

Ironically, Yamaguchi's most vivid memory from the Games was not having the gold medal placed around her neck; instead, it came moments after she finished her long program. Coming off the ice, waving to the crowd, the pressure was finally off. But rather than relief, Yamaguchi felt a sharp sense of loss. She told *Sports Illustrated*, "I knew I'd done well, and I was happy for that. But I remember thinking, Is this it? This is the Olympics. You've always dreamed of it, always, your whole life, I didn't want it to be over yet."

The following month, Yamaguchi successfully defended her world championship. She was the first American skater to defend the world title since Peggy Fleming did so in 1968. Although that accomplishment put her in the company of such skating luminaries as Sonja Henie and Carol Heiss, Yamaguchi modestly told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1992, "I've never thought of myself as a Henie or a Heiss. They are legends. But it's an honor that people are talking about me and those things."

### After The Gold

In September 1992, Yamaguchi decided to turn professional, which meant she could no longer compete in amateur competitions such as the World Championships and the Olympic Games.

Since her Olympic victory, Yamaguchi has been busy, not only with professional skating performances throughout the country, but also with her numerous endorsement contracts. Although many business media experts predicted that she would never be offered the endorsement opportunities of previous U.S. figure skating gold medalists due to her Japanese American ancestry, Yamaguchi's many commercial appearances have proved otherwise.

Hours after her gold medal win in Albertville, the cereal giant Kellogg began printing Special K cereal boxes on which Yamaguchi appeared wearing the costume she skated in during the final round of competition. She became the only athlete to grace a Special K box.

Although post-Olympic endorsements were down in general for all athletes in 1992, most likely due to the sluggish economy, Yamaguchi nevertheless fared well. She signed lucrative contracts with Hoechst Celanese Corporation, makers of acetate fabrics for fabric designers, DuraSoft contact lenses and Wendy's restaurants. She had glamorous four-page spreads in *Elle*, *Seventeen*, and *Vogue*, made television commercials for DuraSoft and Wendy's and did the national talk-show circuit. She even had a walk-on next to famed Olympic diver, Greg Louganis, in Disney's family movie, *D2: The Mighty Ducks*, with Emilio Estevez. Yamaguchi is currently appearing in major cities throughout North America as part of the Discover Card Stars on Ice tour, joined by fellow Olympic medalists Paul Wylie and Scott Hamilton.

At times, Yamaguchi's new professional career seemed almost as grueling as her intensive training days: "I was pretty overwhelmed by the number of decisions I immediately had to make after the Olympics. Before, there'd been only one way: to reach my skating goals. Now there were all these different ways I could go," she told *Sports Illustrated* in 1992.

"I'm just an athlete. I don't think I've changed," added Yamaguchi. "It's still funny to have other people fussing over your hair, pretending you're a model for a day. I still feel I'm the same old kid, and someone who still wants to be one."

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—Sketch by Terry Hong

## Hisaye Yamamoto

(1921- )

Writer

Hisaye Yamamoto began writing fiction at the age of fourteen and received her first acceptance from a literary magazine at the age of twenty-seven. In between, "I got a whole slew of rejection slips," she recalled with a laugh during an interview with Terry Hong. Throughout her long career, she has written dozens of short stories, many of which were published in journals and short story collections. In 1988, her best known short stories were collected in a much-acclaimed slim volume, *Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories*.

Despite the length of Yamamoto's career, she cannot be described as a prolific writer; however, she has consistently produced some of the most anthologized stories in the Asian American literary canon. According to the editors of the seminal Asian American compilations, *Aiiieeeee: An Anthology of Asian American Writers*, and *The Big Aiiieeeee: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature*, Yamamoto's "modest body of work is remarkable for its range and gut understanding of Japanese America. . . . Technically and stylistically, hers is among the most highly developed of Asian American writing." As well, Yamamoto's early stories "form the only portrait of pre-war rural Japanese America in existence."

Yamamoto was one of the first Asian American writers to gain national literary recognition after World War II. In spite of the rampant anti-Japanese sentiment throughout the United States immediately after the war, Yamamoto's stories prevailed. The story, "Yonoko's Earthquake," was chosen for inclusion as one of the Best American Short Stories of 1952. Three other works—"Seventeen Syllables" (1949), "The Brown House" (1951), and "Epithalamium" (1960)—were also chosen for the yearly lists of "Distinctive Short Stories" included in the *Best American Short Stories* collections. Since 1948 when Yamamoto wrote "The High-Heeled Shoes," her first story accepted by a major publication, she has emerged as one of the clearest, most resilient voices of Asian America.

### A Working Woman

Hisaye Yamamoto was born on April 27, 1921, in Redondo Beach, California, to immigrant parents from the Kumamoto region of Japan. She remembered that the family "moved around a lot because in those days, California state law forbade aliens from owning property and becoming citizens. We would lease land for two or three years and then move on again." Although the family moved from various locations throughout southern California, Yamamoto was able to attend Compton Junior College, where she majored in French, Spanish, German, and Latin.

At the age of twenty, Yamamoto and her family were living in Oceanside, California, when they were relocated to Poston, Arizona, soon after the bombing of Pearl Harbor by Japan. At the internment camp, Yamamoto served as a reporter and columnist for the camp newspaper, the *Poston Chronicle*, and published "Death Rides the Rails to Poston," a serialized mystery. In addition to being a writer, Yamamoto was also an avid reader during her camp years. She told Hong, "There were a bunch of old *New Yorkers* in the camp library. I would sit on a plank on top of piled-up crates and read all the small print and practically fall off laughing. It would really make my day. It really hit my funny bone." At the Poston camp, Yamamoto developed a lasting friendship with Wakako Yamauchi, who would later become a noted writer and playwright.

Yamamoto left the Poston camp with one of her brothers for a month and a half to work in Springfield, Massachusetts. "I was supposed to be a cook and my

brother a valet to a wealthy widow. We had wanted to go [to Massachusetts], but after we learned of the death of another brother fighting in Italy, we went back to camp as our father requested. I guess he wanted to keep the family together," she recalled.

When the war was finally over, Yamamoto returned with her family to the Los Angeles area. From 1945 to 1948, she worked for the *Los Angeles Tribune*, an African American weekly. "It was a very educational experience. I learned the extent of racism, besides what happened to us during the war. In those days, there were lynchings going on in the South," she told Hong. For three years, Yamamoto was, as she said, "the extra arm who did a little of this and that," predominantly proofreading articles and writing a column of her own. "The column was something very personal. It was on anything I wanted to write about at the time." Occasionally, Yamamoto was sent out of the office to do "man-on-the-street interviews" and gather the "world-news roundup."

In 1948, Yamamoto began to publish her writing in well-known literary journals, including *Partisan Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Carleton Miscellany*, *Arizona Quarterly*, and *Furioso*. Awarded one of the first John Hay Whitney Foundation Opportunity Fellowships, Yamamoto was able to write full time beginning in 1950. Between 1953 and 1955, she lived on a rehabilitation farm on Staten Island, New York, with her adopted son, Paul, and worked as a volunteer for the Catholic Workers of New York. She married Anthony DeSoto and returned to Los Angeles. Eventually, she became the mother of four more children.

Because she was both a writer and a mother, she told Hong, "shorter pieces were more viable since I always had kids to bring up which meant little time in front of a typewriter. So I never thought about writing a novel." Although Yamamoto describes herself simply as a housewife, she has been lauded by numerous scholars, Asian American and non-Asian American alike, as one of the finest short story writers of the postwar era. "[H]er stories are equal to the masterpieces of Katherine Mansfield, Toshio Mori, Flannery O'Connor, Grace Paley, and Ann Petry," wrote King-Kok Cheung, professor of English and Asian American Studies at the University of California at Los Angeles, in her introduction to the compilation, *Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories*.

### Yamamoto, the Storyteller

According to Cheung, three themes recur in Yamamoto's work: "The interaction among various ethnic groups in the American West, the relationship between Japanese immigrants and their children and the uneasy adjustment of the Issei in the New World, especially the constrictions experienced by Japanese American women."

The interaction of diverse ethnic backgrounds in Yamamoto's stories varies from outright racism and bigotry as in "Wilshire Bus," in which a drunk white man demands that a Chinese couple go back to where they came from,

to inter-ethnic bonding as in "Epithalamium," in which a Japanese American volunteer falls in love with an alcoholic Italian American. Yamamoto portrays intergenerational relationships in stories such as "Las Vegas Charley," about the uneasy bond between a drinking gambler and his exasperated son, or "Morning Rain," about a visiting father and his daughter who becomes newly aware of her father's loss of hearing. In a number of stories, Yamamoto also focuses on the difficulties of first-generation Japanese American women as in "Yoneko's Earthquake," in which a lonely woman begins an affair with her husband's worker, is forced to have an abortion by her husband and soon thereafter, loses her only son. In "Seventeen Syllables," the immigrant mother who finds solace in writing seventeen-syllabled haiku is misunderstood by her modern American-born daughter and punished by her indifferent husband when she wins a haiku contest sponsored by a Japanese American newspaper.

Although Yamamoto's writing is not exactly autobiographical, she does draw on her own experiences. "I can only write about what I know. I can't write science fiction or great dynasty novels or things like that," she chuckled. "I write when something sticks in my craw and I think it might be worth writing down. Writing is a compulsion or an itch. I love to read, so writing is a pretty wonderful thing to be doing."

Year after year, Yamamoto continues to both read and write. She is currently engrossed with Asian American literature: "I'm really impressed by Maxine Hong Kingston, Gus Lee, David Wong Louie, Amy Tan, and Gish Jen." She continues to write short stories, which are published in anthologies and literary journals. When asked if she would ever consider teaching, Yamamoto answered with her usual modesty, "Oh, no. The farthest I've gone is junior college. You need more degrees to teach." Then she added with a laugh, "Besides, it's time I retired anyway. At seventy-two, you don't begin a new career."

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### Other

Yamamoto, Hisaye, telephone interview with Terry Hong, April 27, 1994.

—Sketch by Terry Hong

## Minoru Yamasaki

(1912–1987)

Architect

Minoru Yamasaki was a self-made architect who distinguished himself in the 1950s with a series of graceful textile-like buildings, and then gained worldwide fame as the architect of the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center. The two identical 110-story buildings standing side-by-side at the southern tip of Manhattan are arguably the world's most recognizable modern skyscrapers.

Minoru Yamasaki was born in Seattle, Washington, on December 1, 1912, to first-generation Japanese immigrant parents. His father had owned much land in Japan, but in America the family lived in near poverty. Their first home was a tenement in the Yesler Hill section of Seattle that had no hot water and no indoor bathrooms. They did not live there long, however, for Yamasaki's father was a very hard worker and he often held two or three jobs in his determination to improve the living standard of his family.

In high school, Yamasaki did very well, as was expected of him. He especially excelled in math and science courses. It was during his high school years that he had an experience that altered the course of his life. As he recalled in his autobiography, *A Life in Architecture*, "My Uncle Koken had just graduated in architecture from the University of California. After graduation he had been promised a job in Chicago, and he stopped to visit us on the way there. He unrolled the drawings he had made at the university and I almost exploded with excitement when I saw them. Right then and there I decided to become an architect."

After graduation Yamasaki enrolled in the University of Washington to study architecture. He initially had a very difficult time, especially in the creative classes such as sculpture, drawing, and art, but he overcame his hardships with devotion and diligence. He became an excellent engineer and routinely headed his classes in subjects dealing with straight sciences. When he again had trouble in his later years with building design, he considered abandoning his dream of becoming an architect and settling for the more mundane life of an engineer. A professor in whom he confided, however, encouraged him to stick it out, surprising Yamasaki by saying he thought Yamasaki would go on to become one of the best architects the school had ever graduated.

The Yamasaki family at this time, like many American families, was experiencing financial difficulties. The Great