While a Hawaiian vacation may not be on the agenda this summer, let "Cookie Lily" ride you over until your next tropical getaway. You'll have a front-row seat at the Senior Ms. Oahu Pageant, observe the lengthy preparations for an authentic luau and spend the day selling hot dogs at a beachside stand. Even though the story lines often deal with tough topics, author Mary Troy is a master at tucking humor into her tales. You'll explore the parts of "paradise" that most visitors never have a chance to see, with plenty of opportunities for chuckles along the way.

Now an associate professor of English at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, Troy lived in Hawaii for six years during the late '70s and early '80s, working as a technical writer at the University of Hawaii. While she was there, she tried to sign up for an already full anthropology class, ending up in a creative writing course instead. She was 33 when she wrote her first story, and she hasn't stopped writing since.

In "Cookie Lily," Troy uses Hawaii's idyllic landscape primarily as a means to juxtapose the characters' difficult struggles. She said it's "interesting to set unfulfilled desires and needs, insecurities and injustice against the true beauty that surrounds all the characters almost all of the time."

Although the women in the book's nine stories and one novella have all been dealt their share of hard knocks — unfaithful lovers, the sudden deaths of both parents and a father behind bars for bribery and extortion — they remain optimistic. "Hope is ... a constant that no one can live without," Troy said. "It keeps my mind about haoles, just about me.”

"It's more than the thick, clean sand and the salt air," I said. "It's because Chinese here are stingy pakes, Filipinos are bok-boks, Arabs have halitosis, Koreans are manic paranoid, portagies are dumb, Hawaiians are lazy, but as haoles we're loud, rude cheats. ... It all evens out here." 

Those familiar with Troy's first two books — "Joe Baker is Dead" and "The Alibi Cafe and Other Stories" — already know that she creates page-turning situations for her characters, and "Cookie Lily" follows suit. That's right, just go ahead and try to put down a story about a woman who literally calls up and "orders" a homeless man from a local cable show to masquerade as her boyfriend. Then start enjoying your trip.