

# Obasan by Joy Kogawa

Reviewed by Kristen DePre, Cold Spring Harbor High School, New York

*"It's becoming frightening here, with the agitation mounting higher. It isn't just a matter of fear of sabotage or military necessity anymore, it's outright race persecution. But the great shock is this: we are all being forced to leave. All of us." (101-102)*

This was not Nazi Germany. In fact, it was not a genocide or even concerning the internment camps in the United States. This was British Columbia, Canada in 1942. The government was not collecting criminals or prisoners of war, but their own citizens, some second or third generation Japanese-Canadians. Joy Kogawa beautifully illustrates the hardship of an innocent people through her memoir-like novel *Obasan*. Kogawa is not a traditional novelist; she is, in fact, a poet, and this is shown consistently throughout the book. Stylistically, *Obasan* is a sort of epic poem, charting the early life of the protagonist, Naomi. Yet, it does not progress in a typical chronological order. No, this would be far too easy for the reader to follow. Instead, Kogawa almost leads you into the middle of the thick of the hardship and lets the reader explore it through a series of letters and official documents.

The author begins in 1972, in a very different, although a very much the same, barren Canada. Naomi Nakane is a schoolteacher, unmarried, and quite alone traveling to her Aunt Obasan after hearing of her late uncle's death. The author keeps the reader in the dark for a good portion of the novel in a sort of detached, estranged mood, much like the attitude of Naomi herself. By starting in the present, the author allows the reader to see the permanent emotional effects and damage the separation and isolation has inflicted upon innocent peoples. Naomi hides her emotions from her family, revealing her thoughts, instead, by telling her story through a series of articles and official documents brought by her Aunt Emily, a strong willed woman, determined to not let the past slip away from her. She is a contrast to Naomi who has seemed to have somehow built a wall to safeguard her from emotion and lack of maternal care, as her mother "abandons" her, fleeing to Japan. Naomi's middle-aged life seems desolate, much like her childhood during a time that for the most part was forced to be forgotten in Canada.

Kogawa then takes the reader to the past through a series of letters and diary entries of the vocal Aunt Emily. Poetic lines

are ubiquitous throughout the novel, which can either be extremely moving or seem a bit overwhelming in the already choppy plot which is not aided by scores of different characters (many names are Japanese and stretch through multiple generations of extended family). Personally, I think Kogawa's poetry sets the mood, a kind of everlasting, sad nostalgia that weaves all of the characters together.

Another key aspect of the book is the presentation of how different characters cope with the same situation. Naomi's brother, a talented musician responds to the displacement by denouncing his culture and by doing so, almost renounces his family. Aunt Obasan is "the glue that holds the family together", serving as both a maternal and a sort of paternal figure, as many male figures are sent to work camps or are often separated from the families. *Obasan* is a novel meant less to evoke guilt and shame, but more an account of linking a lost past to a new opportunity on life. Although Kogawa expresses that the past may never, and should not be forgotten, she points to the new generation of hope and forgiveness.

Naomi's story is a complicated one, with a plot line that was at times a bit complicated to follow. Kogawa could write the novel in a straightforward manner, but she doesn't. Why, though? Perhaps Kogawa writes her choppy plot to mirror a lifestyle once whole and complete, thrown into a tumultuous time of suspicion and lack of trust between a government and its own people.

Little is known in the international community of the internment that took place in the United States; even less is known about the displacement that took place in Canada. Through a series of

provocative propaganda and confusion, Japanese-Canadians were persecuted, their property taken, and their lives ruined. Some 20,881 people were uprooted, of which 13,309 were Canadian citizens by birth. A formal apology was not issued until 1988, in addition to a three hundred million dollar settlement. However, alienation and separation cannot be bought. Emotions cannot be given a monetary value. These are only a few of the prominent themes Kogawa illustrates in her novel of reopening wounds of the past and healing them, while always looking for the promise of a better future.



# The Genocide Intervention Fund

[www.genocideinterventionfund.org](http://www.genocideinterventionfund.org)

Review By Matt Capetola, Cold Spring Harbor High School, New York

Upon entering the address, your screen will immediately turn to a moving flash video, a mere preview of what you will learn ahead. The video contains graphic photos taken directly from the horrors of the Sudan Region. “Never again,” pledged the international community after the Holocaust... ‘Never again,’ it repeated after Cambodia, Bosnia, and Rwanda... Now, a genocide is being committed again...”

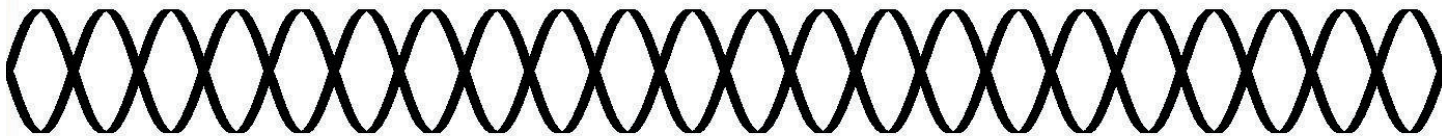
After stating the basic facts, the purpose of this foundation becomes apparent- to help the African Union Peacekeepers in Darfur. Since there exists the failure to act by the world’s leaders, we as human beings are morally obligated to help- and do whatever we can.

The Genocide Intervention Fund (GIF) “aims to increase public awareness about genocide and support organizations, initiatives, and government policies designed to help prevent and stop genocide. At this stage, the GIF will focus its fundraising on supporting the African Union Peacekeepers in Darfur Sudan.”

This foundation was created in conjunction with “The

Responsibility to Protect” report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty of 2001. According to the commission, “sovereign states have a responsibility to protect their own citizens from avoidable catastrophe...but when they are unwilling or unable to do so, the responsibility must be borne by the broader community of states.” You may ask- what does GIF have anything to do with this? The answer to this question is the objective of GIF- to bring the Responsibility to Protect to private citizens.

Notable sponsors of the foundation include US Representatives and university professors from all over the world. There are educational links and many advocacy links, including “STAND: Students Take Action Now: Darfur. The Darfur Aid Agencies include: UNICEF, Save the Children, and others. Aside from the general idea that the foundation is based on, the existence of such support proves this fund a worthwhile investment of time and money. I recommend a visit to this website highly, if for mere education purposes, or if you are looking to make a donation.



## Crash

Reviewed by Lisa Gelshenen, Cold Spring Harbor High School, New York



It is hard to place the movie *Crash*, directed by Paul Haggis, in one specific genre. Throughout the film there were moments when I wanted to cry, times I laughed, and other times I felt suspense and shock. The movie was brilliantly written featuring the intertwining lives of complete strangers who did not feel at all contrived. During the hour and fifty-two minutes, many characters were introduced. Matt Dillon as officer Ryan, Sandra Bullock as Jean, Don Cheadle as police detective Graham, Terence Howard as Cameron, Jennifer Esposito as Ria, Ludacris as Anthony, and Ryan Phillippe as officer Hanson, were just a few of the talented

actors involved in this movie.

It only takes place over a time span of two days, but all the character’s lives are visited. A black police officer, with a criminal brother and drug-addicted mother, two car thieves, a district attorney and his angry, spoiled wife, a racist cop caring for his sick father, a black Hollywood director and his wife who are forced to deal with racism, a Persian immigrant who wants to protect his store by buying a gun, and a Hispanic locksmith and his scared daughter; they are all connected. These characters seem so distant from each other, but they each affect one another in some way. Human nature is portrayed very truthfully. Each person judges the other by the associated stereotypes with them. Not every scenario ends happily and this is what makes the story so real.

The fact that *Crash* is rated R, makes it difficult for the entire public to see it. I would encourage anybody old enough to watch it, to do so. It was a truthful movie that kept me captivated throughout the whole showing.

# One Survivor Remembers

Reviewed by Matt Capetola, Cold Spring Harbor High School, New York

This Academy Award winning video tells of the six-year ordeal of Gerda Weissman, a Polish woman who vividly describes her memories as a victim of Nazi deportation. The video begins with a brief history and graphic photographs of the final stages of the German Death March during Nazi power.

Abducted from her hometown of Bielsko, Poland in September of 1939, Gerda was the only survivor of her family and close friends. The beginning of the film is a deep plunge into the confusing emotions one would experience as they lost all sense of faith and security. According to Gerda, "It was a feeling of complete betrayal- you were home, and you were not home anymore...I pretended for a little bit, what it would be like if the war hadn't happened...reality which I had taken for granted had become a remote fantasy." The fact that Gerda's small town was taken from their grasp in merely hours, however, became the least of her worries.

Tearful, Gerda Weissman goes on to discuss the loss of her brother, and then one-by-one, the loss of the rest of her family, as they went through the deportation to Germany from the Polish ghetto. She described this trip as a "journey to execution," in which she was separated from her mother.

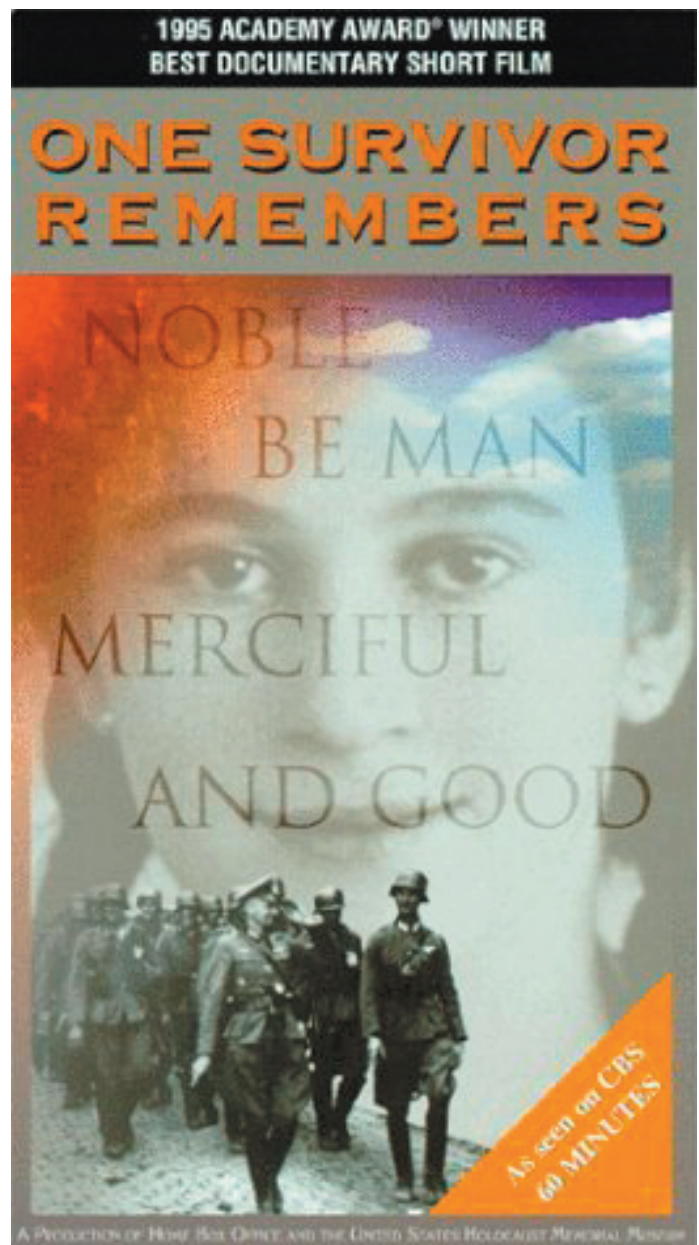
Once at the death camp, she experienced horrible treatment and deplorable conditions, which were the catalyst to Gerda's incredible loss of morale. All around her, people she knew well were dying; she even knew one family who had decided upon committing suicide as a whole, inspiring thoughts of suicide for Gerda herself. One day at the camp, she was standing by train tracks, as she heard a train approaching. Simultaneously, she thought in her mind, "so easy to jump in front of a train." However, an almost supernatural headache and pain in her head reminded her of a promise she had made to her dad long ago, when the horrors had just begun. She had to stay strong for him and the rest of her family.

The climax of the video describes the Death March, which was a panic attempt on the Germans to shift the Jews out of the concentration camps and get in their "final killings." This was famously known for the horrible exposure to the January cold, the arbitrary executions committed by the Nazis, as well as starvation. This scientifically was said to be an almost unimaginable experience on the human body. The people in the march would occupy their minds through imagination; they kept on going by forcing their minds into a state of higher being. During the march, people would let go, left and right, either to die in the cold, or to fall behind purposely to be killed by the Nazis.

Gerda witnessed the loss of courage of her friend who died in her arms, sick with hallucinations. This was a supply of horrible anxiety for Gerda, because only a short while later, soldiers came to their rescue- "The disbelief in daylight to really see someone who fought for our freedom, for my ideals, he looked like god to me."

Liberation according to Gerda was "the moment of humanity, of humaneness, of dignity...freedom." After she tells of the actual moment of liberation, she discusses the aftermath as well. She, in fact, married the man who saved her, Kurt Klein.

I recommend this movie to those who have the capacity to recognize the atrocities which man has committed to his fellow man in the past. This movie is slightly graphic, and may be bothersome to a younger audience, but for those who are looking to be educated on the subject of the Holocaust or to listen to a courageous survivor's story, this interview with Gerda Klein is perfect.



# An Interactive Journey through Time: The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

By Danielle Dunnder and Alexa Campagna, Cold Spring Harbor High School, New York

If you want to learn more about the Holocaust, The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum offers a comprehensive web-site, [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org), that is just what you are looking for. Not only do you get a complete history of the Holocaust, with encyclopedias, maps and personal experiences; you can also keep up with current issues and have an opportunity to comment and have your voice heard. The site is very user friendly and easy to navigate. You can even visit “on-line” exhibitions that utilize both pictures and commentaries to provide a real-life museum experience.

For teachers looking for ways to help students understand the important moral issues that developed from this time in history, this site provides a complete guide, along with a companion Resource Book. In fact, the entire book, *Teaching about the Holocaust* can be printed directly from this site! There are so many excellent learning tools for teachers to use with students, including the on-line Holocaust Encyclopedia, making referencing specific information easy for anyone, and offering links to other resources. There is also an on-line Teacher’s Workshop, offering guidelines for teachers and sample lessons. This is especially important for teachers because teaching about the Holocaust is such a sensitive subject.

The USHMM site also lists links for other reference books for teachers as well as links for teaching materials such as: chronologies, biographies and ID cards of victims, which portray the experiences of many different people. The information and resources available on this site will help teachers address all issues relating to prejudice, hate, and stereotyping in our world today.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum site is also great for students because it is very interactive, and offers many ways to get involved. There are on-line activities where students can explore exhibits and then follow steps for a learning adventure. One example is an activity in which you research files to trace the steps of four Jewish refugees and their journey to America. Learning about their past and final fate gives the student a real life experience of the hardships faced. In addition to on-line educational courses, there are also many links for other related sites, reading materials, and artifacts for those who want to explore this topic further. For creative students who want to express their views on the subject, there are also art and writing contests.

Students can also go directly to an online “Learning Site” at [www.ushmm.org/outreach](http://www.ushmm.org/outreach). This site reviews the history of the Holocaust, based on the museum’s exhibits. It shows easy-to-understand timelines, maps, artifacts, biographies, and key dates. The history is laid out by sections, starting with the “Nazi Rule” all the way through to the “Rescue and Resistance.” From this site you can also go back to the Museum home site or visit the Holocaust Encyclopedia.

A very powerful part of this site is the “Personal History” section. Here you can actually play videos of victims describing their personal experiences. You will hear first-hand from those who survived the concentration camps. You’ll hear how they were separated from their families. You’ll hear about the treatment of the prisoners. You will also hear from the refugees, those in hiding and the aftermath. There is no better way to understand the atrocities of this time, than by listening to the stories of these remarkable people.

Another highlight of the web-site is an “Online Workshop” called “Teaching About the Holocaust” by Nesse Godin. Nesse is a Holocaust survivor who experienced concentration camps, labor camps, and a death march. Students can follow along, listen to Nesse and watch videos of her personal testimony, starting with her life before the Holocaust and ending with a question and answer session.

For those who want to research specific topics relating to the Holocaust, such as euthanasia, a simple search will provide links to books and sites providing history, procedures, viewpoints and further references on the topic. You can learn how the program of euthanasia expanded and continued throughout World War II. You can read about victims and hear testimony from people who witnessed these horrible killings.

In addition to the past, The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum site provides on-line exhibits relating to current issues. This helps people to understand that genocide is an on-going issue in the world today. For example, one current exhibit is about Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt’s work to stop genocide in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Keeping visitors on top of current issues, the “What’s New” section also covers important dates and events, such as International Holocaust Remembrance Day. You can see how this tragic event is remembered around the world and learn how you can take part in this memorial. And of course, when Oprah recommended Elie Wiesel’s memoir, *Night*, the web-site provided ways to learn more about Wiesel’s history, lectures, and book signings. They also provide outlines for teachers to share these current issues with students.

There is no question that The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum web-site offers a complete learning experience for everyone. After just one visit, you will come away with a deeper understanding of the how hate, prejudice and racism can cause so much destruction. In a smaller way, you will relate these concepts to your own life in the form of peer pressure, equal rights, and fairness. We recommend this excellent educational site for researchers, teachers, and students.

website: [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org)

# Paper Clips

By Matti Simon and Jennifer Walsdorf, Cold Spring Harbor High School, New York

This documentary, directed by Elliot Berlin and Joe Fab, is about a small town in Tennessee, trying to raise awareness about the Holocaust. The town, Whitwell, has around 1600 people, and the general population is Protestant. As you can imagine, the town is not diverse at all.

The principal of the middle school, Linda Hooper, decided that it would be a good idea to educate the students about the Holocaust after one of her teachers, David Smith, came back from a conference and suggested the topic be taught in an effort to teach diversity. He had help from Sandra Roberts an 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher at the school. Still, how does one show the enormity of the event in numbers?

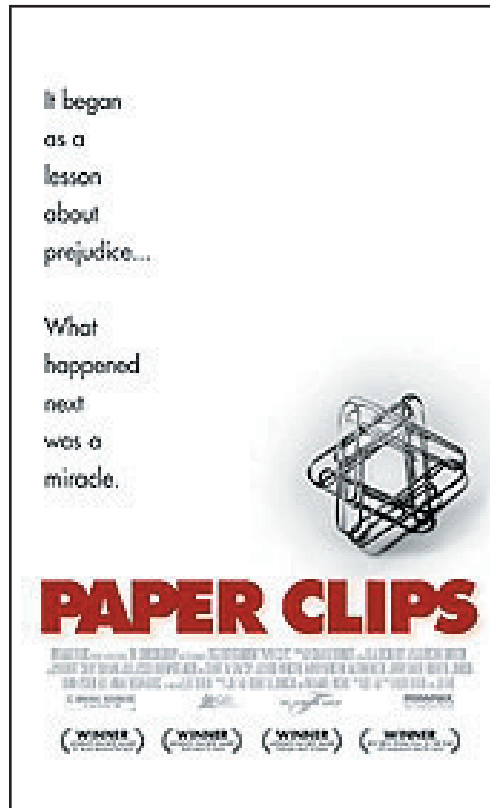
The students wanted to collect six million paper clips representing each Jew who died. They appealed to the local community and to the global community. Every paper clip sent in had a letter or a story connecting to a person whose remembrance and honor was meant to live on. At one point, the school received so many paper clips that the mailman had to have the principal come to the post office and pick them all up. In the end, the students collected over twenty-nine

million paperclips for their project.

Eleven million paper clips were housed in a railcar on their school grounds. A German couple, Peter Schroeder and Dagmar Schroeder-Hildebrand, who had been helping the students with their project, found the railcar in a German museum. The owner of the museum sold it to them after finding out about the children's project. The railcar's number was 011-993 and was built in 1917. After researching the car, the Schroeders realized that it probably had been used to transport Jews to concentration camps.

The car was shipped all the way from Germany to the United States, and the school built a small railroad track to place the car on. They made a little garden and walk-way with butterflies leading up to the car. Many people from Tennessee and all over the country come to visit the memorial every year.

This continues to be a very enlightening and moving experience for everyone who has participated in the project, and a film has been made about the story. *Paper Clips* is rated "G" and is 79 minutes long. This documentary teaches awareness of the Holocaust and the dangers of the roots of intolerance.



## Update on Darfur Genocide April, 2006

By James Reihing, Cold Spring Harbor High School, New York

The genocide in Darfur is still occurring and is still taking the lives of 500 Sudanese each day. "The world's worst humanitarian crisis," as stated by the UN, is forcing about 2 million people into refugee camps, and those who are still home are not allowed to plant crops. The people who are not being killed are dying a slow death by starvation. Many charitable groups have gone over to the region with food and health supplies, but cannot stop the violent raids and killings by the Janjaweed group. While the US government has been calling the killings a genocide for almost a year, they have yet to help send a peacekeeping force. Just this week, President Bush finally promised a NATO commitment to the Darfur region, an action that might bring needed help to the Sudanese people affected by the genocide. Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy has also made statements to the

American Society of International Law stating that, "It is the duty of the world to do more than watch," and that after the Rwandan genocide, "the world wept but little, and then went on its way."

College and high school students can help the situation by joining S.T.A.N.D. (Students Taking Action Now: Darfur) and starting STAND chapters at their school. The STAND website, standnow.org, states that "the mission of each STAND chapter, and the National STAND Coalition, is to educate others on Darfur, raise relief funds, and advocate for political action." Help must be promised by major world organizations to stop the brutal killings and starvation of the people of Darfur. There is no reason for people to turn their heads to these atrocities after both the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide.