LONGstorySHORT with LESLIE WILCOX

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I'm not saying that I wouldn't have had problems, or I wouldn't have been … tormented, or I wouldn't have been driven, or … neurotic. But … I don't think the suffering, the great suffering that I and my brothers and sisters endured made me a better writer.
Scratching the surface with author Susanna Moore, 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. Susanna Moore is one of the most acclaimed novelists ever to come out of Hawaii. Critics call her work brilliant, sensual and sly. For over three decades, Susanna has written novels like My Old Sweetheart, The Whiteness of Bones and In the Cut, which was made into a 2003 moving starring Meg Ryan. From afar, it would seem like Susanna had a comfortable childhood here. She grew up in the upscale Honolulu neighborhoods of Tantalus, Kahala and Portlock, and graduated from Punahou School. Household servants tended to Susanna and her four younger siblings. Scratch the surface of this glossy image, though, and you'll find that Susanna's childhood wasn't as easy as it may have looked.**

My father was a doctor who came here after the war. He had been in Japan, sent to Japan as a captain in the Army, 'cause he was a radiologist, and he was studying the effects of radiation after the bomb was dropped. In many ways, I think he never went back, emotionally, I imagine, after his experiences in Japan. He never talked about it and I may have romanticized that.
But he was closed off?
Well, he was like a lot of fathers in the 50s. Fathers did not change diapers, or take you to ice skating lessons or --
They just gave you --
-- go to the movies.
-- your allowance if you lucky enough to have that, and --
Yes. Fathers were quite distant and quite removed, and because of that, probably mysterious and probably not good for girls. Probably not good for boys either, to have a father that was so distant. 'Cause there was not a lot of

intimacy in households between fathers and children. And there were five children. My mother died when I was twelve.

I can't imagine what that must be like for a twelve-year-old girl, or boy, to lose your mother. Was it unexpected?

It was unexpected, and she was very young. She was only 35. She had been ill, and there was is some mystery about how she died. I will never know what happened. I suspect it was an accidental suicide. I suspect that maybe she took some pills and then forgot, and went back. I don't know.

How did that change your life? And that's a big question, but if you could give us a sense of it.

Well, I adored her and was very close to her. I was the oldest child. Also, I was born when my father was still in Japan, so I didn't meet my father like a lot of children until I was almost three. So, I think there was a very strong bond. I've always thought I must have minded it tremendously when this man turned up. It changed my life completely. It was awful for all of us. There were, as I said, five children, and the youngest was two. I had been a mother to the other children for a while, for a few years probably, because of her illness. And so that increased, of course, after she died.

Some parts of your upbringing, which you relate in a book, I have trouble identifying with, 'cause you lived in a more privileged world, and you have parents and kids not eating together. And that was common with your friends, right? Everybody ate in different rooms.

I don't know if it was …

And you had servants.

Yes. Yes, but I don't know if the eating part was common. We ate different food. We ate children's food. Creamed hamburger on toast and rice --

And what were the parents having?

I think they had something much better, but we would not have considered it interesting as children, of course. No, we did eat at different times, and then after my mother died, we would eat only with my stepmother and father, say, at Christmas or maybe Easter. And it was torture, it was agony.

Because?

Our stepmother was not very kind. It was awkward. We couldn't wait to be finished, and it was not happy.

So you had more bonding with the servants than with, say, your stepmother?

I remember going to the old Queen Theater in Kaimuki that showed foreign movies to see something called Sundays and Cybele. And I was taken by the housekeeper's husband, and I was thrilled, of course. I still remember the movie very clearly. But yes, my relationship was with the housekeeper's husband, not my own father.

Through her teenage years, Susanna Moore's father and stepmother remained distant from the children. She says neighbors knew about the neglect taking place in the Moore home, but avoided confronting Susanna's parents. However,

the neighbors found ways to reach out to the Moore children. One of the adults who looked out for Susanna was Alice Chester Kaiser, wife of industrialist Henry Kaiser, who developed Hawaii Kai and the health insurance plan named after him.

Mrs. Kaiser was enormously generous, and played a very important part in my life as a young girl. And other neighbors; I would spend a lot of time at the neighbors'. I was dressed by one neighbor. I had two sets of clothes; I had the clothes that I would wear to school in the morning, which my stepmother had found for us at the Salvation Army, really awful misshapen, ill-fitting clothes, and another set that my neighbor would bring to school, supplied by her mother and by her, into which I would change in the morning for school, and then I would change back in the afternoon. So, things like that. People were very sweet. But never in any direct way. No one ever challenged, no one ever said to my parents, What are you doing to these children?

And that was true for all of the kids? There was always --

Well, my brother; my brother was a paperboy, the boy next to me, which is my next brother. And there was a woman at Portlock named Frieda Brown, who lived in a house on the seawall, lived on the sea with her aged mother, and she used to prepare food for him. So when he would deliver the paper, he would stop at her house last and rush in, 'cause he had to get home, and eat the dinner she prepared, which always, I remember, included a can of warmed Le Sueur Peas, you know, in the silver can. He loved those little Le Sueur Peas. And then later, when he ran away from home when he was still at Punahou, he went to live with Frieda Brown, and she took him in. So, people were kind that way. And then, my sister also ran away and went to live with him at Frieda's. Quite an eccentric arrangement, and I think rather crowded, but --

And your father said, That's where they want to live, that's okay with me?

I've asked my brother about that. Like, how did you get to school, how did you … did you have any money, what about your clothes, did our father ever call Frieda or come looking for you? He said, No, never did.

So, there was no arrangement between your father and --

Frieda; no, no. None. No discussion. No thank you, no … Send them home. Nothing.

I notice when you graduated from Punahou, you did what many Punahou grads do not do. And that is, you didn't go to college at all.

No, it was made clear to me that I could go to UH, or I could work. I was not very much encouraged, and also, my grades at Punahou were very bad. After my mother died, I really lost interest in that, in school. I had loved school, did love school, but that disappeared, that discipline and I suppose, wish to please her. And so, the day after I graduated from Punahou, I left, was sent and I had a feeling that I wouldn't be back for a while. It was quite heartbreaking. And especially to leave my brothers and sisters.

Did you feel sent away?

I did feel sent away. And I went to live with my grandmother, my mother's mother, who was an old Irishwoman who lived in Philadelphia, very, very modestly. And then, for a long time, I lived with very, very little. If I wanted to eat the next day and was fortunate enough to be taken to dinner, I would have to take home the bread and whatever I could.

This was when you --

Packets of sugar.

-- were living as a young adult on the mainland?

I went to New York when I was eighteen, nineteen, and again, through Mrs. Kaiser. And I was very poor, and often didn't have food.

What did you do for a living?

Mrs. Kaiser was the largest customer of Bergdorf Goodman, and so, she called Andrew Goodman and said, I have a young friend who's coming to New York and needs a job. And I worked as a salesgirl.

Susanna Moore always had the writing bug. As a child, she wrote plays, stories for Punahou's student newspaper, and what she calls really bad poetry. Although she spent her childhood in Hawaii, life as an adult took her all over the place. From New York City, she moved to Los Angeles, where she worked as an assistant to Warren Beatty and Jack Nicholson. It's also where she met her future husband, Richard Sylbert, a Hollywood production designer, with whom she'd have her only child, Lulu. That marriage ended in divorce. Life then took Susanna to London, and back to New York, where she lived for over three decades. Despite her wanderlust, Hawaii was always with Susanna. Many of her books, including her memoir, I Myself Have Seen It, take place back home in the islands, and in nature.

In growing up on Tantalus, I think it's in the foreword or the first chapter of your book, I Myself Have Seen It, you talk about being very aware of and believing in spirits about, when you go into the forest, you ask permission of the gods.

Yes, asking the *moo*, the lizard god who lives in waterfall pools whether it's safe to go in, yes, and beseeching not his protection, but his indifference. Yes, one of my childhood friends was Tommy Holmes, who died in a canoe, but he grew up to write the great book about the Hawaiian canoe. He lived in Tantalus, and he and I spent our childhood exploring those woods. And the smell of Tantalus is still very vivid in my head. Its decaying leaves, mildew, eucalyptus, mud … lovely smell.

[CHUCKLE]

I always thought that, in a way, nature took the place of my mother. So, I was very, very grateful and conscious of it, even, I think, as an adolescent, that it was playing a part in my life that was significant. That Hawaii was meaningful to me in a way that was profound. Still is.

And yet, once you moved to New York City, that's where you stayed.

Yes, that's true. That's the irony, isn't it?

Except for sojourns here and there.
Yes. I mean, I would come back almost every year, but no, I had been in New York, to my own astonishment, more than thirty years. I moved there because my daughter had not been school, I had been living abroad, I had been living in London. But no, I stayed away. I did stay away, it's true.
Well, not really, because you came back every year.
Yes, but I never quite made the leap to … and friends of mine have said, Why aren't you here? What are you doing? And my brothers; Why aren't you here?
Why were you wandering?
Well, in some ways, I didn't have a home. I had been really on my own since I was seventeen; much too young to be on my own. Made awful mistakes and took a long time to grow up. I was also really … avid, keen, greedy, desperate for the world, and for things that I knew that I couldn't, wouldn't find here. So, I had to find those things, ballet, and opera, and traveling, and different cultures, and different sorts of people. That period in which we grew up too, there was not ever any consciousness, even though it was privileged, of money. Women wore *muumuu*'s, women were not like I see them now in Chanel suits and high heels and stockings. You know, women were in *muumuu*'s, or men in *aloha* shirts always, not tucked in. No one had fancy cars, no one went to Paris, for Christmas. It was very modest. Houses were modest. I mean, I'm sure there was land, of course there was money in some families. But it wasn't evident, it wasn't talked about, it wasn't …
Not much consciousness about wealth. What about race?
That was always interesting, too. Because when I grew up, I discovered that the places where we lived, like Kahala, had racial restrictions. I was quite shocked by that. I had no idea. And obviously, that changed.
As a matter of fact, I recall James Michener, who was married to a Japanese woman, couldn't live in Kahala.
Yeah. I didn't know that. I didn't know that growing up. And that's quite shocking, that that happened. And there was also, the races were quite separate, especially Japanese. There was not a lot of mixing. I remember Japanese girls would now and then disappear, because they had become involved with a *Haole* boy or another Asian boy, but not Japanese, and were whisked back to Japan to live with their grandparents. There was much more of a separation. You didn't see Asian girls at the beach.
Were there *Hapa Haoles* around at Punahou?
Hapa Haoles, yes, and I was always and still interested by the fact that Hawaiians had a certain prestige, always, always. To be certainly part-Hawaiian was privileged, but there were none of the prejudices against and of course, unspoken, maybe even unconscious prejudice. There wasn't outward discrimination against Japanese or Chinese, or Filipinos. Although later, of course, I realized it was there.
And Hawaiians would tell you they felt discrimination, they felt …

And of course, they were discriminated against; of course. And they were certainly discriminated against in that their culture had no value. If we learned a *hula* at Punahou, it was … Little Grass Shack, or something equally insipid.
***Hapa Haole*.**
Yes; Lovely Hula Hands, or something.

Susanna Moore's first novel, My Old Sweetheart, takes place on Kauai. Its main characters are based on Susanna and her mother. Female relationships, particularly mothers and daughters, are a recurring theme in Susanna's novels.

As the subject of, I think, almost all of your books, you've chosen mothers and daughters in stupefying variety. I mean, you even have a mother who murders her child.
Well, that book began because I realized I had written endlessly about what it is to be a daughter. And I thought, Well, I haven't really written about what it's like to be a mother.
And you are a mother.
And I am a mother. And of course, my daughter teases me that the character that I chose to write about is someone who murders her children.
[CHUCKLE]
She thought that was a bit revelatory. But I thought, that extreme situations often serve a writer very well in that they cause a character to display qualities, or to summon aspects of their personality that might otherwise remain hidden. So, extreme situations are easy for a writer.
I've heard authors say before that their books are like children, they can't choose among them. Is that true of you, as well?
No, I don't think of them well, first of all, I think people do have favorite children, so that's a bit disingenuous. No, I think that my books are so different, really, that I like them for different reasons. In part, I wrote In the Cut because I was so exasperated by hearing, after the three Hawaiian books, that I was a woman's writer, which meant that I wrote poetically about children and flowers, and mothers. I remember thinking, Oh, is that all I can do? Oh, is that … is that how I'm seen? So, I very, very purposefully wrote In the Cut to dispel that notion. It was a bit …
I'll show you. [CHUCKLE]
It was a bit adolescent in that, Oh, yeah? Well …
And then, you later said --
-- look what I can do.
You later said, there was so much titillation --
Oh!
-- by that book, that it --
Yes, I would never, ever --
-- became a distraction for you.

And I would never want to do that again. It's been very … I've very deliberately not written about sex again.

So many people think that when you are a successful, critically acclaimed author, you make bunches of money, you don't have to worry.

I know.

And of course, the book business is changing, so that's an additional dynamic now. How hard has it been to make a living, even though you have these books that are well reviewed?

Well, it's impossible as a writer. I did not receive a royalty until In the Cut was published. And then, I would say maybe the royalties that I've received over the last twenty years amount to maybe five hundred dollars. So, very, very little.

So, you do it for love.

I do it in part because there's really nothing else I can do. I've thought of it. What could I do, what could I be? It's too late.

How did you find your voice in the first place?

With the first book, I'd had a baby, a girl child, so I'm sure there was some identification there with myself and my mother, and my mother with her mother. And I was approaching the age when the same age as my mother when she died. And I felt a bit shaky, and I wanted very much to just get down in writing what had happened to me, and to my daughter's grandmother. And that's really how it began, just to record it.

And who were you imagining would see it?

She; I was imagining my daughter when she grew up, would find this helpful in understanding who I was, and who her grandmother had been. And then, of course, it took her years, and years, and years to read it, interestingly. She could not read it for the longest time, not until she was maybe seventeen or eighteen, because it was too painful for her. She would start it, and then she'd have to stop.

What did she say after she read it?

Thank you.

In addition to writing, Susanna Moore has taught creative writing at Yale, New York University, and Princeton. It's the quality of her books that has led to her hiring at such prestigious schools. Other universities turned her down, because of her lack of a college degree. But she does not regret taking the path that led her where she is today.

Do you regret not going to college?

It would not be unlike the way my life would have gone if my mother had lived. I think if I had gone to college, it might have been harder for me to get started on the path that became my life. My path to becoming a writer or to becoming independent and free, the way I did become, would have been much, much harder, if not impossible, had she lived.

Why?

Well, she would have wished for me a more conventional life, I'm sure. To marry, to have children, to be near her, station wagon, house in Kahala. All of those things to which she herself aspired, and a bohemian life would have seemed to her probably frightening and impractical.

Are you saying the wandering, the bohemian lifestyle is really you, and if your mom had been alive longer you would have taken longer to find that?

If ever. Yes, I think it is really me.

It is really you.

Yes.

So that raises an interesting question. Would you rather have had your mom with you longer, or …

Yes; always. Always. I would much rather have had my mother. And I am one of those people who -- I don't believe that suffering makes you an artist. I don't believe in a way, I'm saying the reverse of what I just said, that I don't think the things that happened to me as a child, or as an adolescent or a young woman made me a writer. I think that was there. I don't think suffering is ever an advantage.

Really?

No, I don't think so. I might have written different kinds of books, my interests might have been different, I might have been less interested in mothers. Clearly, I would have been less interested in mothers.

But, I mean, how interesting are happy, open you know, no problem people? If there is such a thing.

Yes. I'm not saying that I wouldn't have had problems, or I wouldn't have been tormented, or I wouldn't have been driven, or neurotic. But I don't think the suffering, the great suffering that I and my brothers and sisters endured made me a better writer.

Writer Susanna Moore, who draws from her Hawaii upbringing in many of her novels, is nationally known and well regarded for her powerful treatment of mother-daughter themes. Our conversation took place in 2012, when this longtime New York City resident returned to Hawaii for a visit. Quite unexpectedly, she fell in love with a man whom she'd known back in her days as a Punahou student, and she decided to move back to Hawaii. She also published a new book, The Life of Objects, a departure for her; it's a coming of age novel set in wartime Germany. *Mahalo* to Susanna Moore for sharing her story with us; and *mahalo* to you for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. *A hui hou*.

For audio and written transcripts of this program, and all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit PBSHawaii.org.

Worked for a while as … I was Miss Aluminum, which was not a great job.

What did you do as Miss Aluminum?

Oh; I had to wear a tin foil dress.
[CHUCKLE]
And go to trade shows, like for boats, and stand there with a tin foil trident. And I cried a lot. I was eighteen, standing in the New York Coliseum with eight thousand men … in a tin foil dress, holding a trident.
[CHUCKLE]