

**GUEST: LEE CATALUNA: CREATION AND CHANGE**

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**Award-winning playwright and newspaper columnist, Lee Cataluna, reveals the creative process behind her first novel, next, on Long Story Short.**

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

***Aloha mai kakou.* I'm Leslie Wilcox. Lee Cataluna is a popular columnist for the Honolulu Star Advertiser, and creator of the local box office hit, Da Mayah. She went on to write other productions for Kumu Kahua Theater, Diamond Head Theatre, and the Honolulu Theatre for Youth that include Folks You Meet in Longs, Musubi Man, You Somebody, and Ulua, the Musical. Lee Cataluna's body of work as a television anchor and reporter, newspaper columnist, and playwright has earned her the Elliot Cades Award for Literature and the Pookela Award for Playwriting. Her latest foray into long form fiction began as a writing sample to gain entry into a master's degree program. She recently launched the completed work as her first novel titled, Three Years On Doreen's Sofa. It's the story of a character named Bobby, a hapless ex-con, trying to make a life for himself from his new home on his sister's sofa.**

I've written for an all-male cast in a theatrical production before, and I was so proud of myself that I captured these male voices. And I've gone through the experience of writing for men, having men cast in the parts, having a male director, showing up at rehearsal, and having them say, Yeah, this is so like a middle-aged woman's version of a man. So [CHUCKLE] I don't have any illusions that I can, like, channel or any of those kind of things. I mean, I know it's through my perspective.

**Do you think you got this character?**

I hope I got this character.

**Tell me about the book. What made you write it, and why pick this subject? I mean, you explain that you're not like the main character in the book, but you are kinda like Doreen—**

Doreen.

**—in Three Years on Doreen's Sofa.**

I think I'm kinda like Doreen.

**Who is a hard case.**

She's a hard case. But, I fight my inner Bobby. Bobby is the protagonist narrator, who just can't get off the sofa; he just can't get his life in gear. And I kind of think a lot of people have their inner Bobby. But those of us who have jobs and families, and function in the real world, we have also our inner Doreen that kicks us to do something. Kind of that fear, slash, anger, slash, survival that makes you do stuff you don't want to do.

**And this brother and sister are the first in their—well, Doreen is the first in the family ever to get off government assistance.**

Yeah; she's pretty proud.

**While Bobby is an alumnus of prison.**

Yes.

**So, what made you pick this milieu?**

The only thing that drew me to the story was, Bobby's voice was so insistent. He was a very clear voice for me. I could hear the way this guy spoke. He had a lot of stories to tell. And it was that experience that some writers describe as almost taking dictation.

**So, was he an amalgam of people you knew, or did you know a Bobby?**

[CHUCKLE] Everybody knows a Bobby.

**But this is a distinctive Bobby. I mean, he pilfers all over the place, he justifies—**

But he has a good heart.

**He rationalizes.**

He's never really malicious, right? He just kind of like bumbles along, and he's just kinda having a good time, and oh, kinda bragging about all the bad things that happened to him. I've known many Bobbys. He's not any particular Bobby. When there's some sort of program that touts itself as, we change lives, and then they sort of give you their spokesperson, like, Oh, yeah, my life is completely different now, and halfway through the interview, right, you have the warning bells going on, like, this guy is doing all the stuff he says he hasn't done in six months or whatever, and he's going to do it right after I leave, and he probably did it this morning. Yet, he's like, a fantastic storyteller, and even though I know he's lying, like, I want to hear the stories.

**And he has no self-awareness.**

None whatsoever. None. I mean, Bobby in the story is so stuck in a very, very early stage of child development. He really wasn't nurtured, and he doesn't understand some basic things about human relationships, about sexuality.

**Well, even the background, I mean, the story you give him, of how he came into the world is pretty incredible. What's the genetics?**

Well, he and Doreen are brother and sister, but they're also cousins. Because they have the same father, different mothers, but their mothers are sisters. And they were conceived the same day, in the same car, in the same parking lot.

**And there's another sister.**

And there's another sister.

**With a different ...**

Different mother, unrelated, but same father. So it was a busy night for their dad.

**And now, where did that come from?**

[CHUCKLE] You'd be surprised. Stuff happens in families. But where it came from in terms of the functionality of the novel for me was, I wanted to have these two characters who had the same sort of genetic background, but not the contrivance of twins. But I wanted them to have the same genetic background, the same early childhood experiences, yet they're so different as grownups, and why. 'Cause I didn't want it just to be blamed on, oh, he was born that way, or that's how he was raised. I wanted it to be something else.

**Doreen has kids, and she's struggling to get a better life for them, and she's telling Bobby, Don't you drag us down.**

That's right.

**I'll help you out, but don't you drag us down.**

That's right. She has concerns external to herself. And she pulled herself out of that path. And I wrote her to be a pretty tough lady. She really doesn't stand for anything, yet, she lets Bobby come into their house. And I don't think we see too much—Doreen doesn't let her soft side, but just letting him in, she was giving him a chance. Bobby doesn't take chances.

**No. I don't want to give away the end of the novel, but I mean, there is no redemption for Bobby, right?**

How could there be? He says, when there's two choices, it's my job to take the bad one. He just sees himself that way.

**Another thing he said, and I really flash on this because I too have interviewed people where this is exactly what I thought. I think Bobby is quoted by you as saying that, I feel good when I'm numb.**

Yeah. I feel best when I don't feel anything. Yeah. Yeah; I mean, my big test for myself in this book tour was, I went to read at the Women's Correctional Center in Olomana, and to the writing group that is there that Pat Clough has, that she teaches. And so, I knew if I was gonna get anything about, like this wasn't true, this doesn't ring true, you don't know what the heck you're talking about, I was gonna get it there, and that I was gonna get the truth. And it was a really cool experience. And as I left, kind of my gift came from the warden, who said, I know Bobby. And he named Bobby, and I won't name his Bobby, but he told me who Bobby was, who is not currently there at the facility. And then, I did a reading at Kumu Kahua, and Judge Steve Alm came up to me afterward. He says, I got Bobby on my docket this week. That's been cool. I mean, it's farce, Bobby is an unreliable narrator. He's lying. I think his big

addiction is to drama, and to stories, so he's making stuff up. But I wanted him to ring true. And I hope he does.

**And he knows his stock and trade is stories.**

Right.

**That's who he is.**

Yeah. I mean, he's got these other addictions, but mostly, he's most comfortable when he's lying on the sofa, little bit loopy, with his slush float. That's kind of his mother's milk that he never got as a kid. And dreaming up crazy things, bragging about his misadventures.

**Writer Lee Cataluna's first novel, *Three Years on Doreen's Sofa*, incorporates Pidgin dialect, and has successfully taken what is essentially a spoken language and translated it for the written word. Here's an excerpt from novel that gives Bobby's narrative account of his relationship with his sister, Doreen.**

Me and Doreen get kinda that same love-hate going on, like our mothers. I love Doreen, she hate me. Well, no, she don't really hate me, she love me, deep down. I am her closest blood relative in the world, next to her mom and her kids and our dad. Even closer, because she related to all of them only side, but with me, we have double blood. She would do anything for family. And me, family. She would do anything for me. Which is why it's cool that I live couple blocks from her wallet every so often, and sometimes Kennison's wallet, and Liko's piggybank, which is really a turtle or some kine dinosaur animal, but he still call it piggybank. He not so good with his animals yet. But not Doreen's wallet. Oh, no, that girl is smart like the mother, and she not tired like the mother. She still young, that's why. Get more chance she count her money at the end of the day, and she going notice when stuff is missing. Plus, Doreen don't have the love for her Uncle Bobby yet. She still see me like one parasite and one loser. I gotta prove to her how I am, really, inside. Which is why I gotta take her mother's money, just for now, just while I still yet getting on my feet, to help me get on my feet. Takes money to make money, right?

**And that is funny, but it's so insightful.**

Justifying bad behavior, most of us. I know I do that, sometimes. My behavior is not quite as bad. It's not that bad. But still, that self-justification, and delusional. He's wrong; he's wrong about stuff. He's wrong about a lot of things, especially about relations.

**But he sees Doreen as really loving him when she gets on him.**

She's barely tolerating him. I mean, she has a feeling of obligation.

**I'm wondering if you're looking to make a transition to more than a regional writer, or when you use Pidgin, do you become more than a regional writer? Is that translatable?**

I think I'm trying to answer that question for myself. Since this book—this is the last piece that I've written in Pidgin. I've been trying to write, and I can write in standard English. I do. But I've sort of stepped away from it, like I kinda got that

itch really scratched in a full length novel. Graduate school is certainly expanding ... my understanding of writing. The kinds of books that I would read, you know, the stuff that gets assigned to you is like, whoa, I would never pick this out unless somebody told me I had to read it. So that's been good. Kinda painful, kinda good. But the first three chapters of Doreen's Sofa, that was my writing sample that I submitted for application for graduate school. So ... it got me in. [CHUCKLE]

**In the year 2000, following a decade-long stint in television news as a reporter and anchor, Lee Cataluna made the career transition to print media as a columnist for the Honolulu Advertiser. And in this year of our taping in 2011, she writes for the Honolulu Star Advertiser. Already celebrated as a dramatist, Lee is probably better known at this time for her provocative newspaper commentaries. In 2005, while making a living writing about other people, Lee Cataluna's own private life was thrust into the public spotlight while she was pregnant with her first child.**

**You know, there was a time when you almost died.**

Yeah. I did die.

**You did die?**

M-hm. I don't have the light story, so don't ask that. But, yeah, yeah. I was coded. So ...

**And how has that changed you? It can't have just been a ripple in the pond.**

**Did it change you?**

[SIGH] I don't know. I mean, that happened six years ago. And I still feel like I'm in it. I don't have that distance from that. I haven't processed it, I haven't written about it, I rarely talk about it.

**Do you have a sense of it happened for a reason?**

No. And if there's any big change in my life, it's that the loss of that, the loss of that everything happens for the reason. I can't really believe that. I mean, I don't know if anyone who goes—anyone who loses a child, that's a tough one.

**Because that was part of your almost losing your life, you lost a child.**

Yeah. Yeah; we died together. And the doctors only brought me back. So, I have hard time seeing that as a miracle. I mean, I had an amniotic fluid embolism, and those are almost always fatal, to both mother and child.

**And that just is something you can't control, you don't know. When you get pregnant, you just don't know if that's gonna happen to you?**

It's a plumbing accident that happens during labor. A little clot of something, maybe the baby's hair or something, and the amniotic fluid gets into the mother's bloodstream, 'cause there's a lot of stuff going on during labor. There's a lot of blood vessels that are ruptured, and it gets into your bloodstream. So it could happen to anybody. But it's so rare, and it's almost always fatal. And when it's not fatal, the mom is usually so—there's been so much damage. And they told me that I should feel lucky that I can walk and

talk, and breathe on my own. 'Cause I was coded for forty minutes, while my child was still inside me.

**Wow.**

Yeah. So ...

**Do you feel changed? Not emotionally, but I mean, have you had any physical effect?**

No.

**That lingers?**

No. The folks at Queen's, Dr. Ikeda, and Dr. Lau, they ran my code beautifully. And there's times I still search for words. But I can breathe. [CHUCKLE] I can think, I can walk, I can plan, I can remember.

**And you had the guts to get pregnant again.**

How could I not? How could I not? How could I say, Oh, okay, well, that was my one shot. I mean, that was one of the decisions that my doctor had to make on my behalf, because I was hemorrhaging out. So many things happen with this amniotic fluid embolism. First of all, your heart stops. [CHUCKLE] I mean, that's the first symptom, is that your heart stops. And then, things get worse. And part of it is, you bleed out. So I had like, six units of blood. And I'm hemorrhaging, and they have to ... the protocol is that they save the mother's life, and then they get the baby out. [SIGH] So they left in my uterus when it would have been ... ooh, that's gross, yeah, to talk about it. [CHUCKLE] When it probably—you know, there was a decision to be made.

**You're a young woman, and they wanted you to have that option.**

But I'm hemorrhaging. So, probably safer to just cut all your losses. But, they worked hard, and they left me with that. So I thought, damn it, I'm gonna use it. [CHUCKLE] They left me with that, I'm gonna try. And my doctor, particularly Dr. Lau, who I will love forever, she'd been with me through everything, she went with my husband through everything, 'cause he remembers it and I don't. 'Cause I was down. But she said, No guarantees it's not gonna happen again. We don't know anything about this thing.

**Did she try to say—**

Absolutely.

**—better not?**

Yeah; everybody said, better not. And I said, I'm going to. She said, Okay, well then, let's work on this together.

**And so, you said that—I mean, I don't know what the odds are of it happening again, but—**

Nobody knows, because nobody lives past the first incident.

**What was that like, every day of the pregnancy which resulted in your son?**

I wasn't afraid of dying. I was afraid of living the way I had been living with that loss, and not having the guts to try again. To me, that would be worse. You know? What is my life without that trying, who am I without that trying.

**How long did you wait?**

The doctors told me to wait six months. And I waited six months. [CHUCKLE]

**And then, you were pregnant again?**

I think it was the next month. So yeah, seven months later. So, yeah, everything happened May of 2005, and my son was born July 2006. Yup. And my husband had to sit on the same bench where he sat outside. 'Cause with my son, part of the precaution was a scheduled C-section. Like, we're not gonna let you go into labor [CHUCKLE], 'cause you can't be trusted. But who know what would have happened if everything had been ... so he had to be really brave for me, too. And that's been a lesson for me. I mean, I guess maybe in the way that I've changed, I've had more compassion. And at first it was, I didn't want to talk to anybody, 'cause people couldn't help but saying stupid things, in the name of being kind. Like, it was meant to be.

**It's like they didn't quite think it through, or they'd never had anything like that happen.**

Or they never had anything like that happen. And then, you start to realize—I mean, for me it's happened to so many people, and they don't talk about it. And then, when it happens, and then they bond, they have this little clan, secret. Because only those people understand. And I had one woman, Nancy Moss, and I will be grateful to her forever. She sought me out. She said, You know what, the same thing happened to me. And she took me to lunch, and she let me say everything, every stupid thing that I needed to say to somebody who understood. And she understood. And it happened to her, thirty years prior, but it was still fresh for her too.

**Why do you think you haven't written about it yet?**

This is the first time I'm talking about it to anybody other than ... I don't know. [CHUCKLE] I haven't made sense of it. I don't know ... I don't know if you can make sense of it. You just kinda pick up and keep going. Yeah, you can't ... [SNIFF] some things—you just come to the conclusion that some things, you're just never gonna understand, or it might take a long time to accept. I don't know. It's the closest thing that I think I might have to a war experience, and a lot of those soldiers don't talk about it when they come back. It's just things you can't put into words.

**Of course, in your case, it was publicized that you were in the hospital, you were seriously ill.**

Not my doing. [CHUCKLE]

**Yeah.**

Not my choice.

**By your own newspaper.**

Well, because one of the TV stations had already gone for it, and pulled out, archive video of me when I was like twenty-four years old and had a bad perm.

**[CHUCKLE]**

Yeah. And I have to say, and maybe that was a lesson too. Not The Lesson, but A Lesson about what it's like to suffer through something publicly, and how to manage that. And I think people grieve differently. That was a big lesson too.

Some people really love having [SNIFF] support. I wanted to be left the hell alone.

**'Cause you must have had a stranger or two ask you about it, and that must have been pretty ...**

Yeah, I still do.

**—disconcerting.**

And then people misunderstand, because my son was born so soon afterwards. They think that everything turned out okay. So that I'm comfortable to talk about it, that it's a story of victory. And in some ways, it is. But my son has his own life, and he has his own purpose. He's not the replacement.

**And do you correct them, when they think it all turned out great?**

No. Because it burdens them. It makes them feel like, Oh, crap. [CHUCKLE]

**There's all this intricacy that you've got to work your way through, even though it's covered with pain.**

Yeah. And I don't want to put—at first, I would just tell people, I would just bluntly tell people, that things did not turn out the way I wanted them to. And then I could see that it was hurting them, and I thought, they were trying to be nice. So, I'd just kinda get through the moment, and then I'd go in the bathroom and cry. [CHUCKLE] And then I'd stop.

**Do you wonder what happened, to your spirit while you were forty minutes coded?**

Yeah. You know, I got ripped off. I didn't get— [CHUCKLE]—

**You didn't get the light?**

I didn't get the light. I didn't get the light.

**Well, that's because you weren't ready to go.**

I don't know. I don't know; who knows. Who knows. Someday, maybe I will understand, but I'm not there yet. Maybe some people go through—I know people who've gone through similar or way worse experiences, and they understand things differently after. And I hope I get to that point. But for now ...

**But you don't have a sense of, the light went out inside me for a while? No recollection?**

No. They gave me Versed, so that I would not remember. And so, I came out of all this. I was not awake for ... I don't know, five, six days, and I woke up in ICU, and I'm like, I don't remember anything. And they were like, Good, you're not supposed to, we kinda took that away from you to kinda ease the burden.

**And then you must have said, What happened to my child?**

Oh, yeah.

**Who told you?**

Well, she lived for two weeks. So, she lived long enough for me to meet her, and hold her.

**And that's good.**

Yeah. It is. Yeah, I got to see her. I got to kiss her; got bathe her.

**Your colleague in writing, Juliet Lee—**

Oh, love her.



**She's a Buddhist priest who says, you know, some things in life are just random, they don't make sense.**

I tend to think that. But I would never argue with someone who gets through this tough, tough life in this tough, tough world by saying everything has a reason. If they believe that, then it's absolutely true.

**Let's talk about ... you're living in California. Tell me about your life now.**

I'm in school fulltime. My little boy is in kindergarten. My husband works at the Desert Sun, he's the managing editor there. I'm homesick every single day. It was a really tough decision to make, but we're kind of economic refugees. When the Honolulu Advertiser shut down, my husband had come back there, and he was not offered a job with the surviving paper. He was rehired at the Advertiser three weeks before the sale was announced. So all of us at the Advertiser, were shocked, and many of us are still dealing with, what happened. And I think that's true for Aloha Airlines, and many other big companies here that we've seen go. So what do you do? You evaluate, you hold onto what you can, you try something new, you try to make the best of the situation.

**Is it harder to write about Hawaii from California?**

Sure. Because so much of good writing is the walking around, right? My dad used to say, A farmer has to have his boot prints in the field. You can't farm from the office. And I don't think you can write from the office too, right? Like the best stories are the ones where you walked around, and you like, smelled the smoke, or you know, whatever.

**But on the other hand, it gives you some distance, so sometimes that perspective works.**

Sometimes; sometimes. I try to report a lot. Actually talk to people. Get them on the phone, or email back and forth or whatever, so that I'm not just doing observational things. I try to rely more on reporting. Where I'm at in the desert, for a while, I was driving around—for too long, I was driving around with my Hawaii license plates, and people were like, Hooey! So, definitely a lot of transplanted Hawaiians, local people in California, in the desert. That's not the kind of stories that people here want to read. They want to read about here. So I freelance for the paper, and I write one story a week. And I try my best. Try my best to stay in touch. Can you completely stay in touch from another state? No, 'cause I don't get to walk around. But, I spent my summer here, and I've been here the last week, and, try my best.

**At the time of our conversation in 2011, writer Lee Cataluna is fast approaching the completion of her course studies to earn her master's degree in fine arts from the University of California at Riverside. Next, a children's book about a Maui bird that wants to fly to the summit of Haleakala. *Mahalo nui*, Lee Cataluna, for sharing your long story short. And thank you, for watching and supporting PBS Hawaii. I'm Leslie Wilcox. *A hui hou kakou*.**

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Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit [pbshawaii.org](http://pbshawaii.org).

One of the rewrites for me was to try to make the Pidgin more accessible. And that's where graduate school has helped me, has taught me a lot. Because I'd been reading a lot of pieces written in dialect, different dialect, dialect that I'm not familiar with. A lot of people have read Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which is a fabulous book. And so he throws in a lot of different, like, street slang and Spanish words, and just lot of stuff going on. And I had to analyze, okay, why am I digging this, 'cause this is not a speech pattern that I've heard or familiar with, and how is this working, and try to learn from that kinda stuff.