

**GUEST: LEE CATALUNA: A WRITER'S JOURNEY**

LSS 511 (LENGTH: 26:16)

FIRST AIR DATE: 11/29/11

I always feel like a distance from what I write. I mean, what I write is not necessarily who I am. I own it, I wrote it, yes, I said that. But do I, like, live with it every second of the day? No. There's a little bit of detachment. I mean, I think that's part of the professionalism, right? I can't live or die, 'cause I got something else to write tomorrow.

**Newspaper columnist, award winning playwright, and novelist, Lee Cataluna, 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 has earned a reputation for a keen understanding of local people and local culture, and yet, she'll tell you she's always been an outsider. And indeed, her newspaper columns have made her a lightning rod, attracting a lot of attention, and prompting heated debates at water coolers around the state. She has many fans who believe she's able to go to the heart of a matter and say what no one else dares to say. Her work is hailed for its character studies and the humorous insights into the idiosyncrasies of our island community. Lee Cataluna's career has taken her from television reporter and anchor to playwright, newspaper columnist, and novelist. She's been awarded the Elliot Cades Award for Literature and the Pookela Award for Playwriting. Her roots are in the neighbor islands, and in the bygone days of Hawaii's sugar industry. Her father, Donald Cataluna, was a third generation plantation worker and a manager with C. Brewer. About every three years, he relocated the family and they lived on various plantations on Maui, Kauai, and Hawaii Island. That means Lee was changing friends and changing schools along the way.**

I think I lost count. It was something like nine. My Facebook is all messed up, because you get connected by people you went to school with, right? And so, like, I went to so many different elementary schools. [CHUCKLE] But only one high school; only Baldwin High School. Yeah, so after Kauai, we moved back to

Wailuku, and my dad was then manager at Wailuku Sugar, and we lived in the manager's house, which was just amazing.

**And when you're the manager of the plantation, you're the mayor, right?**

Kind of.

**I mean, you control what happens in a very large area of town.**

Kind of. I mean, there was that responsibility. But sugar was already struggling, right? I mean, that brings us up into the 80s. So it wasn't quite as huge as generations past. But, yeah, my dad had two company cars, and [CHUCKLE], the big house that is now—

**Did you feel rich?**

Did I feel rich? Well, no, because, the reality was that my mom was sewing my clothes. [CHUCKLE] I didn't get to go to Liberty House and buy whatever I wanted, kinda thing.

**What were your parents like as parents?**

They never spoke Pidgin at home. I don't know if that was a choice, that was just they never did.

**Did you speak Pidgin? Were you allowed to speak Pidgin at home?**

Yeah, I was allowed to, but I didn't. I mean, I'm sure there's the inflection, right? But in terms of like, the heavy duty Pidgin, that was saved for school.

**So when the boyfriends did arrive, what was your dad like?**

The boyfriends did not arrive.

**Oh, they met you outside. [CHUCKLE]**

They did not arrive. No, I'd meet them at the wherever. [CHUCKLE]

**'Cause you didn't want them to go through the gauntlet of your dad?**

Yeah; my dad was the full-on, like, shotgun father. I think I was out of high school already when I brought a boy home. And my dad actually, like, showed him his collection of bullwhips. So, yeah.

**In a meaningful way.**

Yeah. Cracked 'em, and everything. Pack! I mean, not the guy, although maybe I'm just remember it wrong. But yeah, it was a protected childhood.

**And what about your mom; she was also strict?**

No, my mom is the Kool Aid mom that, \ all the kids show up at her house. She just loves to feed kids, and she still does that. Like, she'll buy Popsicles, like those big Costco Popsicle. Not for anybody that actually lives with her, but anybody who might drive by on a motorcycle, or a bicycle. So, yeah, my mom's kinda nuts in a sweet way. She's the kind of person who would make stew for the cat, 'cause he likes it. [CHUCKLE]

**What parts of your parents' personalities did you find yourself picking up?**

The bad parts. [CHUCKLE] Yeah, my dad's sort of obsessive nature. He doesn't forget a slight. Oh, but the good side of that is, he tends to be focused. And my dad is a good storyteller, so I hope I'm like that. And my mom is very fanciful. I mean, she kinda sees the silly in life. Like my parents joined the Koloa um, Visayan Club, and they're not Filipino. But, my mom's like, It's okay, that's all my

friends. And I'm like, But it's like you're trying to pass. She goes, Nobody cares. [CHUCKLE].

**So she didn't care what anybody thought. She just wanted to do what she wanted to do.**

Because the parties were fun, and there was all her friends, so she was gonna join the Visayan Club. And there I am, worried about, procedure and that kinda stuff. She's like, Nah, it's totally ... it's cool. [CHUCKLE]

**Did you know you were gonna be a writer, a storyteller, from early on?**

No. But I had the experience recently of going to Zippy's with a bunch of people I went to high school with, and we were all talking about what we're doing now.

**Which Zippy's did you go to?**

Kahului.

**Okay.**

There on Maui. So we're all there, and we're talking about, like, one of my friends is a high school teacher. She was like, Could you ever picture me as a high school teacher? And one is a mail carrier; Could you ever picture me working for the post office? And it came to me, and I'm like, Could you ever picture me doing this? And they were like, Yes.

**Really?**

Yeah.

**Why did they say that?**

I don't know. I guess 'cause I was getting in trouble for writing stuff when I should have been doing Math. Those kinda things.

**It's interesting; I've heard you describe yourself as bookish, earnest, kind of a dork.**

Oh, yeah.

**But I mean, I think the perception was, here's this very pretty social girl, and—**

No.

**No?**

[CHUCKLE] No.

**No?**

No. And dork, not in a, like, hyper-intelligent way, but dork in a, like, clumsy oddball way. Like that.

**Were you perceived that way, too?**

I think so. No, I was never on the homecoming court. And Baldwin had this great rule, where once you served as a princess, like, homecoming, basketball rally week, May Day court, even if you were like Miss Princess Kahoolawe, that was it, that was like your one shot for all of high school. So by the time you get to senior year, like, most of the girls had had their time with the tiara. Nothing.

**Did you have to run for it? Was it an election, or did you have to be picked for it? How did you get to be that?**

Election; popular vote.

**Did you run?**

I think I self-nominated, yes. [CHUCKLE] Sad, yeah?

**But that helps writers, for them to consider themselves outsiders, because you become a better observer, right?**

Yes. I think writers tend to be that outsider-ish kinda ... character.

**And do you feel like an outsider?**

Always.

**Even though you're clearly plugged into local culture.**

No, I'm always the outsider. Yeah. [CHUCKLE] I'm much more comfortable sort of being in the back of the room, watching everybody, than being the one on stage.

**And your mom gave you advice about that too, once, didn't she? About listening.**

Oh, yeah. Her thing was always—and she told me from when I was a little, little girl; Keep your eyes and ears wide open, and your mouth shut. [CHUCKLE]

**Lee Cataluna chose psychology and dance as her major fields of study at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California, graduating with honors in 1988. She was planning to go on to graduate school, until she was bitten by the broadcasting bug, hosting a talk show at a Kauai public access station. In 1991, she became a news director for a radio station, and two years later started a ten-year chapter in local television as a news reporter and anchor. While still in broadcasting, Lee Cataluna's writing took on a new form when she wrote her first play, Daayah, which broke box office records for Kumu Kahua Theatre. She went on to write other productions for Kumu Kahua as well as Diamond Head Theatre and the Honolulu Theatre for Youth. Audience favorites included Folks You Meet in Longs, Musubi Man, You Somebody, and Ulua the Musical. She started this turn in her life while on a trip for the local NBC TV affiliate station.**

The How I Got Into Playwriting story was, I was working at KHNL, and they sent me to New York to do the promos, like sitting next to Matt Lauer and Katie Couric, and Hi, watch me, Hi, watch me, kinda thing. And it was my first trip to New York City, and it was my first time traveling alone, other than going back and forth to college. And I was scared, and felt lonely, and sad. And the promos at NBC lasted like twenty minutes, like it took twenty minutes. They had me in, Howzit, we did our thing. Out. And then I had two more days in New York City by myself. So after I stopped crying in the hotel lobby [CHUCKLE], I got my act together and said, Okay, I'm here, I might as well see stuff. And I had to really force myself to see a Broadway play, because I thought, you know, as a frustrated dancer ... I'm gonna be sitting there going, I hate them, I hate them all. They're fabulous, I'm not fabulous. They're tall, I'm not tall. They're skinny. I mean, all that stuff. They're great, I suck. And I was kinda bracing for that, internal monologue. [CHUCKLE] And instead, much to my shock, the voice in my head was saying, You could write that.

**Wow.**

Which was weird.

**I'm sure most people don't go to plays and say that.**

I don't know. I mean it was fun. I went to see How to Succeed in Business Not Really Trying.

**So this was when you were a television anchor. Were you doing the morning, or evening news then?**

Mornings.

**And so this was a totally new experience, and the first time you really came up with the idea?**

Yeah. I had been in like, two plays in my life, and I had certainly seen, you know, like community theater kind of plays. I'd never been to Kumu Kahua.

**And you hadn't thought of writing a play?**

No. I had done sketches for radio. But like minute thirty, three-minute. And then, when I came home from that trip, in my mailbox was a flyer from Kumu Kahua announcing their summer playwriting classes. And I'd never been to that theater before, and I thought, Oh, this is the sign.

**Yeah.**

So, I had to talk myself into going to class, 'cause I'm thinking, Well, everybody's gonna be like these smart UH grad students who can quote Shakespeare, and then there's me. And I was right. That was the class, and they could all quote Shakespeare, and then there was me. But I loved that class. It was Vicki Kneubuhl's class. And I took it like four summers in a row, something like that, five summers. Yeah.

**It wasn't the same class, right?**

Oh, yeah.

**It was?**

Totally; yeah. I could not get enough of her class, and I just kept taking it over, and over. I just loved it, just loved being near her.

**At what point did you have a play that was actually performed?**

Actually, after the first summer.

**Really?**

I wrote my first play that summer, and I wrote it from the assignment. The whole, like, germ of the play was from the assignment from Vicki. And I wrote the first scene, and I liked it. And then the next week, I wrote another scene, and that went over pretty good, and just kept going. So at the end of six or eight weeks, I had a first draft. And I was fortunate that one of my classmates, John Wythe White, was on the board at Kumu Kahua. And so, he took my play ...

**And what was it? Which play was it?**

Da Mayah. Which, I regret naming it that, 'cause it's a weird spelling. It's, The Mayor, so ...

**Yeah.**

Yeah. That was it. I was hooked. Totally hooked.

**And how had you been perceiving your journalism career? Was that gonna be your career, or was that an interim? What was that to you?**

I think I was kind of in the moment. I was working morning news, which I loved, but I found the hours just brutal.

**Right.**

I got frustrated. And I regret the way I left. But as it turned out, I probably needed to do something different pretty soon.

**When you say the way you left, I don't know the way you left.**

Abruptly. [CHUCKLE]

**Oh, you just said, I'm done?**

Yeah. Yeah. Sort of.

**And did you know what you were gonna do?**

No. No. Yeah, that was—

**Well, that's a step of faith, or frustration, or something.**

Stupidity. Yeah.

**You were unemployed for a while?**

I went to LA, I was taking some classes, I was working on an indie movie that fell apart. Then I came home, and I applied at the Advertiser. They were advertising for a reporter, a Maui-based reporter. And I'm like, I could totally live on Maui, I could totally be a reporter there. And I sent in my application letter, and almost immediately got back, Sorry, but we're looking for a real journalist, not like a TV ... I mean, between the lines I read, a TV Twinkie, right? And I'm like, r-r-r. So, I employed a technique that a dear friend of mine once told me about, and it was a brilliant move. I said, Let me prove myself to you. Give me a try out. I will work for two weeks.

**For free.**

For free, and let me show you what I can do. Well, because it was a union shop, they couldn't let me work for free, but I did get a two-week tryout. And I just [CHUCKLE] I did cartwheels. I turned in every assignment they gave me, plus something else, every single day of those two weeks.

**And you were a straight reporter?**

Straight reporter.

**Covering daily news.**

On Maui; yeah. Just, the County Council on Maui. And after those two weeks, I met with the managing editor, and he said, Well, you're, eh, as a reporter, but you can kinda write. Have you ever thought of being a columnist? And here I am, like, I need me a job. So I said, Columnist? I've totally always wanted to be a columnist.

**Why would he suggest that?**

You know what it was? There was a story I wrote about the Paia Sugar Mill. And I went and I talked to some people, and there was, just some writerly things that happened there, because that was a story I could totally relate to. Like standing there in the shower of ash coming out of the mill, and just the way that felt. Like, this is today, and it's not going to be tomorrow, and that kinda thing.

Yeah. So, he said, Have you ever thought of being a columnist? And I'm like, Oh, I would totally love to be a columnist. So then, I had a tryout period with that. And first thing was to go home and figure out, What's a columnist? So I'm rarely slick in my life, but I had a moment of slickness. I'm like, Oh, a columnist. Well, who are your favorites? So I'm like, try remember their name, try remember their names [CHUCKLE] so that I could go home and do some homework before I gave it a try.

**And you started off being a columnist for the Maui Beat only?**

No. Metro.

**Metro, oh.**

So, yeah, I came back to Honolulu. And that was that.

**So, in the beginning, there was no thought that you would sort of be a translator and a voice for local culture?**

Actually, my job offer from Jim Gatti, who was the editor at the time, is really like boldly written, worded. He says, We want you to be provocative. And he describes, We want you to provoke reaction, we want you to have people spit out their coffee at the breakfast table.

**Now, did that appeal to you?**

No. [CHUCKLE] I needed the job. We want people to take the paper, and throw it on the ground, we want people to cut out what you wrote and keep it in their wallets. And I thought ... Wow. Like, how many times is a Portuguese-Hawaiian woman asked to do something like that, you know? And it doesn't suit my nature. I'm just sort of not like that. I really do want to be the one in the back of the class, watching everything, taking copious notes, but not saying anything, and certainly not provoking.

**Yeah, but making comments to yourself, right?**

To myself, maybe, or to the person sitting next to me, or just kinda rolling my eyes so nobody can see, like in the back. But that was a challenge, and I thought, Wow, this is an opportunity, and I'm super lucky that it came to me. And I'll give it a shot.

**After the Honolulu Advertiser folded, Lee Cataluna's husband, Jim Kelly, lost his editorial post at the newspaper, and the family relocated to California so that her husband could accept a newspaper position in Palm Springs. At the time of this conversation in 2011, Lee's column for the Honolulu Star Advertiser is written an ocean away. It continues to spark public debate and discussion.**

I try to make sure that the person I take on is bigger than I am. Like that's the rule, right? You don't pick on anybody littler than you. So I would never take on an individual. I would never take on anybody who doesn't have the same, or more access to the media. That's only fair. And, I try not to make it personal. I mean, I don't know that I always do a good job of that, but I really try.

**In fact, there are some people you like, but you've criticized them.**

Oh, yeah. Yeah. And turnabout is fair play. Yeah?

**So you get criticized back?**

Yeah. It's the job. [CHUCKLE]

**I would guess—I mean, you've written a lot of controversial columns that have provoked lots of blog commentary. I would just hazard a guess that the most controversial ones or the most reaction you had was the one where you wrote, when June Jones after having taken his team to the Sugar Bowl, quit the UH. And you said, June, don't let the door hit you on the pocketbook on the way out.**

Yeah.

**Goodbye.**

Yeah. I always feel like a distance from what I write. I mean, what I write is not necessarily who I am. I own it, I wrote it, yes, I said that. But do I, like, live with it every second of the day? No. There's a little bit of detachment. I mean, I think that's part of the professionalism, right? I can't live or die, 'cause I got something else to write tomorrow. Do I feel that way about the man personally? No. But I think in the moment, like, it was a good thing to write. It was a good column for that particular point in time.

**It made people think.**

Yeah; and it made people react. I think a columnist has to be like the wall that people react off of, they bounce off of. And there were things to be said about, this very highly paid, high profile, almost like idol in community who was making this—

**The UH football coach.**

Yeah. So let's talk about it. And if I can play a role in the discussion, saying that she's right, she's wrong, this, that, whatever, then I've done my job.

**Well, just recently, as we speak in 2011, the Governor and his wife, Nancie, decided to take their thirtieth year anniversary in Paris, something they had dreamed of. And here comes Lee, saying, Hey, come on, look at the economy, you should be having your anniversary at ... where did you say, Maui Seaside Hotel?**

Yeah. Or Uncle Billy's, or something. I don't know. Do I feel like so emotionally tied to this, that I would, I don't know, go hold a sign outside of their hale? No. It's a function of here's an opinion, maybe people will talk about it. Maybe people will react to it. Maybe it'll provoke a discussion.

**Have you been surprised sometimes? 'Cause I'm sure you can predict the way most columns will be received. Was there any really counterintuitive response that you've experienced?**

Larry Mehau called me up once, and told me, Right on, sistah, you get balls. [CHUCKLES] This came years after, and I tell this story kind of as a source of pride. Sort of the only person who has ever come up to me, finger in my face, said, I don't like what you wrote, was Larry Mehau.

**And he's a big guy.**



He's a big guy. And, he carries ...

**Yes.**

—the weight of his name. And he, full-on, finger and everything, I didn't like that.

**What didn't he like?**

What did he like?

**What didn't he like?**

What didn't he like? Something I wrote about Frank DeLima, his friend. And the one he did like was the one I wrote about June Jones.

**Oh, really? Now, you wrote about Frank. Was it the ethnic humor Frank DeLima column? You went after Frank for doing ethnic humor.**

In the schools.

**In the schools; I see.**

Yeah. And he and I have kinda been in the same place. We've been in schools together since then, and he's cool, I love his work. But I know what it's like to be ... I don't want to be causing him any more grief from me, but I know what it's like to be a Portuguese-Hawaiian girl growing up in Hawaii, and having to deal with all the things that I am purported to be, as a Portuguese girl.

**What is the stereotype? When you were growing up.**

[CHUCKLE] Talk too much. Yeah. Talk too much, but say nothing.

**And you got that?**

Constantly. Yeah. Yeah; and I had to fight to be in the college prep classes.

**So we've talked about the columns that got you the most heated responses.**

**What were your favorites? Were those the ones that were your favorites?**

I know it sounds weird, but I love writing story obituaries. Where you can spend time with a family and try to get the tone right, of someone's life. And what that meant to the family, to the community, that kinda stuff.

**For example?**

One story I wrote, it was a while after the woman's death. But a man called me up, and his daughter's killer was being sentenced, and for the first time in this whole long process after the murder, he was asked to give a victim's statement. And he wanted to kinda talk with me about it. And I said, Well, I can help you write it, but, I'd love to hear your story. And we spent hours at his picnic table outside his house in Kalihi, and his wife kept bringing out food. And journalist not supposed to eat, right? But in Hawaii, you have to.

**If you turn it down—**

Yeah, kinda the interview stops. And I think I had about three lunches, and it was moving on into dinner, and I was still there talking to him. He spoke in metaphor, in a like, uniquely Hawaiian way. And I had to try to understand what he was saying. Like, his daughter played the harp. And I thought, Wow, that's an unusual instrument for a girl who grew up in Kalihi, what's that about? And he goes, Well, I was a diver, and sounded like when I'm diving. So those kinda things. And like, I had to kind of understand him, and then I wrote his story about what it was like, what her life meant to him, what it was like for him to try

to give a victim impact statement in court. And that was the first time I remember writing a story about someone's life, and kind of feeling like I could almost hear them. Like as I was writing it, and I don't want to sound too, like woo, kinda thing. But I was thinking, gosh, I hope I'm helping, I hope I'm doing the right thing, I hope I'm getting this right. And I kind of felt a presence.

**Did they enter the column in the court record?**

I think he might have read it, yeah. I don't know for sure, but I think he might have read parts of it and, had his own things to say.

**So that actually has given you the most satisfaction, that kind of column?**

Yeah. I like when I write about somebody, somebody alive too, and they say, Yeah, you got it, you got it right.

**You captured it.**

**In 2011, the year of this taping, Lee Cataluna published her first novel, *Three Years on Doreen's Sofa*, the story of a character named Bobby and his misguided attempts to go straight after serving prison time. Lee also is completing her studies in the Master of Fine Arts Creative Writing Program at the University of California at Riverside. *Mahalo piha*, 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*.**

For audio and written transcripts of this program, and all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit [pbshawaii.org](http://pbshawaii.org).

**If I'm not mistaken, some of your earliest storytelling had to do with comedy.**

**You were doing audio, right? Audiotapes.**

I did that for a while.

**To me, comedy is harder than anything, and it makes you so vulnerable.**

That's why I'm not doing it anymore. [CHUCKLE] Michael W. Perry told me to my face, Lee, you're not funny. [CHUCKLE] And I think he was right. I'm not; I'm not funny in person. Sometimes I can write funny. But that was more like I did it when I was younger. It wasn't what I wanted to be. It was just sort of an experiment. You know, grew up huge, huge fan of Booga Booga, and Rap, and Andy Bumatai, and Frank De Lima, and so much of my writing is influenced especially by Rap, I would say. I mean, most people, my generation say that, right?