

Jeffrey J. Higa



COURTESY JEFFREY HIGA

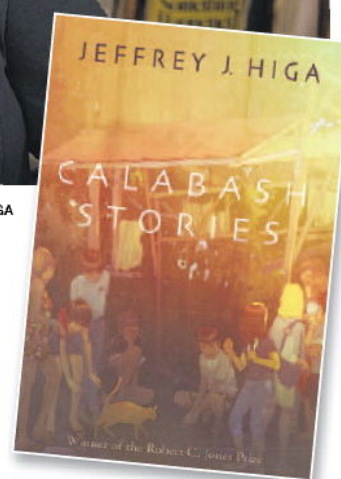
Jeffrey J. Higa's journey to publishing his first collection of short stories started in a secondhand bookstore in Troy, N.Y. The Mililani High School grad was renting a room above the bookstore and noticed a cart of used paperbacks that were priced 25 cents each. The price was right, and he began buying the ones that looked interesting.

Higa's self-directed reading program was transformative. He earned a Bachelor of Science degree in communication with an emphasis in literature from the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, and a Master of Arts in English/creative writing at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

As a writer and playwright, he drew on his cultural legacy as the great-grandson of Okinawan and Japanese immigrants who came to Hawaii at the turn of the 20th century.

Higa's play, "Futless," won a contest for best full-length play from Kumu Kahua Theatre and the University of Hawaii at Manoa in 2003. In 2019, his short story, "The Shadow Artist," received an honorable mention in the national Kurt Vonnegut Fiction contest, sponsored by the North American Review.

Higa, 54, celebrated a double career milestone when "Calabash Stories," his first short story anthology, won the Robert C. Jones Prize for Short Prose last year and was subsequently published in February. You can find the book at da Shop in Kaimuki (dashophnl.com) and on Amazon.



Going back to that bookstore in New York, what caught your eye, and what did you read?

I had to pass the cart (outside the stores) to go anywhere and they were only 25 cents, and I was washing dishes at the time, so it was easy to buy a couple and bring them home. I bought anything that I had kinda heard of so I read "Soul on Ice" by Eldridge Cleaver, and I remember picking up Dante, and books like "Catcher in the Rye" and "Gatsby." I think you could say I read a lot of American stuff.

What inspired the book? Why do it now?

I had been writing stories for a while and I felt that I had enough for a good collection, and so I entered the contest.

Should readers see these stories as your personal experiences? Things you witnessed? Things you heard about?

They're within my family history in Hawaii. Some of the characters are kind of like my family members, and some of the events are true. I think the most true from my experience is the story about trading baseball cards. Some of the other stuff happened to my parents or happened to family friends, (but) it's not all true.

Writing fiction seems more personal than nonfiction. How do you approach it?

You have to be honest with yourself to connect with the reader. You can't just hide behind your characters.

What's next for you?

I have a book reading tentatively set up with da Shop in Kaimuki June 19.

Do you have any thoughts on where Okinawans and Okinawan culture fits in Hawaii?

My dad is the one that's 100% Okinawan. He was in the military, and after he retired he became active in the Okinawan community at the Hawaii Okinawa Center. My daughter is very active with the language and the trips over there and the culture, so I kinda feel like I'm the lost generation in that I'm not that connected to it. My dad's going over there — I think it's next year — so I'm thinking about (going with him).

What do you tell people who want to be successful published authors?

Fiction — especially literary fiction — I tell them about rejection. So every little step forward you make you should hold on to and use it to build your confidence. I always tell people that if they can, find a peer group (to get feedback on their writing).

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