

Songs My Mother Taught Me

BY WAKAKO YAMAUCHI

EDITED BY GARRETT HONGO WITH AFTERWORD BY VALERIE MINER

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S*ongs My Mother Taught Me* is a collection of short stories, memoirs, and plays by Wakako Yamauchi. As a second generation Japanese-American or Nisei, she recounts in a strong, lyrical, and sensual voice the city and country tales of two generations of Japanese in the United States. While these selections do not focus on the World War II detention camp experience, the effects of this experience on the detainees and their offspring are richly and dramatically detailed.

Although the collection contains some powerful pieces such as “So What, Who Cares?” that should be used selectively with younger high school students, *Songs My Mother Taught Me* could and should be integrated into both literature and history courses at the high school and college levels. Literature instruction can be enriched by considering the diversity and talents of Yamauchi as a writer. She develops credible and poignant characters such as the teenage narrator of “That Was All” who suddenly and inexplicably becomes enamored of Suzuki-san, an old family friend. And she uses different genre to tell the same tale. For example, the story of the restless and lonely Akiko is told in both the short story, “In Heaven and Earth” and in the play, “The Music Lessons.” Likewise “And the Soul Shall Dance,” which recounts the struggle of second generation teenage daughters to fit into life in the United States and to accept family expectations, appears in both short story and play. This use by the writer of different genre to express the same plot, characters, and theme, can lead to class discussions and written commentaries about the effect of the conventions of each genre on the author’s writing. The story “Makapuu Bay” can also be used to help students consider the art and craft of writing. It revolves around the narrator and a friend and their discussion of the ways “each finds his own truth.” Finally, any of the short stories, memoirs, or plays in this volume can be used to exemplify the universal alienation and isolation felt by all immigrants. As such, the works in this volume can compare and contrast with other immigrant tales to learn about the uniqueness and universality of the Japanese-American experience.

In history classes at the high school and college levels, this volume can be a companion to textual accounts of World War II history. Reading “And the Soul Shall Dance” and “The Music Lessons” provides history students with an interesting and accurate picture of life in California for the Japanese immigrants in 1935. All of the selections in *Songs My Mother Taught Me* provide insight into the economic status of the United States as a whole during this time. In addition, they bring up sociological concepts such as gender issues, intergenerational conflict, and racial discrimination. For example, at the beginning of “Shirley Temple, Hotcha-cha” the concept of anti-Japanese prejudice

is presented in a matter-of-fact way—“It was common practice with the Japanese living in America to send their more promising children to Japan for an education. Because of the prevailing racial discrimination, the future of Japanese in America was pretty bleak.” (p.109). Teachers can use this selection to discuss with students the reactions of members of various ethnic groups to prejudice. Geography is also an essential theme in *Songs My Mother Taught Me*. Asian, American, and Asian-American settings are presented in both urban and rural settings. Students can consider how location affects the lives and actions of individuals and the history of a nation.

Songs My Mother Taught Me is an excellent resource for both high school and college teaching. It presents the story and history of Japanese-Americans as they coped with alienation, expatriation, and repatriation prior, during, and after World War II. ■

Alyce Hunter

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