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Joy Kogawa comes to terms with her father's abuse of boys in her new memoir Gently to Nagasaki

'Her attempt to come to terms with her late father's dark past is at the heart of this brave, unflinching memoir'

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Gently to Nagasaki

By Joy Kogawa

Caitlin Press

288 pp; \$24.95

In Joy Kogawa's novel *The Rain Ascends*, first published in 1995, Millicent Shelby discovers that her charismatic father – a respected Anglican priest – has a long history of sexually abusing boys. "Millicent's struggle was essentially my struggle," Kogawa tells me during our recent interview at her bright, airy condo in Toronto's St. Lawrence Market. She's discussing her new book *Gently to Nagasaki*, which is in many ways her response to the Pandora's box that *The Rain Ascends* opened. A memoir over a decade in the making, it directly addresses the reality that her father was a pedophile.

As Kogawa recollects in the memoir, she was shocked and devastated as a teenager when she first learned about her beloved father's proclivity for boys. While away from their home in Alberta on a church mission in Okinawa, he was caught in the act by two priests, and the whole family endured public disgrace. From then onward, Kogawa suffered debilitating bouts of nausea, vomiting and cold

sweats. Although writing *The Rain Ascends* helped her to process the crisis and heal, “the repercussions of that returned to me in real life,” she explains to me. When asked at readings whether the novel was based on her own life, Kogawa would admit the truth, and that “sparked a great rage.”

A SPIRITUAL PILGRIMAGE, AN EXPLORATION BOTH
COMMUNAL AND INTENSELY PERSONAL.

GENTLY TO NAGASAKI



Joy Kogawa

JOY KOGAWA

Caitlin Press

Gently to Nagasaki chronicles this aftermath, when Kogawa found herself under attack by certain members of the community for failing to offer a harsher condemnation of her father – one that is not ostensibly fiction. Her attempt to come to terms with her late father’s dark past is at the heart of this brave, unflinching memoir, which takes a hard look at her own journey toward a fuller understanding of what his abuse actually entailed.

In one scene, she meets at a coffee shop with one of her father’s victims and gently asks him if he can talk about what her father did to him. The man’s response leaves her sickened and doubled over in tears, unable to speak. No longer can she have any illusions about the extent of the abuse or cling to her hope that his actions didn’t excessively harm his victims.

“First, there needs to be an acknowledgement that what happened is real,” Kogawa tells me about the struggle to find a way forward. “If we deny it is real, we’re continuing our victimization of people.” At the same time, her memoir addresses the painful, inescapable truth that she can’t bring herself to turn against her father entirely. Continuing to love him, Kogawa gives an unsettlingly human face to this pedophile, exploring how his Jekyll and Hyde characteristics may have evolved from the sexual abuse he himself experienced as a child.

Experimental in style, incorporating fragments of poetry, letters and journal writing, *Gently to Nagasaki* encompasses a wide variety of topics ranging from Christianity and Japanese history to climate change and nuclear power. It sometimes reads less like a memoir than a collection of loosely interwoven essays. “It’s the ongoingness of what is essential in my life,” Kogawa says, when I ask her about the book’s form. It includes “new understandings and new challenges” and “a continuation of the spiritual journey.” True to its title, *Gently to Nagasaki* addresses the bombing of the Japanese city at the end of the Second World War, bringing to life in intimate, vivid details the horror for ordinary Japanese people.

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Kogawa sees the bombing as in some ways a Christian event. Since Nagasaki was home to the Hidden Christian sect (Christians were once persecuted and tortured in Japan, compelling them to practice their faith in secret), the tragic irony is that in bombing Nagasaki, westerners killed their fellow Christians. Kogawa reflects during our conversation that Nagasaki represents for her the “realization that when you go out and kill your enemy, you are going to kill your best friend, the problem being that you know not what you’re doing.” Thus the bombing embodies the “not knowingness of our human condition.”

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This is a recurring theme in the memoir, which weaves together diverse stories that show victim and victimizer, enemy and best friend to be united in the same individual or country. In no way presenting Japan as a pure victim, the book addresses the Japanese imperial army’s history of wartime atrocities, as well as the Japanese-Canadian internment that Kogawa endured as a child and wrote about in her best-known novel, *Obasan*.

Near the end of our interview, Kogawa, now 81, says, “I’m seeing a pathway in my old age to take me right to the grave and beyond ... and it is the forgiveness road.” In order for there to be forgiveness, “love must be twice as strong as truth.” She talks about how at this stage in her life, she takes pleasure and excitement in “letting go” and seeing what comes next. Both in her memoir and in person, she invokes the Japanese term *fushigi*, which means child-like wonder, “that excitement of discovery.”

Leslie Shimotakahara’s debut novel After the Bloom is forthcoming from Dundurn Press.



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