

Interview with

# Gloria Sawai

Canadian Women Reading and Writing  
February 5, 2009



Gloria Sawai was raised in Saskatchewan and Alberta and earned an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Montana. She has taught creative writing at the Banff School of Fine Arts, the Saskatchewan School of the Arts, and Grant MacEwan University in Edmonton. Her short fiction has been published in anthologies in Canada, the U.S., England, Denmark, Mexico and Japan. Her collection of short stories, *A Song for Nettie Johnson* (2001), won numerous Awards including the Governor General's Award for Fiction, the Danuta Gleed Award for the Best First Book of Short Fiction and the Henry Kreisel Award for Best First Book. After living in the U.S., Japan and other parts of Canada, Gloria Sawai now makes her home in Edmonton.

We had the opportunity to interview Gloria Sawai (G.S.) on February 11, 2009, just after she gave a Brown Bag Lunch reading at the Canadian Literature Centre ([www.arts.ualberta.ca/clc](http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/clc)) at the University of Alberta.

CanWWR (Patricia): Thank you for being part of this interview. We're really concerned with the connections between your reading and writing.

CanWWR (Clare): So we thought we'd start by getting some idea of what kind of reading you did as a child. What kind of genres or writers were you attracted to, and were there limits on that or was it wide open?

G.S.: I remember that at the school I went to in Saskatchewan our library was a shelf at the back of the room and it had an encyclopedia on it, it had the play *A Doll's House* by Ibsen, and a few others. There were about five books, and that's all it was.

CanWWR (Clare): So, limited.

G.S.: Yes. What did I read as a child? I really liked the Anne of Green Gables books; I read all of them. I read good, proper, nice books. I remember, as a high school student, joining the "Book of the Month Club" and getting some books in the mail. My mother looked at them, and she got so mad. She deemed them to be "inappropriate." She mailed them all back. It was bad. She thought they were obscene. I remember receiving a book when I was in early high school called *Especially Babe*, and it was

written by Ross Annett, an Albertan writer. I was so amazed by that book, I thought it was so wonderful. I don't know, it just stuck with me—the landscape, the dust, the weeds, the thistles. I picked it up as an adult, recently, and looked at it again and I thought, "I wonder why I thought that about it!" (Laughter)

CanWWR (Clare): That's a sad moment.

G.S.: Yes, it was sad to look at it again and see that I didn't have the same response.

CanWWR (Clare): Have you had the opposite experience at all, books that you've gone back to and they still have the same spell over you?

G.S.: Not with childhood books. I remember receiving *Lassie Come Home* for Christmas when I was in grade school, and I thought that was amazing. I read the whole thing on Christmas Day, I think. But we were limited. I was not raised in a scholarly home. My father was a preacher, so there was a lot of Bible stuff. But there are a lot of pretty good stories in the Bible, and my dad was a really good story-teller. But other than that, there was a lack there. I feel a real lack in my cultural education. That's it about the childhood stuff, really.

CanWWR (Devorah): Was there a moment when you knew you wanted to be a writer, or did you always write? And the other way I like to think of the question is, sometimes people just accidentally become writers, and sometimes they can't live without it, they have to write all the time. So was there any specific influence or anything that made you decide to start writing?

G.S.: Well, I liked writing in school. I began a novel when I was in grade 5. I still remember the first line: "It was midnight in the slums of New York. What a dark, cold midnight it was." (Laughter)

CanWWR (Clare): Wow, what a great opening line.

G.S.: I thought that was pretty good for grade 5.

CanWWR (Patricia): In Saskatchewan! (Laughter)

G.S.: But then I became an English teacher. I taught grammar, sentence structure. I don't know, I'm really good at sentences now. I don't think anybody writes a better sentence than I do, actually. But back to your question, was there any pivotal moment? Yes. When I was married I had two children, and I was totally depressed and just sat and looked at the wall. My husband was an artist and he said, "If you don't do what you are meant to do, and want to do, if that doesn't work out for you, you're going to get sick." So he suggested that I actually go to school, that I work on an MFA degree in writing. He felt otherwise I wouldn't do it. And I wanted to do it. Depression was the thing, though. But school seemed like a really exciting possibility. So I applied to graduate studies at the University of Montana. I had to send in a few samples of work and I sent a couple of poems. And I got a letter back saying that I was not accepted so I felt terrible about that. My husband was a university professor, so he knew how the system worked, and he said, "Do you want to do this or not? Do you really want to do this?" And I said, "Yes, I really do." And he said, "Well then you'll do it." And we drove down to Montana and had an interview with the head of the writing department and I was in.

CanWWR (Clare): It must have been a good interview.

G.S.: (Laughter) Well, it was just amazing that you could do that.

CanWWR (Patricia): Persistence.

G.S.: Persistence. So then I was in that program for two full years and three full summers, and I loved it. It was just so good. We just had little writing groups, informal groups. And that's when I realized I had a passion for this. And I did a lot of work. And it was wonderful to do that work. I loved the courses. I was in my 40s, early 40s, and when there was some holiday or class was cancelled, I got irritated. (Laughter)

CanWWR (Clare): That's a good sign.

G.S.: I didn't want to stay home in bed when I could be studying Chinese poetry.

CanWWR (Patricia): Were you actually in Missoula? Oh, that's a great city.

G.S.: Have you been to Missoula?

CanWWR (Patricia): Yes, I like it a lot. The downtown theatre, The Alma? Is it called The Alma? I love it.

CanWWR (Devorah): I have a follow-up question. When you left that program, did you find it difficult to keep writing?

G.S.: Yes. I came home and I got a job teaching writing at the

University of Calgary. But then when you're teaching, you're not writing. So I didn't do much of that at all. Then I was here and I was teaching English at Grant McEwan, and writing on the side, on weekends and holidays. I wrote a few stories and they were published. Then I went down to Banff and studied and wrote. And I fooled around with it a lot. I fooled around all those years, here and there, writing, publishing. In 1996 I had a massive heart attack. I'd been teaching at Grant McEwan. I knew it was no good because I was uptight and tense, I hated my job, but I felt I needed money. I recovered, and was healthy, but I didn't go back teaching. So a friend of mine said, "Well, maybe you'll finally get your act together and start writing." And I did. And that's when I wrote most of this book that was published.

CanWWR (Patricia): About your writing process—once you devoted yourself to it full-time, Gloria—do you have a certain schedule when you write? Do you read as you write, do you use reading to kind of prompt you to write? Do you write only in the morning, do you write throughout the day, is the evening better for you? What's your writing process like?

G.S.: It's spotty. (Laughter)

CanWWR (Patricia): And irregular?

G.S.: And irregular. But I like the morning best. That always works best for me. Just get a couple of hours or three in the morning and then I feel good. Lately there's been some kind of resistance to that and I have to take a look at that. It's like trying to drive a car with the brakes on. What is the resistance to me finishing this novel I've started? What bothers me is that I can't seem to let it go but at the same time, it's not going forward. And I remember John Irving once said, "What is the difference between a professional writer and a non-professional? It's not writing more than anyone else, and it's not writing better than anyone else. It's finishing what you start." And I think that's never left me and I've got this manuscript in front of me and I don't want to finish it, you know, but I'd really disappoint John if I stopped now and let it go. (Laughter) He wrote this beautiful story, [The World According to Garp 1978], about a transvestite and wrestling—a very wild story.

CanWWR (Patricia): So, your schedule is basically morning. And how are you dealing with this block right now, Gloria?

G.S.: Not well.

CanWWR (Patricia): So it's just frustrating you.

G.S.: Yes. However, I do try to write some lines and get something down on paper.

CanWWR (Patricia): You don't go to anything else so that maybe by diverting your attention you can come back to this,

renewed?

G.S.: Well I have gone to something else because I've gotten a commission to write something here or there, which I've done. And then I've come back to this. Actually, I think I'm working on this because I applied for a grant and I needed to have an idea before I got the grant. And I thought of this great idea to get the money and I got the money. And I remember going to a therapist about it, this touch therapist, and she said, "Give the money back." I didn't but it's an albatross on my neck, you know, to have that money and to think I have to do this thing that I just made up to get the money. (Laughter) But, yes, I write in the morning and I like to get together with other writers around me. We used to get together in a little group and read sometimes to each other. We don't do that anymore. You know, I look at that novel that I don't like and don't want to finish and I look at parts of it and I think, "This is really good. I forgot how good this was right here." So that gives me a little encouragement to finish the thing. Also the fact that my idea for the project originally must have come from some place.

CanWWR (Patricia): Maybe it just needs more time to . . .

G.S.: Time! I've been at it for six years! (Laughter)

CanWWR (Patricia): Ok, I'll shut my mouth. We'll edit that out. (Laughter)

G.S.: No, that's actually a good thing to ask. It's just that I don't have a good answer.

CanWWR (Amy): Ok, well we're going to go back to reading again. We started out with what you read as a child, we'd also like to know a little bit about what you read now. Are there specific authors, genres? Do you read specifically men, specifically women, do you care? Also, we are interested in Canadian writing so if you have thoughts or comments on what there is to read in Canada, we're interested in that.

G.S.: Actually, I read what I want to read and it can come from any country and it can come from men or women and it really doesn't make much difference to me. I remember the first novel that really stunned me, just knocked my socks off was *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Márquez. What happened in that reading is I thought, "My goodness, you can do anything you want." You can do anything you want if you can make it right, make it real to the reader. And that liberated me a great deal to do some odd things in my writing. And *The Horse's Mouth*, I remember that was a wonderful book.

CanWWR (Patricia): By Joyce Cary.

G.S.: Yes. These are not Canadians but these are the ones that got me going. The very first book though, as I said, when I was in grade school, was Canadian.

CanWWR (Amy): Right. Albertan, even.

G.S.: Albertan. Ross Annett. And, in fact, I got a newer copy—it was reproduced—of Ross Annett's book and there's a long foreword in it by Rudy Wiebe. And he picks up on the significance of the book, so that was interesting. So a lot of that is from when I went down to Montana and I got in touch with all these American books, including John Updike. But in Canada, of course I picked up Alice Munro. My best friend is just a fanatic over her work and I read her work and I think it's wonderful. That's the short story genre. I also like Alistair MacLeod. I think he's masterful and I learn from him because his scenes are just magical, I think. I love Canadian writers. I love Fred Stenson who lives in Calgary. I like him as a person and I like his writing and I think he gets better and better and he really does it consistently. I love Tim Bowling, who lives in Edmonton. He gave a reading once that I was at. It was for his non-fiction book and I started to cry in the middle of his reading. It was so moving; I'd never done that. Guy Vanderhaeghe, I like him. I like Margaret Atwood too. Her novels are very readable. She's a good story-teller.

CanWWR (Patricia): Do you prefer her as a novelist or as a poet? Does it matter?

G.S.: Novelist, I think. I don't read much poetry so I don't have much to say about that. I don't decide, "Ok, I'm just going to read poetry this afternoon," and pick up a poetry book. Oh, I like that guy who doesn't get much credit. He wrote the trilogy. He's dead. His books are good too but he's criticized because they say he's trying to sound like Charles Dickens.

CanWWR (Devorah): The Deptford Trilogy?

CanWWR (Patricia): Oh, Robertson Davies?

G.S.: Yes! Robertson Davies. I really enjoyed reading his stuff. And I liked *The Stone Angel* by Margaret Laurence. I think those are pretty wonderful writers, actually. Canadian short story writers too—I think Canadians are so good at short stories.

CanWWR (Patricia): Well Alice Munro is definitely at the top of the field and she's internationally acclaimed.

G.S.: Yes. She is absolutely wonderful and I don't know how she does it. It looks like it's totally effortless and she's just casually telling you something over the kitchen table and then there's this amazing story underneath. Isn't it amazing?

CanWWR (Patricia): Yes.

CanWWR (Amy): So then you definitely do take from what you're reading, when you can, with your writing? You like to read things that inspire you?

G.S.: Yes, I think so. But I'm not very picky. If there's some book hanging around, there it is. I haven't decided, "Ok, I'm

going to search out this particular writer.” I think I’ve read *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky about three times and I’ve got this worn copy that I still have and I might read again. A friend of mine just gave me *War and Peace*. I remember reading that long, long ago but I don’t think I’m going to read that again.

CanWWR (Amy): Once was enough? (Laughter)

G.S.: Oh, Chekhov’s short stories are wonderful. I think he’s a master.

CanWWR (Amy): Well, we do like to ask that question but we find it interesting that mostly people respond either, “I don’t care, I read anything” or they respond, “I do everything I can to avoid reading Canadian literature.”

G.S.: Somebody says that?!

CanWWR (Amy): We did a survey of some undergraduate and graduate students here and we got that response quite a lot. “I don’t read Canadian literature; I only read it because I had to in university or high school.”

G.S.: Hmm. What do they prefer?

CanWWR (Amy): I think part of the problem is that some people don’t realize that the Canadian canon has exploded. It’s not just Atwood and Laurence anymore. There’s a lot of other stuff to read. And they probably would pick up a Canadian book without even realizing it’s Canadian.

G.S.: One thing I like about reading Canadian—and if you’re writing in Canada—is that you get to know these people who are writing and it’s just a really interesting community.

CanWWR (Patricia): Is there an Edmonton community of writers?

G.S.: There’s some, but they’re not close-knit. We don’t get together or anything. I like that kind of community but lately I’ve been sort of out of it. I’m not in the zone; I’m not in the groove. I have been separate, somewhat. When I was teaching creative writing at Grant MacEwan, writing the short story, one of the models I used all the time was “Misery” by Anton Chekhov. If you look at it you could say it’s sort of sentimental but I just think it’s wonderful for teaching what you can do with a conflict. And the landscape is gorgeous. And the sentiments—there’s a line in there when he’s describing the sorrow of the old man who lost his son and he says if the sorrow covers the whole world you couldn’t see it, it wouldn’t show even if you lit a candle and put it right up to it, you still couldn’t see it. It’s an image that I can’t get out of my mind. Another short story I used a lot is “A Worn Path” by Eudora Welty. It’s about an old lady who takes a journey into town to get some medicine

for her grandson. It is just probably one of the most beautiful stories I have ever read—a wonderful story. I tend to use the same things that I love over and over, so I’m not as adventurous in trying new things in teaching. And I don’t ever get tired of the stuff, ever. I’m just happy with it. There’s a little sketch called “Breakfast” by John Steinbeck and I read that every year because it’s so beautiful.

CanWWR (Devorah): I have a question that actually goes back to your reading. I was just wondering, in short stories like the story you read today, “The Mother,” I felt like there was this whole undercurrent of shame. There was shame with the cat and there was shame with her developing but you leave it out, right?

G.S.: Well I don’t want to say the words. It should be shown through what’s happening.

CanWWR (Devorah): Right. Does that happen naturally when you write a story? Does it just kind of come out or do you purposely choose which sections to not mention?

G.S.: You don’t want to just state “This is about shame.” If you did, then why write a story and not just an abstract thesis. (Laughter)

CanWWR (Devorah): But do you set out saying “This is going to be an undertone,” or does it just come out on its own?

G.S.: No. I don’t start out by thinking, “This will be the undertone,” or “This has that meaning.” It happens sometimes without my will. Like this girl who is so shamed by her father—what would a person like that do next? How is she going to handle her life? I think one thing I did consciously try—but I don’t think anybody picks it up—is that I have her looking at the snow falling down at the beginning of the story and she compares it to refugees looking for a place to live and a warm house and tea and putting their babies to bed. And the picture of that next to that little cat at the end, the conflict there. At that point I think “Oh, I hope somebody sees the bigger picture, the political picture of displacement.” What I like about this particular response is that the girl has this huge lie she creates to cover up the deed—big barn, hay, milk, other cats. So then I hope people think more about the political meaning. This is what’s happening, and this is the lie we tell and it’s awful.

CanWWR (Amy): Thank you so much for this interview, Gloria.

G.S.: You are so welcome.