

**GUEST: GAVAN DAWS**  
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**Aloha no and welcome to *Long Story Short*. I'm Leslie Wilcox of PBS Hawaii. Today, on *Long Story Short*, we get to share stories with a professional storyteller – best known as an author, Gavan Daws.**

**Australian transplant Gavan Daws was the first person to earn a PhD in Pacific history at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. The academic and teacher became the bestselling author of *Shoal of Time: A History of the Hawaiian Islands*, *Land and Power in Hawaii*, *Holy Man: Father Damien of Molokai* and many other books. Now he's collaborated on an 1,100-page anthology, *Honolulu Stories: Two Centuries of Writing* – full of voices of Hawai'i.**

**You're a storyteller in so many forms. Your latest form is this very hefty book with Bennett Hymer. What other ways have you told stories in your life?**

Well, if it comes down to twenty-four words or less, I suppose that all of my life has really been about words and audiences. Words is all I have; I have no other skills of any kind, either creative or financial. So it's words; words are my currency. And I kinda grew up on the edge of the Outback in Australia, where when I was a kid, there was no radio, and where for a long time, there was no TV. And storytelling was what everybody did. And when you got old enough, which is around sixteen, you'd go into the pub two or three years below drinking age; and that was storytelling territory as well. And on top of that, I'm about five-eighths Irish, and there's genetic storytelling in the Irish. I've done it in books and in stage plays and in song lyrics. And I've done the libretto for an opera, and I've done documentary films, which are not my talking, but other people's talking. And I'm a huge admirer of standup comedy; I just love standup comedy. So words are the way that things come to me; and on a good day, they're the way that things come out of me.

**In this anthology, *Two Centuries of Writing, Honolulu Stories*, among the things you include is a comedy sketch by Rap Reiplinger.**

Yeah. When we were setting up the anthology, Bennett and I made a decision that we wouldn't limit storytelling to what most people think of as, you know, short stories or bits out of novels. We'd have scenes from plays and musicals, and operas, and we'd have Hawaiian chant, we'd have poems, we'd have song lyrics, we'd have cartoons, and we'd have standup comedy, and we'd have slam. And the all-time great standup comic of my life, and I've seen a lot in a lot of different places, is Rap. A genius; absolutely genius. And as I say in the introduction, he's the youngest standup comedian who ever made me, A, fall off my chair laughing, and B, snort beer through my nose.

**[chuckle]**

Nobody else has ever done that, and he could. And of all his, I think *Room Service* is the best; Mr. Frogtree trying to get his cheeseburger. So in *Honolulu Stories*, in the section about modern Waikiki, that was, of course, you know, had to have that. And so, Jon DeMello of Mountain Apple very kindly gave us permission, and it's just a joy to have that in there. One of my big things about living here, and having hopes, my own private hopes for the place, is that more quality stuff from here can become exportable. You know, think of Iz, Brudda Iz; think of that. There's the most local musician imaginable; who could be more local than Iz?

**Going global.**

And he sings a Hollywood classic from the 1930s, *Over the Rainbow*, and he's got the first platinum CD from Hawai'i, with half the sales outside Hawai'i. And he's in six movie soundtracks, he's in commercials all over the world, and he's a ring tone. The ultimate exportable, right. And that's good quality, okay. Let's have more of that; let's have more of that.

**Well, thank you for putting regular people in this book. I love several of them. This particular short little essay has been the subject of a newspaper story in which you and the reporter said, *Where is this writer, we'd love to know more; Mark, who was a student at Makaha Elementary School in 1981. And if I may, he wrote, My mother lives in Las Vegas, my father lives in Hawaii. I am my father's son, and my sister is icky. Our family has small noses and soft faces. If you ask me one day, I will soar like an eagle to visit my mother.***

M-m. I came across that in a collection by Eric Chock, of Bamboo Ridge, who's been running Poetry in the Schools for a long, long time. And the poetry that he gets from little kids, you know, from Makaha or wherever; wonderful. And so, again, one of the decisions Bennett and I made was to have stuff by kids. You know, most anthologies, even the big ones, don't do that; they don't think kids can tell stories, you know. Kids can tell stories. So we have a couple of dozen kid poets in there from the second grade on up. And wonderful stuff from Lois-Ann Yamanaka's learning school, Na'au; she's got a half a dozen poems from little kids in the book.

**I like the haiku. I mean, here's a seventeen-syllable one.**

Yeah.

**Bus from Manoa, always the same hair and dress; Japanese tutus.**

Yeah. That's part of one of the chapters that goes all around Oahu in poetry. Every district we picked up on that would take you like on a round the island tour; and that's one of the Manoa poems.

**Holoholo through writing.**

Yeah; yeah.

**As a UH Manoa history professor, Gavan Daws was known for holding the attention of large lecture halls of students. And this consummate storyteller weaves an entertaining, seafaring tale of how he came to land on our sunny shores.**

The Reader's Digest version of the story, which is a combination of Romeo and Juliet, and Ivan the Terrible and—

**Ooh. [chuckle] Do tell.**

--all sorts of things. I was escaping from Australia, rather than going to Hawai'i. And I came on a freighter, which crossed the Pacific at five miles an hour. It was by no means a Hokule'a voyage, you know. And I kinda fell off the ship here. And my entire preparation for Hawai'i was to have read on the freighter, the book, *From Here to Eternity*. That's what I knew about Hawai'i.

**Wow.**

And everything from then on, has the appearance of being intended, but in fact, was just sleepwalking and bumping into things. And that's been my whole life. So the ship was going to Hawai'i. If it had been going to Bulgaria, you know—

**[chuckle]**

—I would have been in Bulgaria.

**Bulgarian Stories.**

Yeah. Right; right.

**So you accidentally came here, in a sense. And then you accidentally got a PhD in Pacific History?**

It was like breaking the balls on a pool table. You know, things just went everywhere. And one of 'em went into a pocket, and that was the academic life. It could have been anything else. And it just kinda grew from there; I got offered a job, I kept the job, I got tenure, I wrote a book, and so on and so on. But I've also done other things outside Hawai'i and other things other than academic work, you know, so

**You—within just what, a decade or so of coming here, you're writing a history of the Hawaiian Islands, *Shoal of Time*, which is it still a local bestseller after all these years?**

Yeah, it is; it's forty years in print. And still—which is amazing. Eighty percent of books disappear after a year. They're like restaurants, you know; they fold. And I had no idea, doing that, what kind of life it would have, or even it would get published. Which you never know. And just a little bit of the history of that. Honolulu Book Shops, which was the only book shop in town in those days; they ordered twenty-four copies. And when they sold them, they didn't reorder; they thought that was about the demand. But here it is, forty years later, and—

**It's required reading in many courses.**

Which I don't want; I don't want to be required reading. I want to be read by, my phrase, consenting adults; I want them to choose to read it.

**Have you heard that in the intervening decades after the book came out, there has been some perception on the part of native Hawaiians that there's a colonial tone here—**

Oh, sure.

**--in the book?**

Yeah. I think every writer writes as someone of his or her own time. I certainly had no great ability beyond anybody else's to look backward or forward, or sideways. I breathed the air that was here to breathe at that time, and wrote that. Now, in the forty years since then, and almost fifty years since the research, there's two generations. That's half the people living here now, A, weren't born then, and B, weren't born here. So the change in everything here is huge, since I started doing that. Okay. Any general history written now would be written by somebody now, looking back at then, through the eyes of now. Totally different. There wouldn't be a sentence in this book that would be the same, if I were doing it now.

**Is that right?**

Oh, yeah. Or if anybody were doing it now. Now, in that forty to fifty years, we've now got more than thirty years of the Hawaiian renaissance. You know, think what a difference that's made in the air that everybody breathes. Okay. The next book that'll be done, and I wish done soon, will breathe that air. Fine; there's always—Thomas Jefferson says, History needs to be rewritten every generation. And there's been two generations since this; long overdue.

**Author Gavan Daws has a deep connection with his adopted home. But it's certainly not all warm and fuzzy; he knew some of his writing would be profoundly uncomfortable to some.**

**What do you love about Hawai'i?**

Just that it exists. I love getting up in the morning here, and going to bed here. We, my wife and I, traveled a lot, and we live in the zip code where we want to live. We've seen a lot of zip codes. We live exactly where we want to live; and that's a blessing. Not a whole lot of people are fortunate enough to be able to say that. I like the food, I like the climate, I like the life. We've been in Paris, the City of Light, we've been in Tahiti, Polynesia. The light here is just magical, and so is the air. So why would you not want to live in 96822?

**When you were researching *Shoal of Time*, how did you put yourself in mind of what, say, native Hawaiians were doing at that time, and how'd you learn to characterize certain things?**

With difficulty. What I try to do with writing, and it's not just for *Shoal of Time*, but anything at all. I try to keep people interested in turning the page. If you're not readable, then what? If I put you to sleep by page ten, even if I've got something interesting to say on page fifty, and you don't get there, what have I done? So first thing; be readable. And then you've gotta dance with nonfiction. With fiction, you can say anything to be readable; you can have, you know, sex every three pages or a mighty explosion every five, or whatever. But with nonfiction, you can't really take those liberties. So what you've gotta be able to do is do that dance between readability and reliability. And that's a dance. And it's a solo dance; only one person's name is on book. And everybody's dance with readability and reliability will be different. And that's why they're my books; that is to say, that's my name on the title page. But they're only my books; there's always room for another book, and for a better book, always.

**Land and Power in Hawaii. The story of power brokers and the struggle for land, from the '50s through the '80s. That was a lightning rod for discussion. I always wondered; what kind of heat did you take from doing that book with George Cooper?**

Well, George and I have now known each other for more than half George's life, and half my life. And we collaborated on this book, and we're still friends. And collaboration is a sometime thing; you know, a bad collaboration is worse than a bad marriage, you know. So we dreamed up *Land and Power* in Kuhio Grill on King Street in Mo'ili'ili over a beer. And we used to sit there and drink; it was one of the cheap grad student drinking places. And two things about George. One, he is one of the few people to whom I would trust my moral life; he's an absolute straight shooter, just absolutely genuine. Secondly is, he's the best researcher I've ever met in thirty-five years in academic work. No academic I've ever met has touched George for factual research. George is a truth-seeking missile. You aim George, and he hits the truth all the time, brings it back not blown up, but absolutely intact. So perfect collaborator. And what we wanted to do was simply describe land politics in Hawai'i in those thirty years, and offer no judgments, just facts. And there are no factual errors in *Land and Power*; and there better not be, because you can get sued. Okay. If you're gonna get sued, you get sued in the first six months. The book's been out twenty-three years, and we haven't been sued. So those are facts.

**What do you think was the most remarkable fact that emerged from the book?**

In the totality, the nonpartisan approach to land development, where you get Democratic senators and Republican businessmen, and a couple of Supreme Court justices, and two guys from organized crime, and their wives and civil servants in the same hui; that's the big fact, the big overriding fact. And there are thousands of cases there. When we did the index, we had three thousand names in the index, two thousand nine hundred and ninety-five of whom were probably not pleased to be in the book.

**Were you suggesting that there's a big conspiracy going on?**

No. It's not a conspiracy; it's how business and politics were done. That's not conspiratorial.

**You said were; so not done that way anymore?**

If this were done again, if *Land and Power* were done again—and I wish it would be—there would be different players. The names would be different, but the game is very much the same. Because land is power.

**And anyone who didn't know the word "hui" knew it when your book was published.**

Yes; I imagine so.

**Land huis and people—**

M-hm.

**--pulling together to use advantage of some kind to acquire land.**

Well, that's not the only meaning of hui. Hui just is "together." There are honest huis; of course, there are. You know, eighty percent of the huis in that period would have been just business.

M-hm.

But the edge that power gave to business is what the book is really about.

**Yeah; there are a lot of people who do feel that they were made out to be money-grubbing, advantage-taking, you know, arrogant, misusing folks.**

M-hm. Well, this is a free country, with a free press. They are free to write their books.

**You never got a serious challenge to *Land and Power*?**

Not factual.

**What kind of challenge did you get?**

Well, the usual. A big drop-off in invitations. [chuckle]

**People didn't want to be seen with you?**

Like that; like that, yeah.

**I know when I've read accounts of what the book presents, there's always a reference to, This is what happened in the Democratic years. But you're suggesting it wasn't a function of the party. Or the—**

Oh, by no means.

**—or the belief.**

By no means.

**It's just they were the ones who were in power at the time.**

Yeah. As we way in the introduction, land has always been power in Hawai'i. Go back to the ancient times, the chiefs. The first things they did when they won a war, redistribute the land. And then you know, the Great Mahele, and all that followed that, and the missionaries coming to do good and doing well, and then the Big Five. Land has always been power, and it always will be. As Mark Twain said, you know, Invest in land, they're not making anymore of it. Land is prestige, land is power; and therefore, land is politics.

**Gavan Daws, in the introduction to his latest work, writes, "It takes a great deal of history to make a little literature," which he quotes from Henry James. And, he says, he starts with history first.**

**One of the books you wrote was about Father Damien.**

M-m.

**And I think I've heard you say in the past that he was an ordinary man who made some moral decisions right every time, again and again. Does that mean you don't think he was a saint?**

Yeah. Again, doing *Holy Man* was interesting, because I'm not a Christian. I'm not a practicing Christian, and I'm by definition not a Catholic. And I'm no more than morally average. So what would I be doing, writing a biography of a man who I came to believe is a saint? And my answer to that is simply write the best book I could. You know. But time and time again he was a really ordinary guy. He wasn't real smart; he certainly wasn't sophisticated. He couldn't write very well, he wasn't cultured. He wasn't sensible. He didn't—

**Why do you say he wasn't sensible?**

Well, look what he did with his life. He could have risen in the church.

**M-hm.**

He could have been the Bishop in Honolulu. But look what he did. Time and time again, he does things that nobody else is prepared to do, at the risk of his physical life, in the interest of what he always called the imitation of Christ. That's what he did. And if he isn't a saint—I'm not an authority on the Vatican's procedures, but if that isn't a saint, and to die of the disease that he was looking after by me, that qualifies him, and it's a delight to me to see that the canonization of Damien is further along than it's ever been. And there's quite a possibility that he will be canonized. So as I said, I just tried to write the best book I could about him. And I read in preparation every biography of Damien that there had been before, and I was amazed to find there were hundreds. He's a world figure; he really is.

**Why did you decide to write another one?**

Well, again, one of my stories. All my books start in absolute ignorance; I've got no idea what's gonna happen. And that one happened because of the Damien statue that stands outside the Legislature. They had a competition for that statue, and there were six finalists, and they had models of all those six in the public library. And I went and looked at them. And they didn't look like Damien particularly, they didn't feel like him; they could be anybody. Just as the biographies were standard, plaster biographies of a saint; they weren't books about a person. But the last statue was the one that was chosen, astonishingly, which is Marisol's, which is quite frightening in a kind of a way. I mean, here's this diseased face and this black, boxy body. And I thought, my goodness. So I began to read about him. And that's when I started reading the biographies; and none of them seemed to me to be about a human being. So at that point, for the first time in Hawai'i's history, the governor was Catholic, John Burns; the Speaker of the House was Catholic, Elmer Cravalho; the Chairman of the Senate was Catholic, John Hulten; and that's when Damien was chosen to be the second great man of Hawai'i. And I thought the second great man of Hawai'i was worth a book. And that was the start of that. So again, it's thirty-five years in print, now in six languages. Including Korean.

**Does that give me an idea of how you've chosen to write the fourteen books you've written?**

Yeah. It's ignorance and curiosity. Another book I did—half my books have been about things other than Hawai'i. Another book is called *Prisoners of the Japanese*, and it's about allied POWs taken by the Japanese in World War II. And that was a horrifying book to do; just dreadful. But that started—I was in a bar in Waikiki, where I sometimes am, and down the bar was a guy talking about being a prisoner of the Japanese. And what he was saying was unbelievable to me; I just couldn't believe it. So I went down and talked to him. And he talked, and I talked with him for a long time. And he introduced me to others, and others, and others, and others, and you know, ten years later and couple of hundred interviews later on four continents and about two thousand cubic feet of archival material, you know, there's a book. So they all start like that.

**Seems like two you've mentioned started over alcohol.**

[chuckle] I said I was mostly Irish.

**[chuckle] You've been on bestseller lists, and you're an academic whose books have been reviewed by the New York Times, which doesn't happen to most academics, because they like to point that out. Would you talk about that a bit? You've drawn the attention of major reviewers and major audiences and readerships.**

I did a calculation a couple years back. Someone, somewhere in the world has bought a book of mine every forty minutes since 1968. And you used the word academic about me; I am a recovering academic. Put it that way. I never wanted to write like an academic.

**And you didn't.**

No; and for cause. Because bless them; for all their virtues, most academics do not write to be read. They write to demonstrate that they know something. That's a very different thing. And they write for other academics.

**Does that mean other academics might consider your work lighter than others, because it is, quote, commercial?**

They're welcome to. Perfectly welcome to. But I don't see any necessary contradiction between writing responsibly and readably.

**You received the first ever Regents Medal for excellence in teaching at the University of Hawai'i. I know, because I was around at the time that students lined up for your classes; your classes got filled really quickly. What do you think it was about your teaching that drew them?**

Well, back off a little bit. I taught in Varsity Theater in Mo'ili'ili, which has just been torn down, you know. And what I taught was a compulsory course; it was freshman history. And so that course was given the lowest person on the totem pole, 'cause nobody wanted to do it.

**But there were several sections of it.**

True. But I got the heaviest load, because I was the lowest. And I was immigrant labor, and so I could be given the lowest paid, worst job. And teaching freshpersons in Varsity Theater, compulsory course, was the worst job. So I taught four sections of eight hundred and fifty-two freshpersons at a time. That's thirty-four hundred a semester; that's sixty-eight hundred a year, with summer school and night school.

And I taught that for ten years; so that's more than seventy thousand students. And that's how I got the first medal; it was for quantity, doing volume.

**You don't think it was for doing an ordinary job extraordinarily well?**

Well, I wouldn't say that. I don't know of a teacher that says that. But yeah; again, it goes back to the same thing as writing. When you're talking to a certain kind of audience, know who you're talking to and talk to them. Don't talk to them the way you would talk to a different kind of audience. And above all, don't talk to yourself. When you're in front of eight hundred and fifty people with a microphone, talk to who's out there. I think that had something to do with it.

**Gavan Daws does everything he can to know his subject and his audience. I'd like to thank you and author and historian Gavan Daws for joining me for another *Long Story Short*. I'm Leslie Wilcox of PBS Hawaii. Thank you also for your logging on to [www.pbshawaii.org](http://www.pbshawaii.org) and sending us your comments and suggestions. We enjoy hearing from you. Please join me again next week for another *Long Story Short*. A hui hou kakou!**

**I'm really interested in history, and I've read all the quotes that I know you're familiar with, as far as history. George Bernard Shaw; We learn from history that we learn nothing from history. Kurt Vonnegut; History is merely a lot of surprises, it can only prepare us to be surprised, yet again. And you've dedicated much of your life to history.**

George Santayana, the philosopher; Those who do not understand history are condemned to repeat it. I kinda believe that. But I also believe that there's no such thing as definitive history. No matter how complete something is, it's not definitive; it changes with perception, with time. And that's why it needs to be rewritten all the time.