

**GUEST: NORA OKJA KELLER**

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**If you're a reader of ethnic books, books about women, or books by local authors, you may be familiar with the writings of Nora Okja Keller. But even if you aren't, you'll be delighted to hear Nora's stories about finding identity and a voice through writing. Aloha no; I'm Leslie Wilcox of PBS Hawaii. Welcome to another Long Story Short. Please join me as I sit down with author Nora Okja Keller next.**

**Nora Okja Keller, born to an American father and a Korean mother, has written two critically-acclaimed and important novels, *Comfort Woman* and *Fox Girl*, based on the almost unspeakable experiences endured by Korean women during World War II, and the lives of Korean-Americans that came after them. Although Nora's stories are very dark, she herself is a personable, local hapa girl with a supportive husband and two little girls.**

**You know, if I had read your books without having ever seen you or heard much about you—**  
M-hm.

**I would be expecting to come to this table today, and to see somebody very dark, with the mileage carved—**

[chuckle]

**--in her face. Because you conjure up such brutal imagery, and some difficult themes, like abandonment.**

**Where does that come from?**

You know, I get that all the time. You know, people say, Oh, I thought you were gonna be like, so dour and, you know, like intense. And I think writing allows me to express— we all have that duality. You know, the light and the dark. And I think in part, writing is my outlet for that darkness. So that in the daytime when I'm with my kids, and I you know, go about my daily life, I can release that into the writing, and live you know, very lightheartedly.

**So by day, in the sunlight—**

Yes.

**--you're a happy—**

My secret identity.

**--mom with kids. [chuckle]**

[Chuckle] I know; I get people say, Oh, I thought you would write like children's books about you know, happy bunnies in a field or something.

**[chuckle]**

[chuckle]

**And instead, it's violence.**

Yeah, so they pick up something like *Fox Girl* thinking, Oh, it's gonna be a happy story about, you know, a fox and, you know, woodland animals. [chuckle] And instead, they're, Oh; that is— it's something that I do struggle with, and I think in part, that's why I took a break after writing *Fox Girl*. The intensity of that. That was a—

**Yeah, I—**

--tough, tough one for me.

**You are a nationally known author, but you've lived here, how long?**

I've lived here since I was five. Well, I was born in Seoul. And then my family left Seoul when I was about three, and we traveled a little bit through the U.S. and arrived here when I was five. My dad's from Ohio, so they went back there, and they went through the Midwest. And then my mom was so unhappy, you know, and especially this was in the 70s, so feeling very isolated. And she knew some of her friends had settled in Hawaii, and she just begged and begged, and they moved here. Basically—

**So she could feel more comfortable?**

M-hm. You know—

**How did they get together? What's the story of your dad and mom?**

Let's see. I'm not quite sure. I've heard several different versions. My mom's a storyteller as well, and so I've heard one version that she was a famous singer in Korea, and was singing at a club, and my dad saw her and fell in love. So that's one version. And then another version I got was that they had met in her village outside of Pusan while he was there for the war, during the war.

**What does he say? Does he have a version?**

He just says, Well, what does your mom say?

**[chuckle]**

Whatever she says, okay. And I go, well [chuckle]. He says, Ask her. [chuckle]

**And she had never been here before, but had heard it was a nice place to live?**

Yes. Well, she had friends, and then her friends would tell her, Oh, you have to come; come visit, come try it out, live here for a little bit. And so that's what she did. She ended up staying, but my dad ended up go- they ended up divorcing, and he's now living in New York.

**I see.**

Yeah. And she loved it, because she found like a community. And since then, she remarried and moved to Seattle. But she never found that community in Seattle, and since her husband passed away, two, three years ago, she's moved back, and she's, you know, reformed the friendships that she's had for thirty years here. And so this has really been the place that she calls home.

**And yet, we don't really have a large Korean population. It wasn't that, was it—**

No, no. But my mom has a lot of friends. You know, she's very gregarious, and so [chuckle].

**Are you that way too? Are you very social?**

I am to a certain extent, but not as much as my mother. I definitely like to have my alone time. And I think most writers do. You know, you need that time to reflect and to think, and to kind of exist in this other world that you're creating. And to do that, you need some isolation, moments of, moments of quiet.

**Is anybody allowed to intrude? Can your husband—**

Oh.

**--interact with you then?**

My kids can sometimes; but my husband, no. I'm like, I'm writing. [chuckle]

**Did you have periods in your life where you felt like you had to choose between your ethnicities?**

No, not.

**Or did you have difficulty feeling accepted, or—**

Well, in adolescence. And maybe that's just a mark of adolescence, where we're all struggling against something and rebelling against something. And for me, it was being Korean. And partly because I didn't know very many other Koreans, except for my mother's friends, who were first generation.

**M-hm.**

And I did go through a period as a teenager saying, Oh, I don't want to be associated with anything Korean. You know, it's like, oh, nothing that my mom is- you know, I don't want to learn any- I don't want to learn the language, I don't want to eat the food, I don't want to-

**Was that a mom thing?**

I think in part, that's a big thing. And so that's why I say, maybe all adolescents go through that. But I would say, like if people say, What ethnicity are you? And I'd say, Oh, I'm a little bit of everything.

**Ah.**

You know.

**You didn't have to choose sides?**

I didn't want to choose.

**Or pick one.**

I said, I'm everything. Yeah.

**Nora Okja Keller has lived in different worlds – from Seoul to Honolulu. Struggling with identity, she found her voice as an author. She began writing during her early school days at Ala Wai Elementary, Hahaione and Punahou. Today, Nora's works are translated into Korean and published internationally.**

**When did the writing bug hit you?**

Oh, you know, I think I was always writing. I remember scribbling little poems- in elementary, I would start. And I would do little poems, and I would read something and think, Oh, that's so wonderful. And I would try to mimic the language in the book, and think about how the writer, you know, put the words together to get that effect, to make it sound the way it did. So I was trying to do that, even in elementary.

**And were you also looking for a time alone to think about things like that?**

Oh, I had time alone, because I had to catch the bus home. And so that was my time alone, and I'd write, and then sometimes I'd get so involved I'd miss my stop and end up, you know, having to get- you know, call from the bus station for a ride home.

**Do you remember what you wrote about in your early years?**

Oh, I think I wrote- yeah. I do. I wrote about kids I might have, you know, met, and I would form little stories

around people. Or I see something going on, like maybe somebody walking down the street, an older woman picking flowers or something. And I might write a story about that, or animals. You know, I had lots of pets growing up. We- I grew up partly in Waimanalo, so we had quite a few dogs and cats running around, so I have little animal stories.

**M-hm.**

Things like that. But you know, all that- when I look back, I think, well, of course I became a writer, because I was doing it since I was a kid. But all that time, I never thought, Oh, I'm gonna grow up to become a writer, I'm gonna do this for my career. I never thought of that.

**And that was never featured on career day, right?**

Oh, never. And talking with my mom and my parents, It was like, Well, no, try to you know, do something practical. You know, have something that's gonna support you for your life. You know, nobody's gonna listen to you tell stories. You know, that's not gonna- you know-

**Did they—**

--anything like that.

**--think you were kind of an absent-minded or dreamy girl?**

Oh, of course. Yeah; definitely. I mean, I missed my bus stop several times [chuckle], you know, just daydreaming, and I'd be, you know, and my family would be having conversations, and I would be somewhere else, you know, thinking, oh, about the characters that I was gonna write about. So they say, Of course, you know, you did that all the time. But that was never- I never considered it an option, you know, that I would become a writer.

**So when you—when you went to Punahou, what were you thinking in terms of what you were gonna do, and how you were gonna do it?**

Oh, I don't- when I was in high school, I don't- if anything, you know, I was drawn to arts. But the visual arts, so painting, drawing. I loved biology, so I thought maybe I can- maybe I could become that doctor my mom had always-

**[chuckle]**

--you know, envisioned. That lasted until calculus. After calculus, I realized, no, I can't-

**Back to arts.**

Yeah; back to the arts. [chuckle]

**College?**

UH. I got my undergraduate degree in English and psychology. And even there, I was not sure what I wanted to do. It wasn't until much later, I would say really, my fourth year- I took five years for that double degree, that I said, Oh, I have enough credits for English, I might as well get a double major, you know, along with psychology, I might as well add English to it.

**Well, were your teachers not telling you, You should—you're a writer, you should go into this.**

My English teachers would say that, but- and I was always encouraged. But it was more like maybe go into teaching, or go into- I mean, I was always encouraged with writing, like You're a good writer, but-

**How are you gonna use it? What's the—**

Yeah.

**--paycheck gonna be?**

It was like, well, what about law school, or you know, how will this translate in the practical world?

**What writers have you loved along the way?**

When I was in high school, we had the classics. You know, Hemingway, Faulkner, Steinbeck. And back then, I was drawn to Hemingway for his- you know, the very clean lines, the straightforward. Now, I'm thinking, oh, you know, I can't bear those, you know, another war story and another- you know, another manly man point of view. When I was in college, I took an Asian American studies course, and one of the people that we read was Maxine Hong Kingston. And that was actually the first time I read something and I thought, Oh, you know, this is someone who has a background similar to mine, and we can write about this? You know, we can write about stories that talk about ethnicity, and we can write about stories that talk about girls? It was a really a moment that I thought, Oh, there's room for a voice like mine. And so she was a strong influence at that time in my life. Cathy Song, who I read in that class as well, has been as a friend now, a big influence in my life.

**So she influenced you as a writer—**

Yeah.

**--and you got to know her, and she's a friend?**

Yeah. It's so funny, because in that class, I remembered asking- going up to my professor after class one day and saying, Well, you know, I'm thinking about writing, and do you- can you recommend any- are there any Korean Americans that we can read? Because we had read, like, Chinese American, Japanese American, and Filipino American. You know, those very- the big ethnicities at that time, I guess. And so I said, Is there any

Korean Americans that I could look to as role models? No.

**[chuckle]**

[chuckle] I went, Oh, oh. I was like in shock, and I didn't know what and I was like, Oh, there's nobody for me to follow.

**Did you find Cathy Song on your own?**

No. And the next day, she said, Oh, I was thinking, and you know, Yes, yes, there are. You know. And in fact, Cathy Song is one, but she's only half Korean. I said, That's okay. You know.

**[chuckle]**

[chuckle]

**So am I.**

Yeah; exactly. So then I read her works, you know, *Picture Bride*, and I wrote part of my thesis on Cathy. And didn't meet her until after that. And now, we're—we ended up, she's one of my best friends. And so it's fun how things kinda circle around.

**Nora Okja Keller has found a small group of writers, including poet Cathy Song, with whom she feels comfortable sharing her work. And, in *Comfort Woman* and *Fox Girl*, she was able to eloquently and vividly depict abandonment, abuse, survival, redemption. The term 'comfort woman' is a euphemism from World War II, referring to a woman forced into sexual slavery.**

**When you wrote *Comfort Woman*, what kind of research did you do to find out these just horrible scenarios that happened?**

Yeah. Well, when I first heard about it in '83. There wasn't a lot of information on it. You know, I had thought I knew a lot about Korean history and Korean culture because of my mom, and her stories about growing up, and just reading about it. But when I first heard about it—heard about it through a symposium at UH. Keum-Ju Hwang, a former 'comfort woman,' came to speak there. And as she spoke, I just remember thinking, Oh, my gosh, I can't believe this. You know, this is such an important part of this history, and how come I didn't hear about this? You know, kind of like—

**How come you didn't?**

Well, I think in part—and I had asked this of my mom. You know, you told me so much about this history, you knew so much about culture, and I ask you for all these stories. Where are these stories about these women? And she said, Well, you know, it's such a painful thing to talk about, for Koreans in general, I think, and for her generation, that they just didn't speak about it. And even my older sister, who didn't leave Korea until she was a teenager; she said she remembers like there might be some reference. Like on the Korean soap operas, there'd be like this mysterious woman, veiled in black, going through the background. And the reference would be, Oh, you know, do you see that woman? Something bad happened to her during the war. And so it would be understood, but never talked about. And I think there was so much pain, and so much shame surrounding that event. And Keum-Ju Hwang said it herself, that so many of the women—well, the women who survived—you know, I've read statistics since then that maybe ninety percent of the women did not even survive the camps. But the women who did survive felt like they couldn't even return to their family, and they carried so much of that shame within them, that they couldn't even speak about it, and they didn't talk about that part of their lives.

**What was the reality? What were the lives like of the Korean women who were taken captive, and then forced to act as comfort women?**

Oh; oh. Well, there was probably, you know, hundred, two hundred thousand women—Korean women, not to mention the Chinese women, the Indonesian women, Filipino women. These were women between the ages of eleven or twelve, and thirty-five, forty, who were taken forcibly by the Japanese army, taken into small camps. And they were, in some cases, taken out of the classroom, taken away from families, and forced into these, you know, camps where they were kept to service the Japanese soldiers.

**And what kind of hardships did they go through; they were raped?**

Right; repeatedly. You know, forced to service maybe thirty to forty men a day, abortions. And I think, to add insult to all of that, is that the women who survived these camps were not—were treated as like as invisible, you know, by the Japanese government afterwards. And you know, as nonexistent and that there were no camps. You know, that was the parting line right after the war; Oh, no, there was no such thing as these camps, and there was no such thing as these women. If these women were there, they wanted to be there, they volunteered. It was, you know, that they did it to support the army. You know. It was—that was the attitude. So I think maybe that was one of the most hurtful things for these women. And added to why it was so difficult for them to speak about their stories, you know, along with the shame and along with the trauma, is that they had to deal with you know—the official line was they did not exist. Yeah.

**So either they didn't exist, or they had to define themselves as what awful things happened to them.**

Right; right. Yeah.

**And you said most of them couldn't go home?**

Yes; so many of them, did not return to their families. Some- you know, in their families eyes, they were dead, they didn't return from the war. And they- the families might not have known what happened to them.

**Why didn't they go home?**

Keum-Ju Hwang said, because the girl that she was, was now dead, and that she could not bear to shame her family with what had happened to her.

**That's one of the themes in both books.**

M-hm.

**It's what it takes to survive.**

Right.

**And how do you move on?**

Right; how do you move on, how do you continue to form connections with other people, how do you continue to love? What do you pass on to the next generation?

**How do you be open to other people, when you've seen this just dastardly horrible side.**

Right. Exactly. Exactly. So that's something that I circle back to again. And the strength and the fortitude that it takes to be able to do that, to not just give up and say, I can't do that. [chuckle] You know.

**Well, in both of your books, I think your characters just put their minds in another place. They just detach from their body. Which might work as a short term strategy, but how does that affect them later in life?**

Right; right; you know. Well, I think there's always gonna be a disconnect that you are in some ways present for your children or the people in your lives. But there's always that part of you that is held back. And for something as horrific as those experiences and the prostitution in the comfort camps, it's not something that they would share with their children. So there's always something hidden, and something withheld, and that's a type of pain as well. You know, not to be fully open.

**And if you do share, as your children might want you to, you've just given them just—**

Yes.

**--terrible images—**

A burden.

**--to live with.**

Right. You've passed on your burden.

**M-hm.**

You know, some readers have come up to me and said, Oh, you know, after I read, you know, *Comfort Woman* or *Fox Girl*, now I feel like I have this burden, you know. And I said, Well, then I've done my job as a writer.

**M-hm.**

You know, I-

**The burden of—**

--felt like I was-

**--history.**

--carrying that. Yeah; I was carrying that burden writing it, so now you know, you've read it. It's- you know, you share that burden-

**What has your mom said about your taking up this burden of history?**

Oh, you know, she's proud. You know. And one of the most moving things for me after *Comfort Woman* was written and published in Korean, I got to take my mom and my kids to Korea. And she hadn't been back for twenty-five years. And to be there with- when she was reuniting with some of her family that she hadn't seen for that long, and to- at the same time that was my book was coming out; I mean, it was just really- it was so moving. And to be able to share that with her. So I told her, The book's an apology for all the times that I said I wasn't Korean-

[chuckle]

--and I didn't want to, you know, participate in culture, and wear the hanbok-

[chuckle]

--dress, and so we laugh about it now. I was so blessed at that time, and-

**And timing is good too, isn't it?**

I think-

**There was a—there was a desire to see this material come out.**

Yes. Because that was just about the same time that the first- that the comfort women first began speaking about it, and first breaking their stories, you know. Keum-Ju Hwang said she's talking about it now, after all these years because she- before she dies, she wanted the story to be known, this history to be known. And so I think a lot of the comfort women were coming out- coming forward with their stories at that time. The struggles that I

portray in the book are so intense and so— you know, most of us will never have to experience something, but we all go through our struggles, and we all strive for redemption. We all strive to make connections, and to open ourselves up, and to find that grace in life. And so I feel like that's just as important to write about.

**You know, you said you showed chapters you'd written to fellow local writers, and of course, you had an editor in New York. What's it like when you know, these words are your baby, and the crafting belongs to you. When somebody wants to change it, what's that like?**

Well, first I do a lot. I try to get my vision down as closely as I can on paper first, before I can even bear to show it to somebody in my writing group, even. But these are people I trust. And I know, like, they're such good people that I feel like I can trust them with my work, and that they're gonna look at the work and say, This is what it needs. This is what I think needs to be done. Or even if anybody says, I don't like it, it's for the good of the piece. And I know it's always with the good intentions of how can we make this writing better. And in fact, when I teach classes, that's the attitude that I go in with. And I say, You know, it might seem like I'm gonna write all over your paper, and I'm gonna say, This doesn't work here. But my intention is always, How can I make this piece better, how can I make something become what it should be, or closest to the vision that you have in your head.

**So it's like artists who—or sculptors who start with a piece of stone or wood, and they say they're freeing something from that material.**

I think in some ways. I always you know, I started out thinking I was gonna be— if I was gonna be any artist, it would be in the visual arts, like drawing or painting. And so when I think of, you know, crafting a story or crafting a novel, that's kind of the terms that I think of it as. Like, a rough sketch, you know. Doing the background wash, you know.

**And what does it—**

Adding the—

**--want to be. Yeah.**

Yeah. You know, what form is emerging from this, you know. So it is, that is somewhat. And trying to communicate that to my writing group first, and having another eye look at the piece, and saying, Well, this form is still a little bit hazy, you know, can you sketch it, you know, bring it forward a little bit. Or this character should not be a background character; you need to make this character— bring him into the foreground. You know, so it does help. And so you know, I've been so, so lucky to have people that I trust, you know, first reading it, being first editors for my work.

**M-hm. I think I remember you saying this is gonna be a—**

M-hm.

**--trilogy. And there hasn't been a third book yet.**

I know.

**What's the third book going to be about?**

It will take place in Hawaii more so than the other two books. But still follow the theme of— you know, *Comfort Woman* dealt with the comfort women during World War II. *Fox Girl*, Korean War, but took place mainly in Korea. This next book will kinda jump forward another twenty years or so, and reflect more on Korean Americans in Hawaii.

**So there's more to come from this talented writer, mining a rich, largely unexplored cultural vein – the Korean-American experience in Hawaii. Mahalo to Nora Okja Keller for sharing stories; and to you, for enjoying them with me. Please join me next week for another Long Story Short. I'm Leslie Wilcox of PBS Hawaii. A hui hou kakou!**

Video clip with production credits:

**You've become a teacher part-time—**

Part-time.

**--recently. What's that like, creative writing?**

Oh, it's fun. And I've been teaching students younger than I've taught before. And it's so fun. It's something that I've found that I really enjoy. And I enjoy teaching the younger students, because you know, they take themselves— they don't take themselves as seriously, I think. And they are more willing to take risks with their stories, and they're more willing to explore different things. And I find that refreshing, and it reminds me a little bit about what writing, creative writing should be; you know, a little bit of risk taking, a little bit of exploration, a little bit of saying, I don't know what this is gonna turn out to be, but I'm willing to go along with this story in the time being. So I just enjoy them. They're so funny.