

Juliet Kono's Ho'olulu

Judith van Praag

Poets and writers often write about place: some imagine a metaphorical island inhabited with characters brought to life by their imagination, and some live on actual islands, where they chronicle the history of their people. Others are inspired by their surroundings to write fictional accounts.

Poet and writer Juliet S. Kono was born in Hilo, Hawaii in 1943. In "Hilo Rains", her first book of poetry, published in 1988 (a special double issue of "Bamboo Ridge, The Hawaii Writers' Quarterly"), she describes her birth in "Black-out Baby". An ominous beginning, life colored by the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Relatives who lived on the mainland were interned and Kono's parents and verbal aunts talked about the war all the time. Young Juliet didn't understand what was said, but she was always listening. "We loved to hear the family stories." That she was listening well is reflected in her poems and in her short stories.

More than by the war, Juliet's mother appeared to be traumatized by the Tsunami of 1946, which hit the island on April Fool's Day, devastating downtown Hilo.

"I think my mother suffered from PTS (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder)," Kono said after reading her poem about that disastrous day at Elliot Bay Books in Seattle, in the spring of 2005.

How a mother's traumatic experience affects a child for life is clear from "Tsunami Years", her second book of poetry (another special double issue published by Bamboo Ridge in 1995), in which Kono addresses the Tsunami from the points of view of several characters swept away by the great wave.

Juliet Kono does not scare away from pain, the anguish of others, or her own agony. Parents suffering loss, will recognize the blues in her "Country of Grief" —one of a series of poems about the death of a child— in "Tsunami Years", and find solace in her sharing.

The author spent her childhood in Hilo, during the last years of the Territory, before moving to Honolulu with her parents.

"Everything was a puzzle to me as a child. We still adhered to many of the Japanese and Buddhist traditions while my grandparents were alive and did many things American as well. I learned the Lord's Prayer in school and did the Vandan Ti Sarana at church. We celebrated Easter and the Buddha birthday at around the same time."

Kono's grandfather was an Issei (immigrant without right to naturalize, born in Japan). The laws changed two years before his

death in 1954, but he didn't become a Japanese American citizen. His wife studied for her citizenship, but didn't take the exam. Kono's parents are Nisei, second generation Japanese Americans, Kono herself is Sansei, third, and her children Yonsei, or fourth generation.

The poem "Yonsei", in "Hilo Rains", tells of the son who lives a different life, far removed from the old ways.

"And yet once a year you come with me in your dark brooding – like a craving– to visit the ancestors' grave sites and pray."

After raising her children, Kono went back to school. She received her BA and MA from the University of Hawaii at Manoa.

In "Hiroshima Peasant", the opening story of "Ho'olulu Park and Pepsodent Smile", Kono relates the predicament of a Japanese woman who's married off as a picture bride to a Japanese emigrant in Hawaii. Highly stylized and poetic, the story breathes ancient Japanese culture. The author herself suggests the particular style in this early story, is the result of self-consciousness. Perhaps she aimed at writing perfect English, rather than letting her characters speak their own lingo. In stories of later date, Kono honors her heritage as well as the cultural make-up of the islands by letting her characters speak pidgin.

Aided by her well-drawn characters, Kono leads the reader through different phases of the history, as well as the present day life of the island. She ends her book with "Rock Fever", about a modern day bride, and her predicament: nursing an ailing, elderly mother-in-law. The story is reminiscent of "The Elizabeth Poems" in "Tsunami Years".

In the prologue to "Ho'olulu Park and the Pepsodent Smile and other stories", Kono writes that her stories are based on secrets, lies and shame. This foreshadows a major conflict between fiction and non-fiction. Such an exposé suggests that author and narrator are one and the same. But Kono insists that there's only a kernel of truth in the stories. So be it, as long as the reader can relate.

Juliet Kono won the Elliot Cades Award for Literature, the James Clavell Award for Fiction, the American Japanese National Literary Award and the Ka Palapala Po'okela Award for Excellence in Literature. She was a recipient of a US/Japan Friendship Commission Creative Artist Exchange Fellowship in 1999.

"Ho'olulu Park and the Pepsodent Smile and other stories", a book of fiction, was published in 2004, by Bamboo Ridge, Journal of Hawaii Literature and Arts.

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