

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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Reading is one of the few creative art forms where we enter the mind of somebody on a deeply intimate and personal level, across time, across cultures. You're concocting in your mind what the person looks like and they become something you invent.

As a child, she found refuge in books, which she called her friends because her family moved so frequently. She says reading and writing are linked and somehow writing chose her and she became a writer. Stephanie Han, 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. Stephanie Han was born Stephanie Mi Suk Yoo but goes by her maternal family's name. A resident of Kaimukī, O'ahu, she's a teacher with a doctorate at Punahou School at Honolulu, and she's a writer of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction, much of it about one's identity in multicultural settings. Dr. Han is the author of "Swimming in Hong Kong", a collection of short stories. Her father was one of Korea's top scholars before he came to the United States to attend university, becoming a medical doctor and research scientist. Her mother was raised in Kunia Camp in central O'ahu, a descendant of the first wave of Korean immigrants to Hawai'i. Stephanie Han's parents met in the San Francisco Bay area, and after they were married, lived all over the United States, fueled in part by their wanderlust.

Where do you call home?

Now, Hawai'i is home and in a sense I think it always was a spiritual and familial home to me, we just simply moved around the Continental U.S. I've lived in every place except the Pacific Northwest because my family was peripatetic, we were itinerant, and I have been as an adult. But this is the one place we always came for weddings, funerals, family birthdays, and gatherings, so, I would say, in a sense, if I could call one place an idea of home, this would be it. Hawaii was where I could have a sense of belonging, where I could have an Asian face but I could speak English and it wasn't a big deal, um, where I saw different kinds of cultures and people interacting in a relatively peaceful way and this was a contrast to growing up in the mainland in certain areas

where my family were kind of these pioneers, in the Midwest or in the South or even in certain areas of New England.

Did you experience racism or was it people who simply didn't know what to say to you and said the wrong thing?

I think it was both, you know, my mother grew up in Kunia on the plantation and so when kids were kind of chicken fighting and kind of bullying me and beating me up when I was in third grade, she wasn't gonna have that. She was, she...um, immediately asked um, somebody in the Korean community whose father knew judo, to take me on as a student.

So she was not a hovering parent in the sense that she approached the bully, she prepared you to approach the...

Yes.

Ok, so what happened?

And so, because she grew up, you know, watching boxing matches and wrestling in the Kunia gym, and so, yes, I was supposed to be a good Korean-American daughter, but I needed to know how to fight back. And so, um, we, me and the bully, we had it out in front of the drinking fountain. He was a head taller than me and the kids gathered, and I don't even know how it...after a month, I was very confident, after judo lessons for one month, I obviously felt I could take him on, and um, you know, he hit me, and I punched him back, and then we were hauled off to the, um, by the school librarian, who, now, I know they must've thought it was really hysterical because I was a head and a half shorter...

And boy-girl, I mean usually boys don't take shots at girls, right?

And boy-girl, exactly, and then...

So this is a bad bully...

Yes, and then, he was crying and I was not, I was just in shock and just paranoid that my mother would get mad at me and he never bothered me, nor did anyone ever bother me at the school again, and I was never physically bothered like that again because it was...it's all psychological, right? It's how you carry yourself.

Why did you move so much?

That was my parents, I think their adventure. So, for my mother, being, growing up pre-statehood, her adventure of travel...I mean, my family traveled a lot overseas, too, but her adventure was in the mainland and for my father, as an immigrant to the United States, this was also his adventure of seeing America.

That meant you switched schools a lot.

I switched schools every year until I was nine.

That's a lot.

What you get used to is, you know, making friends, and you also get used to leaving, it prepares you for different kinds of relationships and different kinds of ways of navigating, and it also obliges you to be more open, and what it did was, it made me closer, I think, to my family and to my parents, and to hold on to things that were permanent, let's say like coming here, seeing Grandma in the summer or seeing my cousins here, this became a kind of...a permanent idea.

Did you have any tricks about how to make friends as a kid when you were starting a new school?

No, and I think it did become difficult and it's what propelled me to become a reader and a writer...because, um, at a certain point, I think, you know, we were often in these places like Iowa, where there were not a lot of Asian-American children, and I remember telling my mom that I had troubles making friends and she said, well, if you read a book, you'll always have a friend. And this had to do with how she was, I think, and she was a bookworm, and she was a mom who, um, you know, sought out intellectual and creative things, and we didn't talk as much about feelings, we could find those through books and things like that, so, um, you know, books became my world, books became a way I could make friends, she was right. Books became a path to understanding and to figuring out how people behaved, and from reading comes writing, an idea of expressing personal narrative.

I think I've heard you say that uh, your mom taught you the importance of creative expression, your father taught you never to quit, which came in very handy when you're a writer seeking publication.

Yeah, so that was definitely my father. So there's a saying he used to tell me, fall down seven times, get up eight times. A really perfect example of it was me with math studies. So when I was in ninth grade, I went off to boarding school at Phillips Academy Andover, I was a straight-A student prior, I get to Andover, everybody was a straight-A student, so, I really struggled, and I was getting a...I think I was failing math, and so, my father and mother said, we're tired of you, you know, calling us up at, you know, every

night, crying about your math homework so you come back for Thanksgiving. So I came back for Thanksgiving, I did math six to seven hours a day with my father, and um, flew back, I passed the exam, and then I stepped off the plane in December and my dad said, we're not...we're conquering this math thing. And so, I did math with my father...I went to work with him six to eight hours a day, every single day of my three week holiday. I would sit there in the gas station, in the front seat of the car, while he's pumping the gas, doing math problems, um, I did the entire math book, over Christmas.

Did you want to do that? Did you resent that?

Uh, at first I resented it, but then after awhile I liked it. Like I still know the quadratic formula to this day, because he made me write it down 27 times, because he said if you write anything down 27 times, you'll never forget it. What it showed me was that you don't have to be good at something, you can persist and you don't have to quit, and then I went back and I went from being a D-student in math to two A's.

What does your dad think of your career? He seems like a very success-oriented guy and goes by the numbers, and being a writer is not going by the numbers, especially as a female...

Yeah...yeah, my dad, um, human being status is, um, granted upon a Masters degree, so now I have a PhD, so you know, it's ok.

Don't you have two Masters?

Yeah, I have two Masters degrees.

And a PhD, the first PhD in English Literature...

Literature, from City University of Hong Kong.

And you do a lot of professional teaching as well?

Yes, so, I consider myself a writer and educator, and I think, you know, my father was a, you know, he was a research scientist and a university professor, too, so he's proud of that, you know, so in a sense, although it wasn't in science and most of his family were medical doctors, even my aunts who were 85 years old in Korea, were medical doctors in Korea at the time, which was quite radical for women, but so now, you know, he knows I teach and I write and it's something that is parallel...parallels his interests.

Stephanie Han's award-winning writings are influenced by the books she read growing up, as much as by her life experiences. Her narratives often center on female

protagonists who deal with issues of race, gender, and colonialism, and above all, identity.

You said your friends were books?

Yeah.

And you do live other people's experiences through books?

Oh yeah, like my early experiences were just, you know, like in Iowa reading Laura Ingalls Wilder. I used to ask my mom why she didn't wear a bonnet and churn butter...like why...

Because that's the real mother...

Yeah...I sent away to the Laura Ingalls Wilder home for photos of Laura Ingalls Wilder. So there are family photos of the Ingalls and Wilder family with my family photos because they, it became such a part of how I was trying to understand where I was living.

Did you watch the TV show, too?

Yeah, but I didn't like the TV show as much. That was kind of just a short cut, and I was one of those, you know, that didn't match, that was in, you know, on the shores of Silver Lake, that wasn't in the second book, you know, I could really...

Who's [INDISTINCT] anyway?

Yeah, yeah, I was like, you know, Pa didn't play the violin like that. You know, I was really...I could be very exact about it. And there were some, also some things that were not quite, you might say kosher, about those books, of when it was written. You know, their treatment...her treatment of how she saw Native Americans, or how Pa was doing the darky kind of dance where he was wearing blackface, and I didn't understand this as I was reading it, so I find it sort of interesting, you know, how you read one book to open your mind, and I did need those books when I was little, to understand the farm children that I was going to school with and their background and then how later you read them differently. So, um, but yeah, you know, that's when I would, you know, I'd say, can we have apple pie like Farmer Boy? You know...

But reading does...depending on what you read, does teach you empathy, or at least the ability to identify

Yes.

...with somebody else whose, maybe, outer behavior is off-putting...

Yes.

Because you don't understand it or you don't think there's a reason for it, but when you read a book and you see what's going on inside...

Yes, because reading is one of the few creative art forms where we enter the mind of somebody on a deeply intimate and personal level, across time, across cultures, even when we're seeing a movie, we're looking at somebody from the outside in, right? We're looking at their face. We're not looking inside their brain. So, when you're reading, we're entering somebody's very intimate thoughts, it's that magic...

And heart.

Yes, you know, how they're dreaming, how they're feeling, and sometimes you know, when you're looking at a picture, um, or illustration, you might initially, you could have these reactions, you could be put off by their clothing or something and you might not be able to enter them in the same way, but when you read something, you're concocting in your mind what the person looks like and they become something you invent. So, reading also propels us to imagine and it works a different kind of imagination gear, in a way, and we, we relate that to ourselves. Like, yeah, I remember I was riding a bicycle, yeah, that's what it felt like, this person must be riding a bicycle in the same way, yeah, you know, and it becomes something else, verses, you know, I love photography, and I love film, and I love video, and, you know, all these other kinds of visual images, but, it's something else, you're outside in.

That's a great point. What are some of the books that have made the most difference to you in reading?

Well, I would say...

Besides Laura.

It changed, yeah, it changed over the course of time, right? So, um, you know, I read, you know Song of Solomon, by Toni Morrison. When I was a teenage girl, then I read Maxine Hong Kingston, The Woman Warrior, and that blew me away, I would say really the opening sequence, because it was the first time I could see the picture. There is a woman of color and she kind of looks like me, she's Asian descent, and look, she wrote this book, and look, this character is not, you know, is fierce, and is a warrior, and is running through the woods and doing these things, and that was really eye-awakening, and I love Jane Austen. Years later, I read the Makioka Sisters by Junichiro Tanizaki in translation which is very similar to the Austen book, and that was the book that my

mother told me to read and I could see how she transposed ideas of, you know, protocol and manners and this, and how they came through to my upbringing. My narrative has always been something that's been changing, um, narratives that were...I was told and then tried to imitate, so, I think about this idea of the stories that were maybe told to, let's say me, through a religious or philosophical structure, which were Confucian virtues, right? Which were...Confucianism is built on the pillars of five relationships, right? King, subject, teacher, husband, wife, and almost all of them are hierarchical, except friend to friend, but there's a very strict hierarchy that organizes a lot of Asian culture and that was the narrative, in a sense, that I think played out for me or continued to play out in a lot of my life. There was also narratives, uh, folk tales that I was told, so...a traditional, it's a Japanese folktale, it was also told to Korean kids, was Peach Boy, which is...I'm not sure, do you know it...

Momotaro?

Yes, and I'm sure you're familiar with this story...

I grew up with that story.

Yes, and he comes with a peach to this older parents, and he fights...you know, he makes friends with the dog, the pheasant, and the monkey, goes off and he kills all the monsters, and he comes back with wealth to his village and he's the hero of the story, right? And this is a typical, Joseph Campbell journey...mythic...myth of the hero, which crosses cultures, right? But there really is not...we don't find the myth of the heroine, and Campbell had said that's because the wisdom that is had, women always have inherently, and Campbell was writing and speaking at a different time period, because women do need a narrative.

What you said before reminded me of something...I was fortunate enough to interview W.S. Merwin, and he said, um, when life is going along pretty well, you tend to read prose, but when you have something awful happening, some emotional thing, what do you do? You read poetry.

Poetry...

Is that true?

Yes, that's totally true, and I write poetry um, when I have no words, that's what I say, and then I write prose to try to make a linear sense of an issue.

As an adult, Stephanie Han has lived in many different places around the world. She kept moving in part because of the adventure of experiencing different cultures, but that was not her only motivation.

You told us how your, your family moved around quite a bit because of your father's career when you were a child, but you continued to move around as an adult.

Yes, it set the pattern. So I thought...so that's how I became an expatriate, ectera ectera, it set a pattern where you think moving is normal, um, it's strange because there's a different skill-set involved with staying, right? And so that's, to me, this is now my question too, of staying, you know, this is my home now, so this is...this is the question of staying, and um, yeah, you set the pattern because, you know, and what you realize is, there are many people who actually do this...were just...were...maybe we don't talk about it quite as much, or we're referring to one place as the home, but a lot of people are rather itinerant.

It seems to me that you've been in a number of first-of situations, you might've been the first Asian girl in a class or...I mean, you've done so many um, so many activities in different countries, uh, what have you learned from that? Because it's not surprising to me that you became a writer, somebody who's already good in English and...generally, writers keep their distance, they're detached.

Yeah, I think um, what I learned is that you have to be open and you have to be curious to different experiences and you also have to be tolerant, and I think being overseas um, for different periods of my life, also opened that up, and what I also found is language, speaking different languages matters, but you really need an open heart and you need to be able to laugh with somebody, you need to be able to eat food, you need to listen to their music and maybe dance a little, and that becomes more important than, often than, um, let's say, exchanging literary ideas.

And when do you know it's time for you to move on, or in the past, how did you figure out...was it outwardly directed or did it always come from within?

Um, no, sometimes people moved because they think moving will solve things, but moving doesn't often solve what you...it could solve temporarily, a job, but maybe that's the job wasn't really what needed to be solved, or a question about this, right? So...

It's a way of distracting yourself, in part?

Yes, right, and you know, there's more...you know, there's the adventure of being out verses sometimes, if you stay in one place, the adventure becomes of going in and going still, or going deeper, so I, you know, I...I've had people tell me, you know, I don't think you can come to necessarily, any more wisdom, traveling and moving, then you can come from being in one place and going deeper. You might find that you can still come to very similar ideas of people and behavior and spirit, and some of the people I

consider the most wise, who I seek counsel or friendship, or guidance from, are people who are in one place. Because they came to similar ideas and then moved and came to a different way of seeing things that were incredibly wise.

Interesting. One thing about staying is that you...if there are issues, you have to either work them out or, or hole up in yourself, and generally people do either...I mean, I would hope people who stay, find a way to work things out.

Yeah, and this just becomes the retreat of a writer, too, right? Reading and writing, for me, um, was always a bit of a social, personal retreat, so, I didn't neces--, you know, if, the outside became too strange or difficult or, I just would read more or I wrote more, which I...I don't necessarily advise to everybody.

Well, why have you moved as an adult?

Um...

Repeatedly?

Yeah, mostly, it was, I think it was work and opportunity, and a desire to seek, and a desire for adventure, and so I think that was the phase that I was also in, and um, there's like a whole community, you know, if you're an expatriate, that's what you do...you just...you move, from place to place often.

And you always find people like yourself...

Mm hm, and it becomes a community.

It is a community.

So that is a community.

So how do you find people in that community?

Um, you know, they can initially be a much more often welcoming and opening...open to people, because everyone wants a place to live, everyone knows you need employment, so people come rushing forth with opportunities or jobs or places to live, they know you need help with this, because it's kind of this strange pioneering community, right? Whereas, if you often move into community where people have been entrenched for along time, they're more closed because you're an outsider and the peculiar thing is, you know, expatriates, they often never really occupy the place that they're in. They live in the peripheral of wherever they are and that is the community, it's being on the periphery.

That's interesting, so, perhaps, at this point in your life, that is still your home?

Um, no, I'd say...it's funny, that's why I think I ended up here because I don't have to always be on the periphery here. I do have maternal family and maternal roots here, so it allows me to step in here. I didn't attend school here which makes, you know, Hawaii is very rooted in people's young, younger years of schooling...

Where did you graduate from...

Yes, but um, you know, my son is now local to here and my family is here in that sense, or I should say some of my older relatives. So, I can be both an outsider and an insider here and maybe that's just right.

At the time of this taping in 2019, Stephanie Han is teaching at Punahou School and lives in Kaimukī, O'ahu, where she also continues to write. Mahalo to Stephanie Han for sharing your stories with us and mahalo to you for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

I don't think people choose to be writers, I think writing chooses you and then writing becomes a compulsion. Reading and writing are very linked and um, when it is a certain level of a compulsion then it flows through you and you feel at that moment, this is what you were meant to do and you draft it very quickly and it's almost as if your body is a kind of vessel for what the words are supposed to be, and there's other times you sit there and you're just miserable and you try to run away from the desk and you decide at that moment you need to clean your room, but um, you know, so it varies and you just have to, you know, kind of sit your butt in the chair.

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