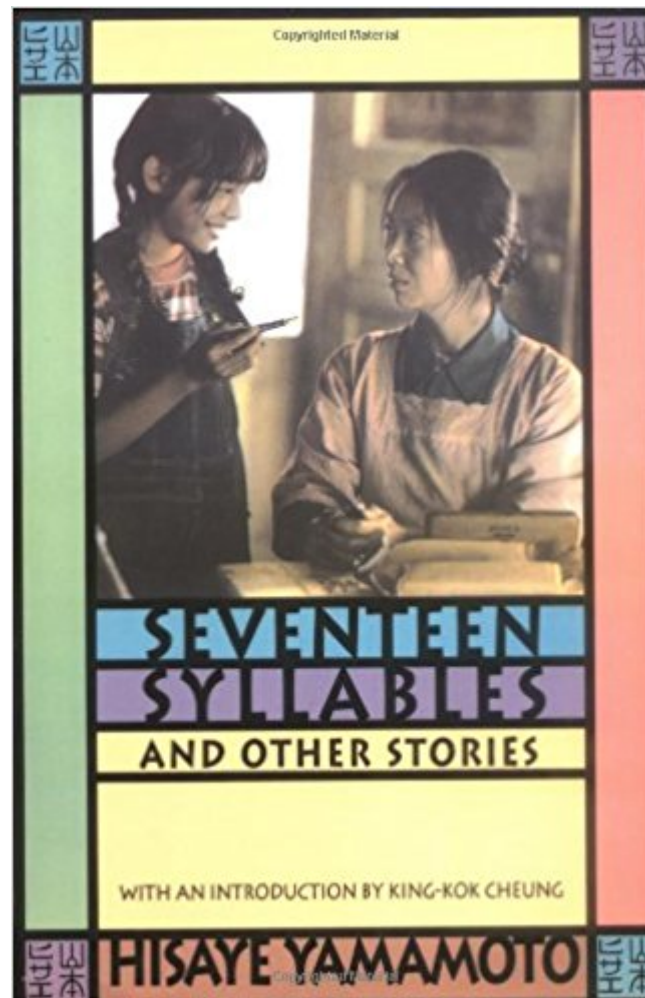


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Seventeen Syllables



Synopsis

"Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories" brings together 15 stories that span Hisaye Yamamoto's 40-year career. It was her first book to be published in the U.S. Yamamoto's themes include the cultural conflicts between the first generation, the Issei and their children, the Nisei; coping with prejudice; and the World War II internment of Japanese Americans.

Book Information

Paperback: 160 pages

Publisher: Rutgers University Press (October 1, 1998)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0813526078

ISBN-13: 978-0813526072

Product Dimensions: 0.5 x 5.8 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 12 ounces

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (13 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #1,440,733 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #68 in [Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Regional & Cultural > United States > Asian American](#) #11036 in [Books > Literature & Fiction > Short Stories & Anthologies > Anthologies](#) #18908 in [Books > Literature & Fiction > Short Stories & Anthologies > Short Stories](#)

Customer Reviews

"Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories," by Hisaye Yamamoto, was first published in 1988. The revised and expanded edition adds 4 more stories, for a total of 19. Yamamoto was born in 1921 in California to parents who were immigrants from Japan, and hers is one of the most remarkable voices in 20th century United States literature. These stories originally were written or published between 1942 and 1995, and thus represent many decades of Yamamoto's literary career. Her style is a blend of delicacy and determined passion. The book as a whole strikes a balance between tragedy and tenderness, and her best stories are quite moving. Yamamoto's stories mainly have Japanese-American female protagonists, and offer glimpses into many decades of Japanese-American life. Some topics include troubled marriages, crippling addictions, racism, and relations among the many ethnic groups of the U.S. Some stories deal with the experience of Japanese-Americans who were incarcerated in concentration camps by their own government during World War II. Other important themes include the human toll of World War II on those Japanese Americans who lost family members in the war, and the cultural shift between generations

in Japanese-American families. The four new stories in the expanded edition are "Death Rides the Rails in Poston," a murder mystery; "Eucalyptus," about a woman's experience in a mental facility; "A Fire in Fontana," about a Japanese-American woman's connection to the African-American community; and "Florentine Gardens," which centers around a visit to a military cemetery in Italy. Hisaye Yamamoto's work is highly regarded by many, and many of her stories have been anthologized (which is how I first read her work).

Hisaye Yamamoto was born in Redondo Beach, California in 1921 to a family of first generation (Issei) Japanese American vegetable farmers. Like many Nisei children, Yamamoto grew up speaking Japanese at home and English at school. After Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order No. 9066 consigning both Japanese-born residents of the United States and American-born Japanese Americans living on the West Coast to internment camps in the high desert regions of the West. Yamamoto and her family were interned at the Colorado River Relocation Center in Poston, Arizona. Toward the end of the war, Yamamoto was allowed to leave the camp, and after a brief stint working as a cook in Springfield, Massachusetts, she returned to Los Angeles and began working as a reporter for the Los Angeles Tribune, a weekly newspaper for the black community. Drawing on the journalism skills that she had learned while at Poston (Yamamoto had served on the staff of The Poston Chronicle, a camp newspaper), Yamamoto worked as a proofreader, a rewriter, and a columnist. Then in 1948, while still at the Tribune, Yamamoto adopted an infant child, an extraordinary thing for a single woman to do at the time. It was while raising her son that she wrote the prize-winning story "Seventeen Syllables" (1949). On the basis of this work, she was awarded a John Hay Whitney Foundation Fellowship for 1950-51. The grant allowed her to complete three other masterpieces of the short story form: "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara" (1950), "The Brown House" (1951), and "Yoneko's Earthquake" (1951). Although Yamamoto has been compared favorably to Flannery O'Connor, Grace Paley, and even Maupassant, her work is probably closest to Flannery in effect.

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