

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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GAVAN DAWS:

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.

SUSANNA MOORE:

In part, I wrote *In the Cut* because I was so exasperated by hearing, after 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 how I'm seen? So, I very, very purposefully wrote *In the Cut* to dispel that notion.

CHRIS MCKINNEY:

Some of the best stuff, some of the best ideas, some of the best things that you can plug into your story will be things that may be scary, and things that there's actual risk in sort of hurting somebody's feelings or making somebody mad. I mean, if you're gonna refuse to do that kinda stuff, find another vocation.

Those are three of Hawai'i's successful contemporary authors sharing thoughts about how they approach their craft. These writers have built careers weaving stories of Hawaii in distinctive, honest, and personal ways. On this episode of Long Story Short, we'll hear some of the fascinating backstories behind their books. Island Wordsmiths, coming up next, on Long Story Short.

One-on-one engaging conversations with some of Hawai'i's most intriguing people: Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox.

Aloha mai kākou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Despite the technology that dominates our lives these days, a good book continues to inspire our imagination and transport us to new places, far away and even within ourselves. Here in Hawai'i, we have fascinating stories to share, and writers who've proven exceptional in bringing these experiences to the printed page or screen. On this edition of Long Story Short, we feature some of the wordsmiths with whom we've talked story over the past decade: Chris McKinney, Susanna Moore, and Gavan Daws. Perhaps not surprisingly, all three have been teachers, as well as writers.

We start with our youngest author. Chris McKinney of Honolulu was thirty-eight, with four books under his belt, when I interviewed him in 2011. A writing career seemed unlikely when Chris McKinney was growing up in rural Kahalu'u in the 1970s and 80s. School-assigned books sparked his interest starting in middle school, and little could Chris McKinney guess then that his very first novel, *The Tattoo*, would one day become assigned reading in many Hawai'i schools.

You know, especially in *Tattoo*, part of the story is about a father seeking to toughen his son. I just make this wild, random guess and figure it's autobiographical. So, which father?

Oh, stepfather. And I can't remember it, but I can just imagine what must have been the look on his face the first time he saw me, when I was about two or three years old.

Because of the leisure suit?

Because of the way my mom had dressed me.

And he said: I'm gonna do something with this kid.

Yeah; he just must have taken one look at me and thought: What in the world is this woman doing to this poor kid? It almost felt like, you know, even though it was the 1970, early 1980s, that we were living in some sort of time warp plantation, sort of the way you were brought up thing. And even the stories that he seems to enjoy telling the most are stories that involve people doing spectacularly crazy things. And so, I think for him at least at the time, is part of what being a man is about. To not show the next guy that you're not just tougher than him, but you're crazier than him, that you're willing to go further than he is willing to go, and he better recognize that before he messes with you, basically. So, if it wasn't for my stepfather, *The Tattoo* probably would not have been *The Tattoo*.

So, you obviously had material to be a writer, but were you thinking about being a writer?

Absolutely not. Again, remember, in some ways, I am my mother's son. And it is that cliché immigrant Asian story, or that philosophy, in that they want their children to succeed financially. I mean, that is the most important thing you can do in life, is you get a good job and you make a lot of money. And I think that hearing my mother and my grandparents and stuff talk like that all of my life, that I bought into that more than anything else. Art; you know, art, that's not what I'm gonna do. I'm going to make money. So, for a long time, the plan, at least from about high school and for most of my undergrad, I was going to become a lawyer, an attorney. And then, what had

happened was that I spent probably too much time playing 'ukulele and drinking beer, and playing Nintendo during my undergrad that I needed to go to grad school in order to get into a good law school. So, yeah, you know. And at the same time, I had my bachelor's degree in English. During my bachelor's degree in English, I was parking cars for a living. After I completed my bachelor's in English, I was still parking cars for a living. So, either way, I thought that grad school, whether it would be an avenue to law school or anything, was probably a good idea, 'cause I didn't want to park cars for the rest of my life. Which was what it felt like. So, it wasn't until I went to grad school as an unclassified graduate student. And again, I was very lucky because the professors who would take me, one being Joy Marcella, and the other one being Phil Damon, and another one—all three of them in the same semester, Ian MacMillan, when I wrote for them, they were all very encouraging. And I thought: Maybe I can do this.

Did you have a sense that your writing was fresh, and that you knew a world that most people hadn't written about? If they knew it, they didn't write about it.

Yeah. Quite honestly, it's because if you were to look into the sort of educational background of, let's say, all of the kids my age within that square two miles of where I grew up, I would put money down on the fact that I may be one of three that actually graduated from college. If that. So, in the sense that I was sitting there and I was writing stories among whatever, you know, seventeen, eighteen other people, yeah, there was definitely nobody else writing the kinda stuff that I was writing.

Would you talk about more of the influences on your writing? What, and who have influenced your writing?

There's a list of teachers that I'm thankful that I had. The first great teacher I had was a guy named Mr. Guerrero. And this was when I was living in California. He was fantastic. He assigned the class a book, *Animal Farm*, that was the first novel that I had read that just totally resonated with me. And at the time, I wasn't thinking that I wanted to be a writer, but it was the first time that I saw, and I was in awe of what you could do with a book. At first, we read it, and then of course, it was this thing, this power corrupt scheme and all of that. And you know, I'd seen that before. But when you find out that it's based on the Bolshevik Revolution, that just blew my mind. Wait a minute; so this guy took history, he put it on some generic farm, and in that last moment, of course, when the animals are looking through the window and they can't tell the difference between the pigs and the farmers, the human farmers, I mean, talk about an ending that I will never forget. So, that was the first book that blew me away. And then, in high school, I had a couple of good English teachers. I think one of them still teaches at Mid Pac. Mrs. Takeshita, Mrs. Takabayashi; they were really good, and they were always encouraging. So, I had teachers, and then there were books that influenced me. Shakespeare, Mac Beth particularly resonated with me when I read it in eleventh grade in high school. So, that was the second story that just sort of blew me away.

How do you feel about high school students getting *The Tattoo* as required or recommended reading in many schools?

Thankful. I mean, at first, it was weird. So, when the book first came out, and people would come up to me and say: I don't read, but my teacher assigned this book and I had to read it, and it was *The Tattoo*. At first, I didn't really know what to say to that, 'cause I just thought it was strange. But at this point, ten years later, eleven years later, I'm grateful. Something like that would never have occurred when I was in high school. I mean, high school, you were taught *The Canon*, you know, *Dead White Males*. So, I think that it's interesting to see that there's more of a progressive thing going on in high schools, where teachers are allowed, and some of the language in that book is kind of foul. So, it's gratifying to see that they have the courage not only to buck the idea that everything has to come from the Western canon, but also that they can take a little bit of risk with what they include in the curriculum.

Since this interview first aired in 2011, Chris McKinney has published more books, bringing his total to eight. He continues to teach writing courses at Honolulu Community College.

I spoke with our next critically acclaimed author in 2012. At the time, she was living in New York City. Susanna Moore's tenth book is expected out this year, 2019. Her repertoire includes two memoirs, one history book, and seven novels, including one called *In the Cut*, which was made into a 2003 movie starring Meg Ryan. Susanna Moore grew up on O'ahu, attended Punahou School, and lived what appeared to be a privileged life in Tantalus, Kāhala, and Portlock in the 1950s. However, her mother's untimely death led to an unhappy upbringing. That experience would later compel Susanna Moore to explore family dynamics in her writing.

When did the writing bug come? Or had you always had it?

I'd always had it, and wrote as a child, and wrote plays, and really bad poetry. You know, I was a reporter for Ka Punahou, the newspaper.

Did you write more after your mom passed away?

No, I don't think so. I think about the same. And also, really a bookworm. You know, reading early, and reading insatiably and incessantly. And then I stopped, because I had to work, I had to support myself. And writing certainly was not going to be a way to do it. And still isn't, you know. Like a lot of writers, I had to teach in order to write.

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, 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 pain for her. She would start it, and then she'd have to stop.

What did she say after she read it?

Thank you. She understood. I think certain things were made clearer to her. Some, perhaps more mysterious.

And what's the name of that book?

My Old Sweetheart.

Which is really the story of you and your mom.

Yes.

As you say. *The Whiteness of Bones*; I mean, I didn't have this background as far as you talked about a little girls growing up on Kaua'i with a land-rich family, but very much a creature of the ocean and the forest, and you know, hanging out with the cook. How did you get that? That was such beautiful imagery.

Well, of that came from spending summers on Kaua'i, particularly in Waimea. And there were bits of that from my own childhood, although those weren't my parents. The relationship with the gardener was our gardener at Tantalus; that was real. The mongoose; my sister did have a pet mongoose. There were things that I took, and then things that, of course, I made up. 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. But Hawai'i was meaningful to me in a way that was profound. Still is.

I find it just really wonderful and refreshing that you have taught at Yale, at New York University, at Princeton, and you haven't attended college. But you've been hired by Ivy League universities to teach.

It's because of the books. You know, if I hadn't written these books, I would not be hired. No; and I don't think I could teach in the English department.

Creative writing is what you teach.

Creative writing is such a made-up thing, and ill-defined. I mean, yes, I can get away with that, teaching creative writing without a degree, but even if I knew everything there was to know about Emily Dickinson, I would not be hired for that.

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 Kāhala; all of those things to which she 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. 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.

Since this interview took place in 2012, Susanna Moore has moved back to Hawai'i from New York and married a former Punahou Schoolmate. She also has published a history of Hawai'i called *Paradise of the Pacific*. Susanna Moore lives in Kapa'au in North Kohala on Hawai'i Island, but returns every fall to Princeton University on the East Coast, where she's been teaching for the past ten years.

While Moore is an author who became a university instructor, our next guest was an academic who became an author. Gavan Daws of Mānoa, O'ahu says he never planned to move to Hawai'i, let alone become an authority on Hawai'i history. He left his native Australia, and just happened to get off the ship here. He was teaching history at the University of Hawai'i in the 1960s when he wrote and published his first book, *Shoal of Time*, which has remained the best-selling history of Hawai'i, ever since. This acclaimed author and historian has written shelf full of meticulously researched and sometimes controversial books, including *Land and Power in Hawaii*.

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. 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 Hawaii, and other things other than academic work, you know.

Within just, what, a decade or so of coming here, you're writing a history of the Hawaiian Islands, *Shoal of Time*. Is it still a local bestseller after all these years?

Yeah, it is; it's forty years in print. 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 if 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 bookshop 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.

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, consent 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 in the book?

Oh, sure. 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. Any general history written now will 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, I that forty to fifty years, we've now got more than thirty years of the Hawaiian renaissance. Now, 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. Thomas Jefferson says: History needs to be rewritten every generation.

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 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 the 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.

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 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 was 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 in books and in stage plays, and in song lyrics. And I've done the libretto for an opera, and I've made 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.

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.

This multi-talented wordsmith has also written for film, television, stage, and has even written songs. In 2018, his most famous book, *Shoal of Time*, celebrated its fiftieth

anniversary. The e-book version has now outsold the many hardcover and paperback editions.

Mahalo to all of these accomplished wordsmiths—Chris McKinney, Susanna Moore, and Gavan Daws—for giving us a peek into their literary lives. And thank you for watching. For Long Story Short and PBS Hawai'i, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

For audio and written transcripts of all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit PBSHawaii.org. To download free podcasts of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, go to the Apple iTunes Store or visit PBSHawaii.org.

I said to my editor this time, who's Sonny Mehta, who was also the publisher of Knopf, that I've always felt my books were covers that would only induce a woman to pick up the book in a bookstore, you know, that I know that women are the primary buyers of fiction, but it would be awfully nice to have a book that a man might want to read from the cover. And I think covers do make a difference. And he said: Yes, yes, I agree that would be good, especially as it might be your last cover. And I thought: What does he mean? He saw my face, and he said: No, no, I will always publish you; I don't mean that, I mean that it might be the last ...

Paper book.

--book in which you'll be able to hold it in your hands. So, it's changing.