



Lawson Fusao Inada

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Author Profile

Educated at the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Oregon, and the University of Iowa's famed writer's workshop, Lawson Fusao Inada published his first major collection, *Before the War: Poems as They Happened*, in 1971. Another collection, *Legends from Camp* (1992) includes recollections of Inada's early childhood, part of which was spent with his parents in the World War II internment camp at Amache, Colorado.

Although designated "Relocation Camps," the sites where 120,000 Japanese Americans were housed were in fact military prisons, with barracks surrounded by barbed wire fences and armed sentries. In a section of the long poem "Legends from Camp," Inada ironically recalls: "The people were passive/ Even when a train paused/ in the Great Plains, even/ When soldiers were eating,/ they didn't try to escape." These poems, and some in *Before the War*, explore being Asian in a hostile environment. Inada's Japanese American identity was also complicated by the fact that his parents were Christians, not Buddhists, and thus had felt themselves isolated in the tight-knit and traditional Japanese community of Fresno. Other poems about childhood focus on Fresno, growing up in a multicultural environment with Hispanic and African American schoolmates. The poem "Rayford's Song" poignantly depicts how a teacher's insensitivity can unwittingly damage the child's pride in his ethnic heritage.

Inada's study of jazz is reflected in his performances of poetry recitations with jazz and in poems celebrating artists such as Louis Armstrong, Lester Young, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, and Mal Waldron. The collective ethos of jazz also influences Inada's view of himself as "a community poet with a responsible role in society." His work embraces American culture's multiethnic roots—as exemplified by jazz music—and an attempt to understand his Asian cultural background. "Tradition is a place to start," he has written and, in "On Being Asian American," he writes: "*Distinctions are earned,/ and deserve dedication.*" Inada's own distinctions have included the American Book Award in 1988 and appointment as Oregon State Poet in 1991. As a professor at Southern Oregon State College and an expert in multiethnic American literature, Inada also helped to direct multicultural projects for the National Council of Teachers of English.

Suggested Readings

Baker, Houston A., Jr., ed. *Three American Literatures*. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1982.

Kim, Elaine H. *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982.

Reed, Ishmael. *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans*. New York: Avon Books, 1978.

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