



BALTIMORE WRITERS CLUB

## The Power of Collaboration: Q&A with the Matsumotos, Authors of 'Of White Ashes'



by Kristina Gaddy  
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“Leaves the reader with a new awareness of history  
and a deeper appreciation of the human heart.”  
—LOIS LOWRY, author of *Number the Stars* and *The Giver*

# OF WHITE ASHES

*a novel*



# Constance Hays Matsumoto & Kent Matsumoto

The book cover for "Of White Ashes," written by Constance Hays Matsumoto and Kent Matsumoto.

Less than twenty-five pages into *Of White Ashes*, we feel the tug of the story pulling us in. In 1939, fourth-grade Ruby sits in her classroom in Hawaii. Ruby's parents were born in Japan, but she doesn't necessarily feel Japanese. Across the Pacific Ocean, Koji is in school in Hiroshima, not yet knowing that he was born in the US. Knowing about American history means knowing that Ruby is at risk of being sent to an internment camp during World War Two and Koji is in a city that will be decimated by an atomic bomb dropped by an American plane.

The book follows Ruby and Koji through the war, heartache and hardship, gained friends and lost family, until they meet in California after the war. Authors Constance Hays Matsumoto and Kent Matsumoto transport readers into the world of Ruby and Koji, and all of their emotions about what it means to be Japanese, American, a teenager, and an adult during an extraordinary period of history.

Connie and Kent found inspiration for the story in Kent's family history, but for reasons they share in this interview, they couldn't write a nonfiction book about Kent's parents. Instead, they've taken that story and combined it with solid historical research to create two vivid portraits of the Japanese American experience in the 20th century.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.





Kent Matsumoto and Constance Hays Matsumoto, authors of "Of White Ashes."

### **Baltimore Fishbowl: Where did the idea for the book come from?**

**Constance Hays Matsumoto:** Well, I guess the idea was born on my first date with Kent, 27 years ago. There was a Dorthea Lange exhibit, and I was standing there absorbing a photograph of a little Japanese girl with a tag around her neck, carrying a suitcase waiting for a bus to carry her off to an internment camp. And Kent said, "That was my mother's story," and I got shivers down my spine. Then he told me his father was a Hiroshima survivor, and I said I thought that was amazing—that these two people came together after having had the worst of the Japanese-American experience during the war.

**Kent Matsumoto:** As Connie got to know my parents, over years, her interest in sharing the story bubbled. In early 2020, we took a pilgrimage to Tule Lake, one of the two camps where my mother was incarcerated, and we decided to explore having a filmmaker do a documentary on my parents' story. We had arranged for a film crew from California to come to the East Coast, but my parents nixed that idea. Then, we thought of hiring a ghostwriter but that didn't work out either. Connie and I decided to collaborate and write the story together, with the limitation that I still have a full-time job.

**BFB: Kent, this is a very personal story. Can you talk about trying to get the story from your parents, and writing about the traumatic events, having to put yourself in Hiroshima in 1945?**

**KM:** For better or worse, my parents never talked about their war years when I was growing up. I think it is a cultural thing, a generation thing. I didn't probe. But as Connie and my parents got to know each other, Connie was able to tease out bits and pieces and pull the story together.

**CHM:** I think Kent's parents responded to my curiosity. Since I wasn't their child, they didn't feel they were burdening me with the trauma that they experienced. I think that is why they didn't share their stories with Kent and his siblings, and worked really hard to put those experiences behind them. But talking to me was more of a historical recounting, an opportunity to educate.

**KM:** And speaking of the trauma, we visited the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, which has very graphic displays. It is not something you can sugarcoat. After the first time I went, when I was in middle school, my father never went back into the museum with us. He would always wait outside.

**BFB: As soon as we know Ruby is in the US and Koji is in Hiroshima, we're aware of what happened in those places, and yet the reader still feels the tension of wondering what is going to happen to these characters. As writers, how did you keep that tension?**

**CHM:** I dove into the deep end. I had no idea how to write fiction, but it was important that we write a book of fiction, because if we had written a nonfiction book and written anything negative about Kent's parents, Kent's brother and sister would have been really upset.

Creating that tension was part of our unique partnership. I worked really hard in the beginning on learning the nuts and bolts and creative writing, taking classes, reading books, attending workshops. I found people who were good critique partners and developmental editors. We worked together to create scenes. We would sit together and know what we wanted to achieve in a chapter to move the story along, and then think about how we want to do it. And, importantly, take these tragic world events and bring in how the characters feel about it. Kent's ability to offer the cultural lens was huge.

**KM:** I think my professional training as a lawyer helped with the tension. I don't like it, but it is something that I am used to.

**BFB: Can you tell us about the co-writing process and how that worked?**

**CHM:** Part of my business background was in organizational structures, and I even have experience building houses. So structuring the book was like structuring a project plan, making sure all of the foundational elements. That became a giant flip chart of the timeline, with Koji and Ruby's ages and world events, and we would add Post-it notes with scenes that would move the story along. I did most of the research, but we went to the National Archives together and pulled the family files. It was moving to hold Kent's grandfather's arrest warrant in our hands.

Kent is a fantastic collaborator, a great wordsmith, and I think it has been really rewarding to work on this together.

**KM:** I don't know if a lot of couples could co-write a book, it takes a lot of collaboration and respect. We are both a little stubborn, and yet, our relationship has strengthened by working together on a project of this magnitude. Our lofty ambition is to change minds, to share my parents story, and not just have it become a statistic. We think we've done that.

**CHM:** We really want to engage people's curiosity, and engage their hearts and their minds. Right now, our world is so fragile, and for many people, nuclear warfare seems so far in the past, but it only takes one maniac to do something, and who would have thought that the United States would have done this in 1945? But we were. And our country is so divided right now, and maybe, one little reader at a time will be more respectful of someone's difference and make the world a little bit better.

## Launch Event

Ivy Bookshop

Tuesday, May 30, 2023, 6 p.m.

More information [here](#).

