

## LITERATURE

## JEFFREY J. HIGA: "CALABASH STORIES"

Higa's First Book Wins National Literary Prize

Lee A. Tonouchi

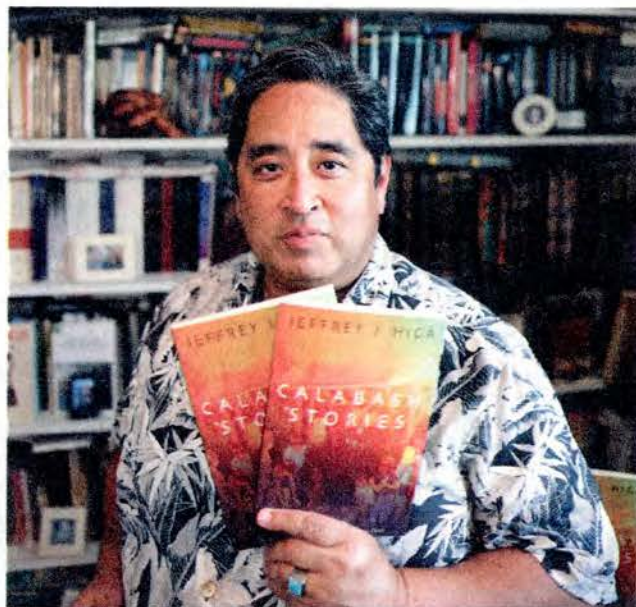
*Special to The Hawai'i Herald*

Jeffrey J. Higa, 54, always wanted to get one book published. Took him over 20 years to develop the "Calabash Stories," but he finally finished. And he did 'em with style. His short story collection won the Robert C. Jones Prize. For that he got some cash money and as part of the prize, Pleiades Press in Missouri published 'em just this year. Big time Hawai'i writer, Garrett Hongo, calls the book "a fond remembrance of local culture and society that fostered us as we grew, with avidity or reluctance, into the globalized and metropolitan identities of postmodern times." I went to talk with Higa to learn the story about how his book came born.

LT: So you went to grad school at Mililani, Class of '84, then you went away to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York. And you lived over a bookstore so that's how you got interested in writing. Try tell us about that time — an you can name the book that when you read it inspired you the most?

JH: Rensselaer is an engineering and science school; originally, I thought I was going to be a computer programmer. But after a few semesters, I got bored. I dropped out for a little while; afraid I was going to never finish college and be an idiot all my life, I started to read. Luckily I lived above a used bookstore where old paperbacks were 25 cents, so I picked up anything that interested me. I did that for at least

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Jeffrey J. Higa, author of "Calabash Stories." (Photo courtesy of Jeffrey Higa)

people's cut-out portraits. I never knew about this art form. Was this popular in Hawai'i before time?

JH: I used to work at Hawaii's Plantation Village and sometimes my job involved going into some plantation manager's house or a plantation family's house and save whatever historical documents we could. One time, I was looking through a box of documents in my office and ran across an old union newspaper that listed deaths of members, and I remember seeing two silhouettes instead of pictures. Both silhouettes

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with everything bathed in one intense bright light. So even though you have no *obake* (ghost) stories in your book, I think his haunting style fits your collection cuz your stories stay from one bygone era in Hawai'i that only lingers in our memories now. How did you choose your cover?

JH: The publisher wanted to know if I had ideas for the cover. I knew if I let them develop a cover, I might end up with hula girls and palm trees and grass shacks. So, I knew I wanted a local artist who knew what local people looked like, dressed like, and generally how they move and hold their bodies. I found Edwin's work online and was captivated by all his work, but especially his work with kids in it. His work has a dreamy, ethereal quality. It seemed a perfect match!

LT: You get some Pidgin dialogue in your collection. Was it hard for your continental publisher to catch on?

JH: My publishers were great. They trusted my Pidgin constructions and most of the details. I think they were most concerned about possible racial bias. It's hard because the way they talk about race on the mainland is a little bit different than how we talk about race in Hawai'i. They trusted me to walk that line in that I would be acceptable to mainland-kine folks without losing the long special history and way we have in Hawai'i of talking about each other in Pidgin.

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a year and a half when I started reading Dante's "Inferno" and J.D. Salinger's "Catcher in the Rye" at the same time. I remember thinking one day, I can write like that. So I went back to college for literature and have been trying to write like that ever since.

**LT: Your bio says you wen go through several writing programs before settling down at da University of Missouri, St. Louis, wea your got your M.A. in creative writing. What wuz it about that particular school that made you say, Yeah, dis da place for me.**

JH: I found a professor, Dave Carkeet, who understood my work and my ambitions. Creative writing programs don't work unless you can find other writers who understand and appreciate your work or what you are trying to do. Coming from Hawai'i, I was writing about things mainland kine people didn't really understand. I was searching through these programs for someone who would understand my work and through that, be able to offer some guidance and discuss my work without me having to explain everything.

**LT: You said you spent 25 years on da continent before you came back. You wen read any Hawai'i writers while you wuz ova dea? Wuz any of dem influential to you?**

JH: Oh, yeah, I knew by not going to [the University of Hawai'i] and being that involved with the Hawai'i literary scene I was missing out. So I read almost everything I could get my hands on in the mainland. I particularly enjoyed first-person accounts, memoirs by non-professional writers, about growing up during the plantation days. Of course, I also read the literary classics like "Pass On, No Pass Back" (written by Darrell H.Y. Lum and illustrated by Arthur Kodani) and "All I Asking for is my Body" (by Milton Murayama), and later stuff by Lois-Ann Yamanaka and yourself.

I found "Significant Moments in da Life of Oriental Faddah and Son" more emotional than I thought it was going to be. Nice job, Lee!

**LT: Set in one time in plantation Hawai'i when photography had already taken root, your story "The Shadow Artist" stay about one anachronistic silhouette artist who goes from camp to camp doing**

were facing each other like they stay talking story. I thought how odd, and didn't think about for a long time until I developed "The Shadow Artist" story. Then I did some basic historical research and learned rich kine people used it a lot before photography.

**LT: What story in your book is your most Okinawan one?**

JH: Offhand, I would have to say "Christmas Stories." The father in that story is pretty close to my grandfather's experience. He did work as a yard boy in Mānoa before opening his own restaurant in Kalihi, the Pālama Inn. One of those famous drive-ins or diners that Uchinanachu opened all over the islands [in the 1930s onward].

**LT: Many of your stories stay set in da olden days in one place on O'ahu called Muliwai Lane wea all da neighbors knew each oddah. Wuz dis wea you grew up? What wuz it like?**

JH: It's in Liliha, across from Kawānanakoa Park. Muliwai Lane is much shortened now from surrounding development. Only a few houses left and still get development going on. I read this question to my mother, June T. Higa (née Matsuyoshi). She's a fan of yours and she said, "What you mean we all knew each other on the Lane? We knew everyone within a three block radius!" But it was like that, working class; the lady who cut my hair lived three houses down. The [neighborhood] cop's patrol was downtown. The Chinese family worked in Chinatown. My grandma was a nurse so everyone went to her first before spending money at the doctor or hospital. Never need car, because we could walk to work and walk to the hardware, drug and grocery store. Everyone made about the same amount of money, everyone rented and no one owned their home, you knew the neighbors really well because you often needed their help or they needed yours. And as kids, news of our naughtiness or rascal behavior often reached home before we did. Those days, we got lickins.

**LT: I jealous cuz your book get one awesome cover by artist Edwin Ushiro. I know he loves for do art that deals with Hawai'i and da supernatural. So your cover depicts kids next to one makeshift struc-**

**LT: You 54 now, but your goal wuz for publish your first book before you wuz 50. So you wuz pretty close. You get any advice for not young, but mid-life kine, aspiring writers?**

JH: The hardest thing is persevering. Out of my college fiction cohort in two writing programs, I am the only one who is still writing and publishing. I wasn't the most talented or ambitious or smartest or well-read. Maybe I was the only one who didn't care too much about rejections? It took me 10 years to get my first story published. I think I had 26 rejections for that story alone. So maybe in short, your self-confidence in your own work has to roll right over any rejections so you can keep going.

**LT: Anything else you like people know?**

JH: Only that the book is available at da Shop in Kaimukī (dashophnl.com) for \$17.95. **HH**

*Lee A. Tonouchi is da author of da children's picture book "Okinawan Princess: Da Legend of Hajichi Tattoos" that won one Skipping Stones Honor Award. An'den he also wrote da poetry collection "Significant Moments in da Life of Oriental Faddah and Son: One Hawai'i Okinawan Journal" that won one Association for Asian American Studies book award.*

*For more on Higa, see [jeffhiga.com](http://jeffhiga.com), and for more of Ushiro's art, go to [mrushiro.com](http://mrushiro.com).*