

# Lawson Fusao Inada (1938-)

By Vincent Wixon

Poet, writer, and educator, Lawson Fusao Inada is an emeritus professor of English at Southern Oregon University in Ashland. In February 2006, Governor Ted Kulongoski appointed him Oregon's fifth poet laureate, and Oregonians have come to know him through the dozens of appearances he has made throughout the state promoting the writing and reading of poetry.

Born in Fresno, California, in 1938, Inada is a third-generation Japanese American. His father was a dentist and his mother a teacher, and his maternal grandparents founded the Fresno Fish Market in 1912. In 1942, shortly after the United States entered World War II, Inada and his family were sent to incarceration camps with his parents and grandparents—first to the Fresno County Fairgrounds Assembly Center; then to a camp in Jerome, Arkansas, in the Mississippi Delta; and, finally, to Amache Camp in the Colorado desert.

After the war, the family returned to Fresno, where their home and business had been looked after by German and Italian friends. Inada attended school in the city's multi-ethnic West Side neighborhood and took writing classes from poet Philip Levine at Fresno State University. He loved jazz music and had ambitions as a jazz string bass player but decided instead to attend the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, where he met his wife Janet. They are the parents of two grown sons, Miles and Lowell.

In 1971, Inada's *Before the War: Poems as They Happened* was the first volume of poetry by an Asian American published by a major publishing house. By then, Inada had earned a master of Fine Arts at the University of Oregon and had been teaching at Southern Oregon College (now Southern Oregon University) for five years. He is the author of two other collections of poetry: *Legends from Camp* (1992), which won the American Book Award, and *Drawing the Line* (1997), which won an Oregon Book Award.

Inada's poems show influences from his wartime incarceration in themes of identity, dislocation, and a longing for home. He has said of his work: "I try not to get bogged down in old wounds. I try to write from a plane of spiritual serenity. Understand, there is nothing wrong with anger. It's got its place. You can make a career out of it. I know people who have. But in the end, where does it get you? Compassion and understanding are what I've chosen."

Inada is coeditor of two ground-breaking anthologies of Chinese American and Japanese American literature and of *Only What We Could Carry: The Japanese Internment Experience* (2000), the definitive single-volume collection on the Japanese American incarceration camp experience. He has also been instrumental in returning to print work by little-known Japanese American writers, including John Okada and Toshio Mori. He was a major contributor to the catalog of the Japanese American National Museum's 1992 exhibition *In This Great Land of Freedom: The Japanese Pioneers of Oregon*, and his poetry is engraved in stones at the Japanese American Historical Plaza at Waterfront Park in Portland.

A deep connection to jazz, its rhythms and its repetition, is obvious in the spontaneous quality of Inada's work and in his tributes to jazz artists. He often performs his work with musical groups and soloists, including jazz masters Mal Waldron and Andrew Hill, and has worked with Portland jazz artists to create "Sentimental Journey," a concert of poetry and jazz. He says that his favorite form of publishing is live.

Inada is the subject of three videos: *I Told You So* (1974), *What It Means to Be Free* (2001), and *Legends from Camp* (2004), a computer-animated film by his son Miles. He is the narrator for the PBS documentaries *Children of the Camps* and *Conscience and the Constitution*.

The recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2004, Inada has served as Steinbeck chair for the National Steinbeck Center and has been a judge for the National Book Award in Poetry. He has been instrumental in creating multicultural curricula for high schools and colleges. He is a teacher, a community member, a husband, a father, a grandfather, and an artist. His readings and poems are pleasurable, instructive, and wise.

## Sources

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The Oregon Encyclopedia

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