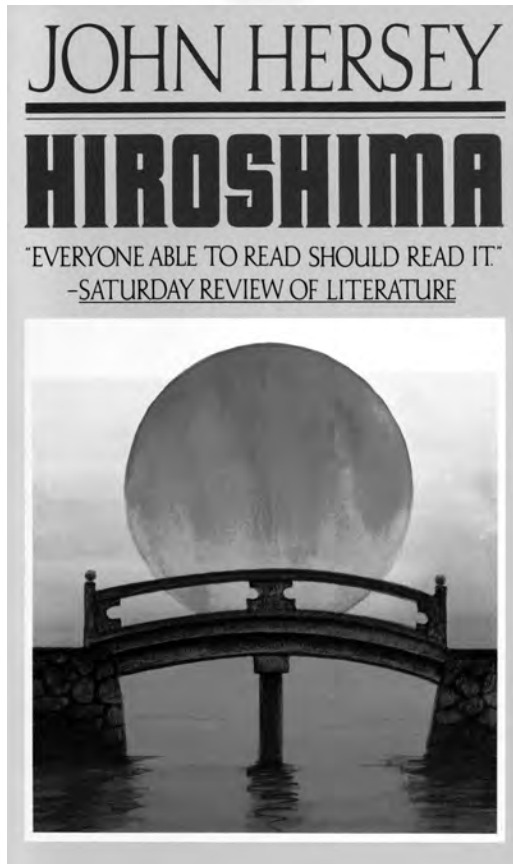
A Tribute to John Hersey's *Hiroshima*

By Fay Beauchamp

This will be the sixtieth-year anniversary of one of the most remarkable books of American history, John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, first published on August 31, 1946, in *The New Yorker*. In March 1946, William Shawn, managing editor of *The New Yorker*, called for an article focused on the immediate devastation in Hiroshima rather than on statistics or politics. John Hersey interviewed survivors for three weeks in May and decided to focus on suffering human beings rather than on destroyed buildings. He edited his 150-page manuscript with the help of Shawn and Harold Ross; the two editors decided to devote one entire issue—no cartoons, no “Talk of the Town”—to this one factual narrative.

A slim copy of *Hiroshima* has been published in United States constantly since 1946, augmented since 1985 with Hersey's follow-up accounts of the six survivors. Many authors of articles in this issue of *EAA* mention the book; I've assigned it almost every year for thirty years, from being a teaching assistant to teaching developmental English and Humanities 102 courses. While Japanese argue about how textbooks treat their aggression at war, this book has allowed American students to learn the consequences of an American political decision. Paradoxically, because the book is unemotional in tone, it allows readers to keep reading and experience emotionally the horror at the center.

Steve Rothman, who maintains a Web site (<http://www.hersey-hiroshima.com/hiro.php>) with his useful 1997 article on Hersey and *Hiroshima*, concludes that Japan did not have access—because of American censorship—to *Hiroshima* until 1949. When I read Rothman's article in 2002, I noticed he mentioned a “pony edition” of *The New Yorker* sent to overseas servicemen. I called my ninety-one-year-old father who worked in Tokyo, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki between November 1945 and November 1948. He said Hiroshima looked like firebombed Tokyo, and he had no distinct memory of the city; what he remembered of Nagasaki was seeing the sliced-off top of the cathedral (the top still lies today where it fell). But he vividly remembered reading *Hiroshima* in *The New Yorker* in Japan. He discussed it with his Japanese-American interpreter and that inter-



John Hersey in 1958.
Photo by Carl VanVechten

preter's family in their home. My father owned the book along with others by Hersey. My father, Donald V. Wilson, devoted his life to the International Rehabilitation of the Disabled, the name of an organization he led for more than twenty years. His relationship with Mr. Kasai, at the Japanese Ministry of Welfare, lasted for more than fifty years. I believe there was a cause and effect relationship between the “truth” of Hersey's published account and the acts of “reconciliation” between Americans and Japanese. I am convinced that there are a multitude of such stories of this

book's profound impact. ■

FAY BEAUCHAMP lived in Japan from age one to three during the American Occupation and she has traveled there almost yearly since 1987. She is currently Professor of English, Humanities Coordinator, and Director of the ASDP Regional Center at Community College of Philadelphia. In 2003 she organized a four-day conference “Reconsidering Hiroshima/Nagasaki,” sponsored by the Japan Studies Association, the Asian Studies Development Program, and Community College of Philadelphia. The conference was also supported by the City of Hiroshima with the active participation of Mayor Tadatashi Akiba, and by the Hiroshima Peace Institute led by Dr. Haruhio Fukui, who became a Conference Co-Chair. She appreciates this opportunity to thank all those involved.

The 2003 Hiroshima Conference Program, with links to the papers presented, can be found at the Web site of Dr. Diane Freedman, Assistant Professor of Social Science at the Community College of Philadelphia.
http://faculty.ccp.cc.pa.us/faculty/DFreedman/HCS/frames_index.htm