

An Interview with Sally Ito

John Ming Chen has recently been working on a collection of interviews with Asian Canadian writers. In the spring of 1999 he met Sally Ito at the Vancouver launch of her collection of short stories, *Floating Shore* (Mercury) and he interviewed her in a series of written exchanges with her during the subsequent summer months. Sally Ito is the author of two books of poetry, *Frogs in the Rain Barrel* (1995)—which was short-listed for the Milton Acorn People's Memorial Award—and *Season of Mercy* (1999).

JMC Before we start, I want to thank you for granting me this interview. I genuinely enjoyed your reading in Vancouver with Goh Poh Seng as part of the Asian Heritage Month reading series. Your book of poetry, *Frogs in the Rain Barrel*, and your short story collection, *Floating Shore*, have been published in relatively quick succession. Another collection of poetry, *Season of Mercy*, has just appeared. What motivates your obvious creative energy and what are you trying to achieve as a writer?

SI I always knew I wanted to be a writer from the age of sixteen. So in a sense, I've been writing seriously since then. Writing is for me two things: a way of communicating to *oneself* one's understanding of the world, and also to communicate to *others* one's understanding of the world. Writing is private in that it is reflective of a personal journey but public in that it is also meant to convey that journey to readers.

The need to write is inner and compulsive. I always say to people who want to write—if you could only write in water, would you? I think a real writer would say ‘yes.’ It’s that urge to write that makes one a writer. Of course, it would be terribly frustrating not to have one’s writing responded to or understood, but not being recognized never stopped a visionary like Blake. Ego is important but not that important.

JMC Many of the writers whom I have interviewed share a strong sense of community or community commitment, for instance, Terry Watada, Joy Kogawa, Jim Wong-Chu, and SKY Lee. Are you influenced by a sense of Asian Canadian community, or is your “vision”—and you mention the visionary work of Blake—more individualistic? What are some of the main influences on your work?

SI I’m not sure where I fit exactly into that loose community of Asian Canadian artists, some of whom you have mentioned interviewing. Certainly I know many of the artists personally and have had some contact with them. Ultimately, however, I think all of us writers have different artistic visions which we pursue relatively individualistically. Although some of us may come from similar cultural backgrounds, we have entirely different obsessions and concerns that we express in our writing.

As for influences, literary and otherwise, after the biggie—the Bible—I have to say writers like Kogawa and Flannery O’Connor have influenced me. I like Kogawa’s blend of the poetic with the political. She has a particularly distinctive style that flows and she has the ability to incorporate visual metaphor quite mellifluously into her narrative. That ability to incorporate the visual lyrically I must say intuitively exhibits a particularly Japanese sensibility. It’s a style I aspire to myself. Such a style combines what is intuitive from one’s own cultural background (in my case and Joy’s—the Japanese culture) with what I as writer have received from the more formal Western elements of my education in the English language and English literature. O’Connor I like for her short stories and her uniquely Catholic perspective on things. Her vision is hard and unrelenting—not as compassionate as I prefer to be in my own writing—but the clarity with which she observes things in her short stories is quite marvellous. It was O’Connor who alerted me to the notion of ‘vanity’ or the idea of the ‘vanity of striving after things’ which presented me with a more Western/Christian understanding of what I only felt sub-consciously as the transitoriness of things that makes any

kind of striving seem futile, pathetic even. My own sub-conscious understanding of the notion of vanity was probably more Buddhist than Christian; it was O'Connor who provided me with the more Christian vocabulary to deal with this vague sense I had of the world. As for poetic influences, I would have to say that P.K. Page has been an important influence because of her visual acuity and the lush breadth of metaphor she had for matters of the spirit. Margaret Avison is less luxuriant but crystalline in her expression. I tend to like writers who have a strong moral or anagogic vision. I just recently finished a short story by Joseph Conrad that had that kind of anagogic vision that I like. Chekhov is also great for short stories. No matter how many times I read a story of his, I'm drawn immediately into the world that he creates. Alice Munro also has the same effect on me—she's a superb storyteller.

JMC You have talked about the community of writers or influential writing, but I am wondering about some of the Asian North American writers who have been influential or important. And what about your circle of family and friends? Have they encouraged or helped you in your writing career?

SI Yes, it is true that I've mentioned mostly non-Asian writers aside from Kogawa but it is partially because I'm attracted to writings that express spiritual truths that are to me more Christian in persuasion, than, let's say Buddhist. This is not to say I haven't read much Asian North American writing. I have. To this end, I must cite a couple of Asian American writers that have influenced me—Hisaye Yamamoto and Toshio Mori. Hisaye Yamamoto's short stories are profound in their expression of spiritual truths. The short story "Yoneko's Earthquake" is one of her better known stories that deals with a young Nisei girl's coming-of-age both sexually and spiritually—it's a superbly written story. Toshio Mori's stories are realist gems of Nisei life that again reflect a uniquely North American Buddhist sensibility. They are kind of a Nisei counterpart to Yasunari Kawabata's Palm-of-the-Hand stories—these short, short stories Kawabata wrote in which only one or two incidents are briefly presented in the most fleeting of ways. Kawabata, however, has a kind of sensuality that Mori doesn't have. That sensuality, I think, is quite Japanese. Recently, I read a book by a new writer from Japan, Hikaru Okuizumi, called *The Stones Cry Out*. The book won the prestigious Akutagawa prize for fiction in Japan a

few years ago. It was recommended to me by a Japanese friend. I was quite impressed by the story. It was very short—parable like, almost—but expressed the kind of anagogic view of the world I like to see in good writing. I thought Okuizumi's writing had depth—more depth than say, Banana Yoshimoto's work, which I think is more clever than deep.

You mention my family and friends. Certainly writers do not work in isolation with only the books they love around them! I've been very fortunate to have a supportive family. My husband, Paul, in particular has always supported my writing. As for supportive friends, I have many. Since I did my degree in Creative Writing, both undergraduate and graduate, I did make some writer friends during my studies. In Vancouver, Jim Wong Chu was supportive of my writing at a very early stage and he has helped my career in various ways. I met Fiona Lam at UBC during my undergraduate years. Fiona is a poet. We still correspond regularly and talk about writing. Roy Miki has also been supportive of my writing as has Joy Kogawa in the past. In Vancouver, a very good friend of mine, Vivien Nishi has been a constant support to me. Vivien works in film. I met Kerri Sakamoto in 1993 at the Banff Centre and we have kept in periodic contact. Through the Banff Centre, I have also met poets Maureen Hynes and Sue Wheeler. I have kept up some contact with them as well. Here at home in Edmonton, I am friends with poet Tim Bowling and novelist and short story writer Curtis Gillespie. Greg Hollingshead was my M.A. thesis supervisor and I am in contact with him. I see him when I need to talk about my writing. This past fall, I joined a writing group consisting of myself, and two other women, Chris Wiesenthal and Astrid Blodgett. The writing group helped me enormously in that it provided feedback for some short stories I wrote and gave me a deadline to work towards. In addition to my writing friends in Canada, I have a good Japanese American friend, Akko Nishimura who is a visual artist; she did the artwork for my poetry book and will also be doing art work for my next book of poetry, *Season of Mercy*, that will be coming out with Nightwood this fall.

JMC I am interested in the way that you have “floated”—to borrow one of your titles—from poetry to prose in your work, and I wonder if you will soon be moving to the novel form? Are there difficulties in shifting from poetry to prose, or vice versa, and do market or commercial considerations play a role here?

SI I've always written both prose and poetry from the start. I just seemed to have gotten a better handle on poetry first. With prose, one has to develop a voice and I think this takes time—time that eventually reflects the writer's own maturing talent and his/her constant practice of the craft. Poetry, on the other hand, is slightly different in that it deals more directly with lyric expression. It somehow is easier to be more lyrical when you're younger. It's no coincidence that the Romantic poets wrote their best and their most beautiful while still in their twenties (most of them of course, didn't even reach their forties.) Poetry also requires a different state of mind than prose. Poetry is intuitive and it requires a disciplining of the consciousness. Writing fiction or prose is different. Everything must eventually defer to the narrative thread, including the lyricism. It has really only been very recently that I've been able to satisfactorily incorporate a lyric sense into my prose. I've always aspired for my prose to be clean and uncluttered and not overly lyrical because I like to write prose to communicate social and moral messages. What I've discovered lately in my most recent project—a novel—is that sometimes a lyrical expression of something is the only form of expression appropriate for certain kinds of messages about love, God, and other such transcendental and spiritual concerns. This is because one is primarily trying to describe the unseen with the limited tools of the senses.

As for market considerations, certainly, fiction has a larger readership than poetry, but that fact didn't stop me from writing either or both at the same time.

JMC You seem to be a person of strong convictions, with your faith buttressing you. Have specific religious and philosophical stances influenced you?

SI Christianity has been my primary influence, with Buddhism a distant second as far as religions go. I've read a lot of Jung and have been interested in the psychological development of consciousness through myths and folktales.

JMC It is interesting to consider the intercultural and interreligious blending on Asian Canadian issues, and I am personally interested in how Taoist aesthetics and even Jungian archetypal theory can be seen to interact in certain writers. On the other hand, Terry Watada is steeped in Buddhism and makes it a pervasive counter-discourse to Christianity in *Daruma Days*. In your work, which poems or stories are personally

satisfying because of their engagement with spirituality and myth?

SI “The Missionary” is one of my favorite stories in *Floating Shore*. It explores the terrain of spirituality and myth right at the crossroads of the two identities, two worlds I live in and know—that is the world of Christianity and the world of Japan. I don’t know yet if I’ve quite got that story right. . . I’ve worked on it for several years and it continues to fascinate me even now. Some favorite poems from *Frogs* are “The Green Fire,” “Dreaming of Jerusalem.” These poems deal with spiritual matters in metaphors I felt were natural and yet distinctively personal. As for poems in the forthcoming collection, I will say that generally they deal with primarily Christian themes.

JMC The diversity of your world, blending Christianity and Japanese culture, is an interesting and complex area. Much postcolonial and anti-racist history draws attention to the dispersion or diaspora of Asian minority groups who have been colonized in some way. What direction, in your view, should the Asian Canadian literary scene take in order to be more sensitive to the Asian diaspora? Where would you situate yourself in the Asian American landscape?

SI I don’t know that I’d like the Asian Canadian literary scene to *be* anything in particular. I do know that Asian North American literature by and large has been more popular now than ever before but with popularity come some pitfalls. One tends to get pigeon-holed, for example, and of course, there is a danger of exoticism with both writers and readers capitalizing on it, if you will. For example, the new *Memoirs of a Geisha* is really the re-hashing of an old trope—the exotic Asian female—but just recently I also saw a book written by a Japanese American who had written under her cover-photo that she was the great grand-daughter of a geisha.

JMC Linda Hutcheon’s *Other Solitudes* examines various critical responses by ‘minority’ writers to Canada’s multiculturalism. What are your views on Canadian multicultural policies or activities like, for example, Asian Heritage Month in Vancouver?

SI I’m all for multiculturalism if it doesn’t end up operating in some hierarchical arrangement where minorities are doing the song-and-dance for the powerful majority. This is a gross oversimplification of a rather complex topic, I know, but often multiculturalism can be reduced to just that—song and dance. Not that I believe that song and dance don’t have

their place—they do and in some way, song and dance *are* the arts of a people. It's just that an understanding of a cultural group shouldn't be merely reduced to those elements. Cultures are organic—they breathe in and out—and changes occur over succeeding generations. What I like about AHM or other such activities is that they offer the opportunity and provide a showcase for artists who are experimenting with cross-cultural expressions of themselves. That kind of hybridization, that combining of traditional cultural elements with Western elements, for example, creates new, exciting and ultimately indigenous art. The only problem with doing this, of course, is that viewers may not always know the points of reference in a given work—for example, if a piece explored Buddhism, the artist would also have to be compelled to explain Buddhist ideas in order to communicate his or her piece. Whether the artist decides to do this or not is a matter of temperament, but it can be an extra burden for the artist (although in some cases it might help the artist better understand and cognitively what he/she has only grasped intuitively).

- JMC Will some of your future writing projects include more “mainstream” narrative ideas and do you see the use of allusions to Japanese culture and literature as an impediment to addressing a wider audience? What are some of your immediate writing plans?
- SI I'm currently working on a novel mostly because I'm in a prose-writing frame of my mind. The novel is the next logical step in terms of form from the short story and since I've done stories, I now want to do a novel. The novel is also more widely read and is the most commercially viable form of writing today and that, of course, is a consideration. Would I like to enter the 'mainstream'? It really depends on what you mean by 'mainstream,' I guess. One can always write what one thinks the reading market might accept, but it's pretty hard to predict what will sell with any sort of accuracy. It's probably better to stick to one's vision and hope that the 'mainstream' will accept it. Yes, references and allusions to Japanese literature/culture can pose a problem and really as a writer, I have to constantly decide whether to explain 'that' one or let 'this' one go. I don't have a rule, necessarily for what to do—I tried to have one before, but it didn't work, so I just play it by ear and hope that I'll have a good editor who will determine what the better choice should be.