

# The Japan Times **CULTURE**

BOOK

## Born in Japan, made in America

BY SUZANNE KAMATA

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Although born in Japan, Mariko Nagai, author of the just-published novel-in-verse “Dust of Eden,” was raised mostly in Belgium and the United States.

“I grew up all over the world because of my father’s job,” she says. “First in Belgium, where I spoke Flemish then French, then back in Japan where I learned Japanese at age 5. Then, when I was 8, we moved to San Francisco, where I learned English by reading street signs and with the help of librarians.”

Later, her family moved to Chattanooga, Tennessee, where she attended a public school that was “95 percent white,” and where there were “close to zero immigrants and foreigners.”

“No one around me could understand why I wasn’t an American citizen even though I spoke English fluently,” she recalls. “You could say that I grew up confused about language, home, identity and God.”

After finishing high school, she earned an undergraduate degree in Boston, and a graduate degree from New York University.

“It wasn’t in my parents’ wildest imagination that any of their children would want to stay in the U.S., so when I thought about living in the U.S. after graduate school, my parents went crazy and basically threatened to disown me for being a ‘traitor,’ ” Nagai says.

Because she lacked the language to cultivate deep friendships in her youth, and because her family moved around, Nagai looked to books for steady companionship. “Reading — and then writing — was a way for me to cope,” she says now, “to feel that there was a life beyond what I was experiencing.” More importantly, through reading and writing, she learned to pay attention.

In her career as a poet and writer, this skill has paid off. She has been awarded the prestigious Pushcart Prize for both poetry and fiction, as well as many other prizes and honors. To date, Nagai has published two full-length award-winning books for adults — a collection of poetry, “Histories of Bodies,” winner of the 2005 Benjamin Saltman Award, which she produced as an MFA student; and “Georgic,” a collection of stories set in Japan, which was the winner of the 2009 G.S. Sharat Chandra Fiction Prize. Her chapbook of linked stories, “Instructions for the Living,” was released in 2012.

Nagai's most recent book, nominally published for middle grade readers, is about 12-year-old Mina, a Japanese-American girl forced to relocate from Seattle to an internment camp in Puyallup during World War II.

The idea for this story came from Nagai's childhood in San Francisco, where she was surrounded by Japanese-Americans who were, to her 8-year-old self, "a curious group of people: they looked Japanese, but their Japanese language ability was minimal or, in some cases, they spoke Japanese from half a century ago."

Growing up, Nagai understood that her family was different. They were Japanese, and her parents told her that they would eventually go back to Japan. Her parents didn't allow her to spend much time with American kids, and her mother spoke little English. Nevertheless, she felt a kinship with the Japanese-Americans who, she said, "would give me a silent nod, as if to say, 'You are Japanese, so am I.' In hindsight, though, they still carried wounds from the internment camp period. Only when you got close to them would they mention the time in the camp, but never in detail." Nagai came to understand that further questions were off limits.

She later took it upon herself to learn as much as she could about the Minidoka Relocation Center in Puyallup, starting with the archive of the Minidoka Irrigator, a newspaper published until December 1944 by internees.

"It gave me the idea to make Mina's father a journalist," Nagai says. "The questions of statelessness, loyalty, displacement, resilience ... rose from my own experiences."

The decision to write the novel in verse instead of prose came from her main character. "When Mina appeared in my head, she brought with her a poem," Nagai says. "I didn't know where it came from, but I knew that her story couldn't really be told in the linear prose style, but in fragments to capture her bewilderment, her inability to connect one moment to another, and also, because when the novel starts, she's looking back on three years of her life, and that is the only way she remembers."

Nagai has now settled in Tokyo, where she teaches Creative Writing at Temple University, and she is fluent in Japanese; Nagai writes poems and stories only in English. "When I think about writing lyrically, the only language that comes out is English. I'm tone deaf in Japanese."

Although her books are not yet published in Japanese, her audience here continues to expand. She recently spoke about "Dust of Eden" at a Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators event held at Yokohama International School.

There is one reader she'd rather not have, however — her mother, who resides in Tokyo. "She understands that I write," Nagai says, "but she has no idea what I write about, and I'd like to keep it that way."

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*Mariko Nagai's first novel for adults, "The Promised Land," will be published in 2015.*

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