

GUEST: CHRIS MCKINNEY

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Somebody once asked me, how do I know I'm finished with a book. And my answer has always been the same; when I'm so sick of it, I can't stand looking at it again. So even when I do readings and stuff like that, people will ask me to, go here. And I'll do it. But there's this side of me that does it begrudgingly, 'cause I just don't want to look at the book again. And it's been eleven, twelve years since I've written *The Tattoo*. Unless I'm doing a reading, I've never cracked open that book.

What does it take for a book to grab you, make you stay up at night until the book falls on your face? Interesting characters, a compelling storyline, maybe they connect with your own life. Next, on Long Story Short, we'll meet the character and the story behind some of the most successful locally penned novels in Hawaii, author Chris McKinney.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

It's been said that we all have a good book within us, we all have that unique story to tell. But so few of us do it. Writer Chris McKinney took pieces of his childhood, tossed in some severely damaged characters, mixed in with the socioeconomic system of Hawaii, and used his talent to tell stories that resonate with readers.

What was your childhood like?

My mother was born and raised in Korea. And she got to Hawaii probably when she was about sixteen or seventeen years old. And my father was mostly born and raised here. He spent some time in Guam, but he spent most of his childhood in Hawaii. So they divorced when I was about—I guess I was about one or two years old. I don't remember anything about the divorce. But there are pictures. There are a few pictures here, and you can see sort of what my mother was trying to raise. There's a picture of me when I was about two or three years old in a leisure suit. Now, who puts their two-year or three-year-old kid, probably at the time, in a very inexpensive leisure suit, except for a Korean woman? [CHUCKLE] I don't know. And buying me—I remember owning, maybe at two or three, leather sandals. In Hawaii, who wears leather sandals?

So what does that say about your mom?

At least at the time, and to a certain extent now, she thinks physical appearance is very important. She values how you present yourself. Your attire, how you're put together, and all of that kind of stuff. I mean, which is fine. I don't have a problem with that. But what happened was, was that the man that she ended up marrying after, after her and my father got a divorce, was sort of the polar opposite when it came to the that kind of philosophy. My stepfather grew up in Kaneohe, a Vietnam War vet, a local, local, local guy. His father was a professional boxer. So how she ended up with him, I have no idea. But they ended up together.

And did it work?

Well, yeah, but there were volcanic moments, certainly. But they're still together, and there still are rather volcanic moments. And a good example of how the relationship works is a story my mom once told me. They were dating at the time, and my stepdad was really into his cars. Nice car, hotrods, that kinda stuff. And they were out on a date, and she had to pee. And he started messing with her, which he does to this day, by sort of swerving, going over bumps, all of that kind of stuff. And she took it upon herself to pull her pants down and pee right in his car. [CHUCKLE] And I think that story pretty much covers the dynamics of that relationship; that's sort of what it's like. So anyway, I went from that sort of leisure suit, leather sandal, condominium, Korean condominium world to Kaneohe, then Kahaluu. And I'm not talking Ahuimanu Kahaluu, I'm talking past Hygienic Store towards Waiahole Kahaluu. And that's where I spent most of my youth.

And what happened to your father and then your stepmother as well?

Yeah. So, my father was a mortgage banker here. And when I was about four, I think, he remarried, and they moved to Gaithersburg, Maryland. And they had this beautiful house on a hill, colonial two-story, bla-bla-bla. He'd drive around in his Corvette, and all of that. And I'd visit during summer vacations. So I'd go to Maryland, for the summer, and then eventually, they moved to California, first Orange County for a little while, and then they ended up in a little town called Soma, California, which has about twenty thousand people in it. It's grape vineyards as far as the eye can see. And so he worked in Fresno, which was about thirty minutes north.

And how often did you see him?

I'd go there for summers. And there was this—well, one of the things that my mom, as I was growing up, what she saw was that it was sort of this, oh-oh moment. And I don't think it's regret, but it's this, Should I have brought my son to Kahaluu moment. Because I think that, like I said about the suit, the putting yourself—yeah, that was out the window. And she started developing this thing about public school. No public school, it's a mantra for her, and it scared her. So what she started doing was, she started pushing me to go live in California with my father. And so, she finally succeeded in the fourth grade. Up until then, I was just going for summer vacations. And then so, I finally moved there when I

was about ten years old. And I stayed there for about three years. And finally, I had enough.

Had enough of what?

I mean, it was the same thing every year. I would be there, I would be miserable, and then the school year would go on, and I'd be fine. I had friends up there, everything normal. Normal childhood, all of that kinda stuff. I even played soccer, which was weird, because where I'm from, we didn't even know what soccer was. But, so I played a year of soccer in California, played the trombone. These were things that I wasn't even really aware of up until that point. And I'd be fine at the end of the year. But then I'd come back here, and I had my brother here, I had cousins here, and we'd do stuff like we'd camp at Kaena Point, we'd go diving, we'd go fishing, and we'd do all of that. And when it was time to leave to go back to California, I didn't want to go back. And then so, finally what happened was the summer after my sixth grade year, I was at the airport, my family was at the airport, about to ship me back to California. And I said, No, I don't want to back.

How old were you then?

Twelve.

Twelve.

And my stepfather took my side and said, 'cause my mom was saying, You gotta get on the plane, you gotta get on the plane.

And I know that was a key moment for you.

That was huge.

It was your stepfather coming up and sticking up for you, right?

M-hm.

That was what was so important about it?

I felt like it wasn't like that. But as a twelve-year-old kid, you're thinking in more black and white terms, right? So it's, you're either with me, you're against me. And it seemed like at that moment, that he was the only one on my side. Which is wrong, which is definitely wrong. Because my mother had ... it was all for good intentions, obviously, my parents in California wanted me back. To them, I was their kid. Bring my kid back. But at the time, as a twelve-year-old, you're thinking, Well, this guy is the only one who understands what I'm getting at.

So here we have conflict, having to decide between his family on the mainland and his family here in Hawaii. The catalyst that helps resolve the conflict? Chris' stepfather, who backs up his decision and becomes the role model who has a huge influence on Chris McKinney's life. For those who've read The Tattoo, this is all starting to sound familiar.

You know, especially in Tattoo, part of the story is about father seeking to toughen his son. I just make this wild, random guess and—

Yeah.

—figure it's biographical. So ... which father?

Oh, the stepfather. And I can't remember it, but I can just imagine what must have been the look on his face the first time he saw me when I was about two or three years old.

Because of the leisure suit?

Because of the way my mom had dressed me, and all.

And he said, I'm gonna do something with this kid.

And he must have—yeah, he just must have taken one look at me and thought, What in the world is this woman doing to this poor kid? So, think about it this way. When I first moved to Kaneohe, 'cause we lived with his parents for about oh, I don't know, about a year before he bought the house in Kahaalu. I was used to having professional haircuts. He cut mine and my stepbrother's hair with a razorblade. When we had a little bit of a fever, he'd stick us in freezing cold water. Basically, it was sort of like it almost felt like, even though it was the 1970s, early 1980s, that we were living in some sort of time warp plantation sort of the way you were brought up thing. And even his stories often are about the stories that he seems to enjoy telling the most are stories that involve people doing spectacularly crazy things. And so, that's part of, I think for him, at least at the time, is part of what being a man is about. To not show the next guy that you're not just tougher than him, but you're crazier than him, that you're willing to go further than he is willing to go, and he better recognize that before he messes with you, basically. So, The Tattoo, if it wasn't for my stepfather, The Tattoo probably would not have been The Tattoo.

Being crazier than the next guy, willing to go further. Aren't these the kind of characters to which we gravitate? The outcast, the anti-hero, the off the deep end villain. For Chris McKinney, it was haircuts with a razor, or defying his mainland family, a wealth of experience to dig into and expose. But even the best experiences need the right tools.

So you obviously had material to be a writer, but were you thinking about being a writer?

Absolutely not. I was thinking again, remember, in some ways, I am my mother's son. And it is that cliché immigrant Asian story, or that philosophy, in that they want their children to succeed financially. I mean, that is the most important thing you can do in life, is you get a good job, and you make a lot of money. And I think that hearing my mother and my grandparents and stuff talk like that, all of my life, that I bought into that more than anything else. Art, that's not what I'm gonna do; I'm going to make money. So for a long time, the plan, at least from about high school and for most of my undergrad, I was going to become a lawyer, an attorney. And then what had happened was that I spent probably too much time playing ukulele and drinking beer, and playing Nintendo during my undergrad that I needed to go to grad school in order to get into a good law school. So yeah, and at the same time, I had my bachelor's degree in English. During my bachelor's degree in English, I was

parking cars for a living. After I completed my bachelor's in English, I was still parking cars for a living. So either way, I thought that grad school, whether it would be an avenue to law school or anything, was probably a good idea, because I didn't want to park cars for the rest of my life. Which was what it felt like. So it wasn't until I went to grad school as an unclassified graduate student and again, I was very lucky because the professors who would take me, one being Joy Marcella, and the other one being Phil Damon, and another one, all three of them in the same semester being Ian MacMillan, when I wrote for them, they were all very encouraging. And I thought, Maybe I can do this.

Did you have a sense that your writing was fresh, and that you knew a world that most people hadn't written about? If they knew it, they didn't write about it.

Yeah. Quite honestly, it's because if you were to look into the sort of educational background of, let's say, all of the kids my age within that square two miles of where I grew up, I would put money down on the fact that I may be one of three that actually graduated from college. If that. So, in the sense that I was sitting there and I was writing stories among whatever, seventeen, eighteen other people, yeah, there was definitely nobody else writing the kinda stuff that I was writing.

Would you talk about some more of the influences on your writing? What, and who have influenced your writing?

There's a list of teachers that I'm thankful that I had. The first great teacher I had was a guy named Mr. Guerrero, and this was when I was living in California. He was fantastic. He assigned the class a book, *Animal Farm*, that was the first novel that I had read that just totally resonated with me. And, at the time, I wasn't thinking that I wanted to be a writer, but it was the first time that I saw, and I was in awe of what you could do with a book. At first, we read it, and then of course, it was this thing, this power corrupt scheme and all of that. And, I'd seen that before. But, when you find out that it's based on the Bolshevik Revolu, that just blew my mind. Wait a minute, so this guy took history, he put it on some generic farm, and in that last moment, of course, when the animals are looking through the window and they can't tell the difference between the pigs and the farmers, the human farmers, I mean, talk about an ending that I will never forget. So that was the first book that blew me away. And then in high school, I had a couple of good English teachers. I think one of 'em still teaches at Mid Pac. Mrs. Takeshita, Mrs. Takabayashi; they were really good, and they were always encouraging. So I had teachers, and then there were books that influenced me. Shakespeare, Mac Beth particularly resonated with me when I read it in eleventh grade in high school. So that was the second story that just sort of blew me. Later on, stuff like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was huge for me. Still love that novel. *Native Son* by Richard Wright. And then later, Richard Price's *Clockers* was a book that did a lot for me. And the last thing that really blew me away, that I think had a sort of permanent impact on me is not even a book, it's a television series by David Simon called *The Wire*. To me, more vast than ninety-nine percent of the novels I've ever read.

Why?

I really don't know he did it, but usually in a novel, even a relatively long one, you might see three or four character arcs happening simultaneously. But man, in *The Wire*, you have over twenty over the series. So you sort of see these characters, tension and all of that sort of building for them, and their lives going in a direction, whether it be up or down. And you see this happening with, it seems like, over two dozen characters. And to keep that all straight and together into one coherent story, to me is amazing. And as a storyteller, I think that genre lends itself. There's so much opportunity there.

Where most of us see chaotic times and troubled souls, writers see opportunity. But the opportunities that make for a good novel can sometimes hit too close to home.

How did you get your knowledge of some of the things you talk about? You know, the gambling and homeless camps, and addiction, and gangs.

So, some of it's firsthand. Unfortunately, I know a lot of people, I'm related to some people who have had their bouts of legal trouble. So they're sources. So over the years, I've collected different friends. And collected is probably a bad word to use. But because I think I get along, it doesn't matter what your background is, I think that I can talk to you, because I had practice at that. So whenever I'm working on something set over here, finding a source or being able to find somebody to talk to and tell me how their world actually works has never been that difficult.

Do any of the people you write about, in a thinly or majorly not that that's a word, or disguised way, do they come back at you and say, Hey, brah, why'd you do that to me? Or your family members. People know you're talking about your dad, that your brother lives in Mililani Mauka. Any fallout that means something to you?

No. I mean, my stepfather always had a sense of humor about it. Whatever. He was aware of the storyline in *The Tattoo*, and there are similarities there. And he seems fine. He's fine with it. I think, though, the only time that it sort of had emotional impact for me was that there's that character in *The Tattoo* who ends up running his wife off the road, killing her, and then killing himself. An incident like that happened while I was growing up in Kahaluu. The family friend who did it, he was close. Basically, my dad cosigned the loan for his truck, he taught my brother, my older brother, my stepbrother how to drive standard. I mean, coolest guy in the world, right? And then he did that years later, and nobody, they had a hard time understanding that. So anyway, there's the incident. I mean, there's that shared incident. I'm not saying that the character in the novel is supposed to be him. But that incident is portrayed in the novel. And years later, I was doing a writing presentation workshop thing or whatever, and this was just a couple years ago his daughter was there. And, I hadn't seen her since she was a baby, so I didn't even recognize her or anything like that. And

she asked me if the character in the book is supposed to be her dad, if that's what he was like, and no. I mean, the guy I knew was nothing but the coolest guy in the world to me. So he's not supposed to be the character. And yeah, so that was the only time that I thought, okay, I should maybe be a little bit more careful about this. But other than that.

But artistic license—

Artistic license.

You pick and choose—

Yeah, in fact, to me, the fear, if you're going to fear those things, don't write. Because that's some of the best stuff, some of the best ideas, some of the best things that you can plug into your story will be things that may be scary and things that there's actual risk in sort of hurting somebody's feelings, or making somebody mad. If you're gonna refuse to do that kinda stuff, find another vocation.

How do you feel about high school students getting *The Tattoo* as required or recommended reading in many schools?

Thankful. I mean, at first, it was weird. So, when the book first came out, and people would come up to me and say, I don't read, but my teacher assigned this book, and I had to read it, and it was *The Tattoo*, at first, I didn't really know what to say to that, 'cause I just thought it was strange. But at this point, ten years later, eleven years later, I'm grateful. Something like that would never have occurred when I was in high school. I mean, high school, you were taught *The Canon*, *Dead White Males*. So, I think that it's interesting to see that there's more of a progressive thing going on in high schools, where teachers are allowed and some of the language in that book is kind of foul. So it's gratifying to see that they have the courage not only to buck the idea that everything has to come from the Western canon, but also that they can take a little bit of risk with what they include in the curriculum.

For Chris McKinney, life experiences filled with leisure suits, a strict upbringing, and growing up with two families gave him material. So, how is Chris raising his own child?

How are you raising your daughter in Mililani?

It's um ...

And how old is she now?

My daughter is seven years old. And she's great. But as I'm raising her, I'm doing so understanding that she will probably not know some stuff that I know. She's being raised in a very different way than I was raised. And, just simple stuff, like, Don't turn your back on the ocean. Being able to sort of navigate through the Kaneohe Bay reefs with a flat bottom boat. Even just being able to operate a outboard motor in general. These are things that ... how to hunt, all of this kinda stuff, she won't know how to do these things. And so, I guess I would be guilty of raising her like an American suburbanite would. Trying to teach her to

be studious, trying to make sure that working with her when it comes to academic stuff, asking her what she wants to sign up for. She's taking ballet, she's taking musical theater now. So I don't know. I don't know how I feel about that. I mean, on one hand you think that you're giving your child, or hopefully you're giving the child the tools to succeed, whatever that means, when they get older. But at the same time, it's weird; you feel like you're depriving them of something as well. So I don't claim to know exactly what I'm doing.

Did you think of splitting the difference and taking her to Kaneohe Bay to fish, or—

Oh, I wish she'd be more into it. But that was the thing, though. I wasn't really into it either. I just got dragged kicking; it didn't matter if I was into it, I was gonna learn it. So I guess that might be the difference. If she were into it, I probably would do more of that stuff. But I mean, she likes going to the beach, but she's more of, I want to play in the sand, not go out in a channel, and what about sharks, all of this kinda stuff. So, the idea would be, do I regret not forcing her, 'cause I would have to force her to do more of that. And there might be, there probably is a little bit of regret that I'm not more firm. And I'm even more embarrassed to say that now, what if she were a boy, would that make a difference? I'm not sure.

Would you force her because you're a tough guy?

Yeah, I'm not sure.

Or force him, I should say.

Force, yeah. I hope that's not true, but it might be. And in fact, I had said when my wife and I first—we had our daughter, I told her once that I'm glad we had a daughter, because I don't know what kind of father I'd be to a son. I'm not sure. I don't know.

We're fortunate that we live in such a diverse place as Hawaii. Look around you. For every person you see, there is a story waiting to be told. Maybe there's a writer who just needs a bit of passion, encouragement, and the right tools to become the next Chris McKinney. For Long Story Short, and PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. *A hui hou kakou.*

For audio and written transcripts of this program, and all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit pbshawaii.org.

Your daughter will have many books to read when she grows up, that her dad wrote. Any trepidation about her reading your books and seeing the real world life there?

No. I mean, actually, I'm relieved that that stuff is around, so I won't be this sort of ... hopefully, this blabbing, semi-senile old man who sort of repeats his stories. And, when I was kid this is what we did. And then, with her, we can hopefully talk about other things, and I can say, If you sort of want to know what I was

thinking when I was younger, what sort of things I experienced when I was younger and all of that kinda stuff, here, you can read about it.

No problem.

No problem.