

Interview with the author

Q. What initially made you want to tell this story?

A. I wasn't sure at first...Auntie Gloria came to mind early on, but the story unfolded as I started to write. Once the first draft was done, it emerged as a tribute to my parents' generation, those who lived through the Depression and World War II...doing whatever they could to make a better life for their children. Next to my parents, my own life feels far less vivid, too soft, too accommodating of injustice.

Q. Why do you think it's important to tell this story?

A. The passing of generations and of times gone by often feel like a vague seasickness, an indescribable sense of loss—we want to get our bearings but don't know how. Even though we know there's no such thing as turning back the clock, we can trick time by telling stories. For the duration of the telling, we can fulfill our wish to live those days again. So much of story telling is about wishing it all back again.

Q. Why the 1950s? To young people, that's ancient history! What are the benefits of having your story take place in another era?

A. To begin with, I grew up in the fifties...and the tug of memory can be more deeply felt as an adult remembering what it was like as a child. Curiously, kids today seem drawn to '50s kitsch and tchotchkes, stuff of seemingly simpler times. And we tend to think of news, what's happening now, to be factual and documented...but recollections from memory allow the dynamic of fact and fiction to create a disturbance, telling lies to get closer to the truth, inventing larger landscapes and crises of the heart.

Q. How did you draw from real life to create your characters?

A. That's a tricky question—as I was writing, the characters multiplied and crowded my mind—on the page, more and more people pushed their way into this small house, like an overstuffed

suitcase. This created a new character for me, the family—an ensemble of characters instead of one central figure. By avoiding a typical situation, I could dare to create characters that were both true to life and richly fictive—to make the ordinary something extraordinary.

Q. How was the Korean immigration story any different from the Chinese or Japanese?

A. Growing up, I remember checking the box “other” for ethnicity; there didn’t seem to be as much of an aggregate of Koreans. Our paternal grandparents, who were immigrants, lived with us and preferred speaking English, especially our grandmother, who wanted to learn slang from us grandchildren. Our dad used to say that the Koreans were the Irish of the East, hard-drinking and hot-tempered, and that Korea was like Poland, constantly getting run over and occupied by outsiders. All this a set-up for why Koreans are so sly and stubborn—always in survival mode. When our mom called our dad “yobo” (slang for Korean) this could be a cooing love call or, at other times, an epithet, suggesting a rogue or bum. We kids heard it as a tough love nickname.

Q. How do famous people like General Douglas MacArthur and Norman Vincent Peale serve the story?

A. Yes, that’s exactly what they do, they *serve* the story. What I love about fiction is its freedom—in this case, pushing historical figures to the background and bringing forward ordinary people, making it *our* story, *our* thoughts, *our* dreams that prevail.

Q. *If You Live in a Small House* is designated as a *novella* by your publisher. How is a novella different from a novel? And why did your book turn out this way?

A. To begin with, we can think of this as a short novel with a long title! Novellas traditionally run somewhere between 20,000 to 50,000 words—Faulkner’s *The Bear*, Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*, Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*...the Russians loved the form, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov...and more recently, *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* by Truman Capote, *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, *Push* by Sapphire.

Novellas are often compared to movies and stage plays because they can be experienced in one sitting. *Small House* is a work of memory, and memory can pick and choose, offering appetizer and dessert, skipping meat and potatoes—rushing to a fullness of feeling. Even in its spare state, I didn't hesitate to cut, cut, cut anything that detracted from the core, the heart of the matter.

Q. When did you start writing?

A. Soon after I learned to read—birthday cards for family members, school work, and at around age 10, letters to pen pals around the world. Letter writing was a form of diary and autobiography—a naïve form of narrative within reach of my child's view of the world...teen angst fed the flames of bad sonnets and moody stories...in college I tried playwriting just because I spent so much time in the theatre department, mostly working backstage. My writing life developed parallel to a work life, keeping a day job, writing on the side. In middle age, I exited Silicon Valley and went back to school. That's when I finally felt permission to read and write to my heart's content.

Q. That's a long time to wait, to get to do what you wanted all along. Do you feel as if real life conspired to keep you from writing?

A. Surprisingly, this turned out to be a good thing. Necessity dictates improvisation. Each job led to a different world—as a technical writer, to fieldwork on the North Slope of Alaska and to national parks in California, Nevada, Arizona, Hawaii. In London, I worked as a telephonist, in the days when long-distance calls had to be patched into a switchboard, talking with callers and relay operators. When a student, I worked as a pineapple trimmer at Dole cannery and as a cocktail waitress at the Green Turtle and the Blue Dolphin Room in Waikiki. Working puts you into the stream of life, providing raw material for stories.

Q. What about your other real-life milestones?

A. Well, I was born and raised in Hawaii—grew up in Kailua, attended the University of Hawaii, left to travel and work abroad, met my husband in San Francisco. Since 1971, we've lived in the San Francisco Bay Area, raising three children who are now all grown up. When

they were young, my kids were the recycle police; now they're teaching me so much more, that moral outrage is not just for the young and the restless.

Q. Which writers influenced your work? Who are your favorites?

A. As a child, fairy tales cast a spell, a way to experience heightened, oftentimes gruesome, emotions—even now, it's hard to predict whether toads or pearls will fall from my character's lips! Reading Sherwood Anderson and Eudora Welty for the first time, I remember thinking, "Ah, just like small town Hawaii!" Anderson lived in boarding houses, closely observing how people constantly negotiated a limited space and loss of privacy. Welty never married, liked ice-cold Coke in heat and humidity, finely forming sentences that entered the ear and lodged in the heart. Oddly, I have no favorites. Far better to read widely and a lot, across time, across cultures. Right now, I'm reading more history and poetry, leaving fiction up to TV news—this world is stranger than fiction.

Q. What advice would you give an aspiring writer?

A. Welcome! You're already a writer. To begin with, we are our first readers—we write something, then read it before anyone else. Sei Shonagon wrote *The Pillow Book* as a bored, distracted young woman in the Heian Court of the early 1000s, private writing that time-travels to us as a classic, suggesting early novelistic touches. Reading sows the seeds of writing—we not only draw from real life but from the world of imagination. As John Ruskin put it, reading is seeing clearly. So what if there's no consolation for loss, as long as we can locate that loss and see with our inner eye, the one tied to our soul.

Q. That sounds so sad. Anything upbeat you could add to that?

A. Not really. You're talking to someone who fell in love with longing and homesickness ...where the heart lives...writing in order to find one's home.