

The Dual Lives of Nora Okja Keller

An Interview

By Terry Hong

After four or five conversations on the phone and numerous e-mails, Nora Okja Keller and I finally recognize one another. “Oh, my goodness, I have your fingerprints in my house!” she laughs gleefully. “No wonder your voice sounds so familiar!”

More than a decade ago, Keller and I took the same modern literature seminar at the University of California, Santa Cruz, “the only time I’ve lived outside of Hawai’i [since moving there as a five-year-old in 1969],” she remembers. As we were all poor graduate students at the time, I picked up copies of the latest assigned title, Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Tripmaster Monkey*, at a discount bookstore over the hill in Palo Alto. “Of course, I still have the book,” says Keller. “Maxine is one of my heroes.”

My memory is suddenly crystal-clear, and I can see Keller sitting at the long table the day that Kingston came to talk to the class. Keller was three seats away, her thick wavy hair pulled back low in a single ponytail, wearing a red sweater with horizontal dark stripes across the chest. “I wore that sweater all the time,” she recalls. “I don’t have it anymore, but I still have the ponytail.”

The 10-plus years since our class together—neither of us finished our Ph.D.s, although she is a dissertation away—have brought Keller worldwide acclaim as a writer who somehow manages to combine words filled with beauty, eloquence, and grace to write books filled with horror and pain. In 1997 Keller made her literary debut with her novel *Comfort Woman*, which is about a Korean woman who survives the unimaginable brutality of being a sex slave for Japanese soldiers during World War II, and the woman’s later relationship with her unknowing, Americanized young daughter. In spite of the nightmarish contents of the book, Keller was rightly lauded for her hauntingly lyrical prose, eventually winning an American Book Award.

Keller’s follow-up, *Fox Girl*, which appeared last spring, takes readers back to post-Korean War “America Town,” where the abandoned, racially mixed children of U.S. soldiers fought for bare survival and Korean women continued to service occupying GIs in order to put food on their shabby dinner tables. At the center is Hyun Jin, the eponymous “fox girl,” a model student from a seemingly loving home. Hyun Jin is thrown out in the streets and forced to create a makeshift family with her childhood best friend, Sookie, who becomes a child prostitute, and Lobetto, a neighborhood pimp who is also just a young boy waiting in vain for his American father to claim him.

As disturbing as they are unforgettable, both *Comfort Woman* and *Fox Girl* give voice to the overlooked and forgotten victims of society’s mistakes. Searching for her own voice

is a struggle Keller remembers well. As the child of a German engineer father and a Korean entrepreneur mother, Keller can still recall the discomfort she felt as a young child growing up in Honolulu, trying to fit into a new culture as a recent immigrant. “First grade was so traumatic,” she says. “I was FOB [fresh off the boat] and felt so isolated from the other kids. Public school was very tough.”

Thankfully, by the time Keller entered Punahou School—an elite prep academy that eventually led her to psychology and English degrees from the University of Hawai’i—home could never be anywhere else but Hawai’i. “I have too many roots here,” she says. “I could never live anywhere else.”

The Bloomsbury Review: *How did you choose to be a writer?*

Nora Okja Keller: Writing is something I’ve always done. Even as a little kid, I always kept notebooks of little stories, poems, illustrations. It was something on the side, a hobby. I don’t think I ever made the choice that I was going to become a writer as a career. In part, this was because when I was growing up—and this is common in a lot of immigrant families—I felt I

had to have a secure financial future for my mother’s sake, and anything artistic did not fit into that category. When I started writing *Comfort Woman*, I did so in my spare time, late at night. I was at home with my older daughter at the time, who was about a year old. Writing was something I did in secret, something I never discussed with friends, other than a writing group I belonged to. So when the book came out, people were so surprised: “Gosh, I didn’t know you were a writer.” I was shocked that people called me a writer. It was a real shift in how I identified myself in terms of what I did. When I was on book tour and had to say “I’m a writer,” the first few times the words choked in my throat. I felt so pretentious.

TBR: *Now do you feel like a writer?*

NOK: I’m much more comfortable now, saying that I am a writer. But it is still ironic, because I’m only really asked about this after a book is done, after I’m finished. So when I say “I’m a writer” it’s usually when I’m not really writing—so there’s still a sense of awkwardness.

TBR: *How did Comfort Woman come about?*

NOK: I hadn’t heard the term before 1993, which is when I went to a symposium on human rights at the University of Hawai’i. I was three months pregnant at the time and having lots of morning sickness, so I almost didn’t go. A friend called to tell me about this woman coming from Korea, a comfort woman. I was totally unprepared for what the lecture was about. The former comfort woman spoke through a translator about her experiences as a young girl when she was stolen by the Japanese army and forced to become a comfort woman, a sex slave. I couldn’t believe that people didn’t know about this, that we don’t learn about this in history books, so I tried to get my friend to write an article about it. My friend turned it back on me and said, “You should write

BOOKS BY NORA OKJA KELLER

Comfort Woman (Viking, 1997)

Fox Girl (Viking, 2002)

Intersecting Circles: The Voices of Hapa Women in Poetry and Prose

Edited by Nora Okja Keller & Marie Hara (*Bamboo Ridge*, 1999)

about this. You're Korean."

But the topic was too big. I couldn't even find the words to express how horrified I was, much less find the vocabulary to talk about the pain in this woman's life. But her story took hold of me. I felt so haunted, I began dreaming about images of blood and war, and waking with a start. Finally, I realized that the only way to exorcise these dreams and the story from my mind was to write it down. So I got up one night and began to write bits and pieces of my dreams and the comfort woman's words. That became the short story "Mother-Tongue" [which won a Pushcart Prize in 1995] and, later, chapter 2 of *Comfort Woman*.

TBR: *And how did Fox Girl come about?*

NOK: I see *Fox Girl* and *Comfort Woman* as being linked together. *Fox Girl* was the natural follow-up: What happened to these women after they served as comfort women? I feel the women in *Fox Girl* are the descendants of the comfort women. It's a natural place to go—the "America Towns." So many of the women who came back from Japan after World War II did not, could not, return to their families because they felt so ashamed and ostracized. They had no other choice but to continue to be prostitutes. And the children, especially the daughters, remained trapped in that cycle.

TBR: *You write about incredibly difficult subjects, about people with harrowing lives. Do your characters haunt you? If so, how do you coexist with them?*

NOK: I feel like I live a dual life. My waking life, which is my real life, is centered around my family—my two daughters, the mother-daughter things we do, arts and crafts, piano lessons, school pageants. Then there's my other life, my writing life, which usually takes place in the dark of night when the kids are sleeping. It really is as if I enter another world: I go to another place, inside of myself, and it is a dark place. I had trouble shaking that darkness when I got up in the morning, especially with *Fox Girl*. *Comfort Woman* was more balanced—Beccah [the Americanized daughter] provided a type of relief. With *Fox Girl*, that darkness was relentless. Toward the end of writing the book, I felt that parts of the characters were seeping into my own character—I was becoming more hard-edged, cynical. It was a difficult place to be. So the next book I write is going to be a happy book, a more balanced book.

TBR: *Would you say you have a writing process?*

NOK: With *Comfort Woman*, I tricked myself into writing a book. I didn't think I could actually write a novel, so I approached each chapter as if it were a short story, a self-contained work. I ended up writing all the Akiko [the mother] chapters first. Then the daughter's story, again as short pieces, of her living her life and speaking to her mother. Once those were done, I literally lined up the chapters and started putting them together as a puzzle. Then I had an arc of an interwoven story—and it became more visible where the gaps in the story were. I placed pieces of paper to signify each of the gaps—to tell myself to figure out how to get from point A to point B. Those became the bridge chapters, and that's how all the

chapters got woven together into what became *Comfort Woman*.

With *Fox Girl*, I knew from the beginning it was going to be a novel. Knowing that influenced the structure and made it more thought-driven, more linear than *Comfort Woman*. I was much more conscious of the different choices that could be made, so in a way, writing *Fox Girl* was harder because I was so much more aware that I was writing a novel. They were very different experiences, writing the two books.

TBR: *What do you hope your daughters will learn from your books?*

NOK: When they're older and they read my books, I want them to get a sense of history, a sense of empowerment from what these women characters had to go through in order to survive. I want them to have a sense of the love between mother and child in both books, and how enduring that love is. But I also hope they're getting something out of the books now. My older daughter, Tae, started going to my readings when she was three. My younger daughter, Sunhi, now goes. They both see me go through the process of writing, and I talk with them about the characters in my books—only the G-rated stuff, of course. They understand that a book or a painting doesn't emerge fully formed, that it grows little by little every day. I hope they learn that art is not something far away, that it can be a part of everyday life. It's a lesson I'm still trying to integrate for myself.

Tae likes to write in her own notebooks, and then discuss writing. I remember one day I was so grouchy, and Tae looked at me and said, "Oh, you're having a bad day—is it writer's block?" She patted me on the shoulder and said, "What I do is, I find my stories from my own life." She reminds me of the enjoyment of writing.

TBR: *Has your mother read your work?*

NOK: I don't think she's ever read *Comfort Woman* all the way through, at least not in English. When it was translated into Korean, that's maybe when she read it through. I had hoped the book would be published locally in Hawai'i by Bamboo Ridge, and we thought maybe 1,000 copies would get printed, so I wasn't even worried that my mother might see it. Then I started getting very nervous when the book got picked up by Viking and 35,000 copies came out. I called my mother, told her I would be asked to do interviews and that I would be asked if the book was autobiographical, especially the part about my mother being a comfort woman. Her reaction was great: She said, "Oh if it sells more books, then tell them I was a comfort woman." So I was relieved of that burden, which allowed me to go places with my writing that I might not have otherwise, because I was afraid of what people might assume about my mother or my family.

Comfort Woman is autobiographical in the scenes that talk about the mother-infant bonding, because at the time my daughter had just been born and I was nursing. So all those tactile feelings, those sensations of being a new mother, that's all in there. Also, there are certain parts that reflect my relationship with my own mother—especially during my teenage years when

my mother would say, “Just wait until you have children of your own!”

TBR: *What’s it like to meet your readers?*

NOK: For the most part, meeting my readers is a really, really good experience. I get validation in ways that I often don’t expect. For example, at a recent reading in New York City, I met an African-American man who had been stationed in Korea at the same time that *Fox Girl* was set. I was very nervous about meeting him, because I was worried that he was going to tell me about all the details that I got wrong in the book. Instead, he shared with me an album full of photos he had brought, and he said, “I’ve been waiting for 30 years for someone to write this story.” In the album, he pointed out a kid to me, saying “Look! That’s Lobetto!” Every once in a while, I meet such readers who validate my stories. It’s amazing my books can touch them in such a personal way.

It was the same with *Comfort Woman*. People would tell me, “My mother was like that.” There is always someone who comes up to me to share something personal and offer that validation. I really like to meet my readers. Sometimes they open up the book to me in a way I never thought about before.

TBR: *Does being hapa [of Hawai’ian origin; refers to being ethnically half and half] inform your work?*

NOK: It’s not something I really think about when I write, but all those things—being *hapa*, being a Korean-American woman, being “local” in Hawai’i—all that gets filtered through my work. I try and leave those identity labels behind and work on just the story, but when I go back, I can see how *hapa* characters come out in *Fox Girl*, for example, which is filled with *hapa* characters in a no-man’s land who serve as the buffer between Korean and American societies. Only after I’ve written can I see the effect.

At the same time, I’m also aware of being part of a legacy of Korean-American writers. What I read growing up was white-washed, without any ethnic specificity. As I got older, I started to question what was “local,” what was Asian-American, what was Korean-American—and how my own writing might fit in. My first Asian-American literature class was at the University of Hawai’i when I was a junior. Until then, the only term I had heard was “Oriental.” For the first time, I got the chance to read Maxine Hong Kingston, Frank Chin, Jade Snow Wong, Joy Kogawa, and so on. I was feeding myself a literary history. But at that time, the whole idea of Asian-American literature was either Chinese-American or Japanese-American writing. I asked if there were any Korean-American writers, and the professor said no. I remember feeling deflated, wondering where to look next. First I found Cathy Song, who is half Korean, and that was a start. As I researched further, I discovered a whole history of Korean-American writers. Looking back, it was like forming a literary genealogy. When you can find others like yourself, you can say, “Hey, I’m part of this history, this very long history.” Before, American literature for me was Steinbeck, Faulkner, and Hemingway. But there’s also Younghill Kang, Ty Pak, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and other incredible writers who

came before me.

TBR: *Are you an avid reader? Have you always been?*

NOK: Yes, I’ve always been a reader. My earliest memories are of reading. The only time that I’m not reading is when I’m writing. When I’m in the midst of a novel, and it’s coming very quickly, then I try not to read anything that might overlap with my work. I try to isolate myself in that sense. Right now I’m not writing, so I’m trying to catch up on my reading.

TBR: *Who are some of your favorite authors and favorite titles?*

NOK: I had the traditional curriculum when I went to school—Steinbeck, Faulkner, Hemingway—and I think they form the backbone of American literature. They make up a foundation that you can choose to either rebel against or use to strengthen your own work. As for other writers, I have to commend Maxine Hong Kingston for giving me a whole new perspective on what Asian-American literature can be. I also enjoy the works of Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison, and Isabel Allende.

TBR: *What’s on your nightstand now?*

NOK: Chitra Divakaruni’s *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*, Tess Uriza Holthe’s *When the Elephants Dance*, and Kazuo Ishiguro’s *When We Were Orphans*. And you can add Ishiguro to my list of literary masters. I have this small window before I get back to work, and I have so much to catch up on.

TBR: *What will you be working on next?*

NOK: I can feel something percolating right now. It’s going to be a follow-up to *Fox Girl*—you can see a glimpse into a sequel in the epilogue. It will again be linked to both *Fox Girl* and *Comfort Woman*—and I do see the three as a trilogy. I always start with a blank page, which is terrifying because I’m confronted with thoughts of “How am I going to put it all together?” I want to challenge myself to make this next book completely different from the other two, to put a twist on it either through structure or narrative voice—and I’d like to finish it much faster than I did *Fox Girl*. The new book will move more into contemporary times. *Comfort Woman* was the 1940s, *Fox Girl* the 1960s, and the new book will go into the 1980s, a period of time about which I’m much more conscious. Plus, both my children will start school in September, and what an opportunity that will be to write! I just hope that I’ll use that time wisely, and not go to the mall or watch bad TV. I’m going to have to try and resist the temptation of those lures! ■

INTERVIEWER: **Terry Hong** writes frequently on books, theater, and film. She is coauthor of *Eastern Standard Time: A Guide to Asian Influence on American Culture: From Astro Boy to Zen Buddhism*.