

## Literary Honolulu

By

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My uncle Howard is the oral chronicler of our family lore. He remembers standing on the rooftop of his home in Kunia Camp, Waihawa, Oahu, the pineapple plantation off the red dirt road, waving innocently at the squadron of Japanese Zeros flying low overhead on their way to bomb Pearl Harbor.

Unlike Japanese Americans on the mainland during World War II, Japanese Americans were not interned due to the numbers in the workforce. Even so, American citizens of Japanese descent knew they would be targets. The plantation united different ethnic groups.

In Hawai'i, we have a phrase: *talk story*. It means, roughly, to chat, to gossip, to tell a tale. To *talk story* is to recount history, affirm bonds, and assert the right to laugh, to honor, and to listen.

Writers create worlds, court difference, and frequently rail against the norm. Where better to explore an idea of Paradise on earth, real or imagined? The city has evolved from the Oahu 1866 harbor town Mark Twain declared “high, rugged, useless, barren, black and dreary” to a million strong metropolis. It boasts a literary pedigree of luminaries who stoked the city’s volcanic myths that continue to linger in the air, long after the sandalwood has disappeared and the whaling ships and women on horseback have given way to traffic jams of tourists in rental cars.

It is impossible to sum up a single idea of writerly discovery here, for what they find is Hawai'i itself. It is its own definition.

Robert Louis Stevenson stayed on Kaimana Beach (or Sans Souci), *talking story* with the other guests under the *hau* tree that still shades a beachside café *lanai*. Stevenson was received by King Kalākaua at Iolani Palace, and befriended his half-Scottish niece, Princess Victoria Kaiulani, composing a poem for her before she went to school in England.

He wrote in the hotel register: “If anyone desires such old-fashioned things as lovely scenery, quiet, pure air, clear sea water, good food and heavenly sunsets hung out before their eyes over the Pacific and the distant hills of Waiana, I recommend him cordially to the ‘Sans Souci.’” The intrepid may find Stevenson’s restored beach shack on display at Manoa’s Waioli Tea Room, up the stairs from a wishing well featured in Elvis Presley’s *Blue Hawai'i*.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the arrival of a fictionalized Hawaii. Jack London and Somerset Maugham penned missives and stories that told uncomfortable truths and spun

romanticised visions of life in the Pacific. Earl Derr Biggers penned *The House Without a Key* (1925) featuring Charlie Chan, modeled on real life Chinese-Hawai'ian detective Chang Apana, while staying at what is now the Halekulani Hotel.

The mainland's infatuation with Hawai'i began in the run-up to statehood in 1954. Paradise could be found within the country's borders, amplifying and packaging a tropical iteration of the American Dream.

James Michener's epic *Hawai'i* (1959) solidified a now dated, but highly influential image of Hawai'i in the American imagination. His legacy here is punctuated by a donation of more than 5000 Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints to the Honolulu Academy of Art. The 1960s and 1970s in literary Hawaii saw a synergy of creative and political expression and the Asian American Renaissance.

Joan Didion's essay on Honolulu in *The White Album* (1979) juxtaposed her personal narrative with Honolulu's iconic setting. She waited for a tidal wave set to hit the shores on TV while contemplating her own: "We are here on this island in the middle of the Pacific in lieu of filing for divorce", unaware that voices outside the pink Royal Hawai'ian hotel would forever change Honolulu's literature.

It would no longer be a literature written exclusively by those outside of the Islands, but would be told by those born and raised here, or those who dared to claim home on an island in the middle of the ocean.

To understand Hawai'i's brutal past, read the work of Haunani Kay-Trask, a writer and leader of the Native Hawai'ian movement. Maxine Hong Kingston, spent many years teaching in Honolulu and in *Hawai'i One Summer* (1987) she describes Mokoli'i, formerly known as Chinaman's Hat, and the magnificent blue of Kane'ohē Bay. She compares the sounds to the sirens from the *Odyssey* and ponders the questions of land, belonging, and nature that continue to surface as Hawai'i grapples with its past with the demands of the future.

Local writers Milton Murayama and Cathy Song descend from the Japanese, Chinese, and Korean plantation workers who toiled in the fields and revealed the complications of the halcyon escape sold to tourists. Murayama's humorous and unflinching portrait of a Japanese American family prior to WWII, and his literary rendering of pidgin English readable to locals and outsiders alike was a literary first. Song's poetry is marked by pathos and precision and reveals a life that has recently disappeared: the last sugar plantation closed only this year. The Waipahu Plantation Village offers a fascinating glimpse of a time and world far from the glittery stretch of Waikiki.

Writing differs from *talk story*, and to ensure the past's record, Uncle Howard briefly functioned as family scribe too. I read about my late grandmother, the archetypal Virginia Slims smoking woman defying her family in order to become a nurse. She ran crying out of the house down Punchbowl Street with her suitcase to stay at the YWCA, an elegant structure designed by Julia Morgan. As I ruminate about my grandmother, my uncle smiles

and laughs: “You know, that YWCA was where I dumped a live shark in the pool to surprise my girlfriend who was living in the dorms!” Talk story.

Talk story lives in that it is an individualistic and rebellious narrative act, a defiance against the stories told and taught from outsiders and authorities. The tradition of talk story contributed to the tacit understanding shared amongst writers in the Islands, which is this: we no longer assume that a single narrative about Hawai’i exists. We acknowledge it as a place of multiplicity and myth, a place of many strands and stars. Hawai’i is densely packed history, an endless ocean of words, and the tales that everyone holds in their hearts: The story that has yet to hit the page.

*(Honolulu: The Monocle Travel Guide Series, 2016)*