



LITERARY FEAST

HARD KNOCKS, CONSTANT HOPE AND HAWAIIAN BEAUTY INFUSE THESE SHORT STORIES

BY EMILY LOWERY

While a Hawaiian vacation may not be on the agenda this summer, let “Cookie Lily” tide 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.

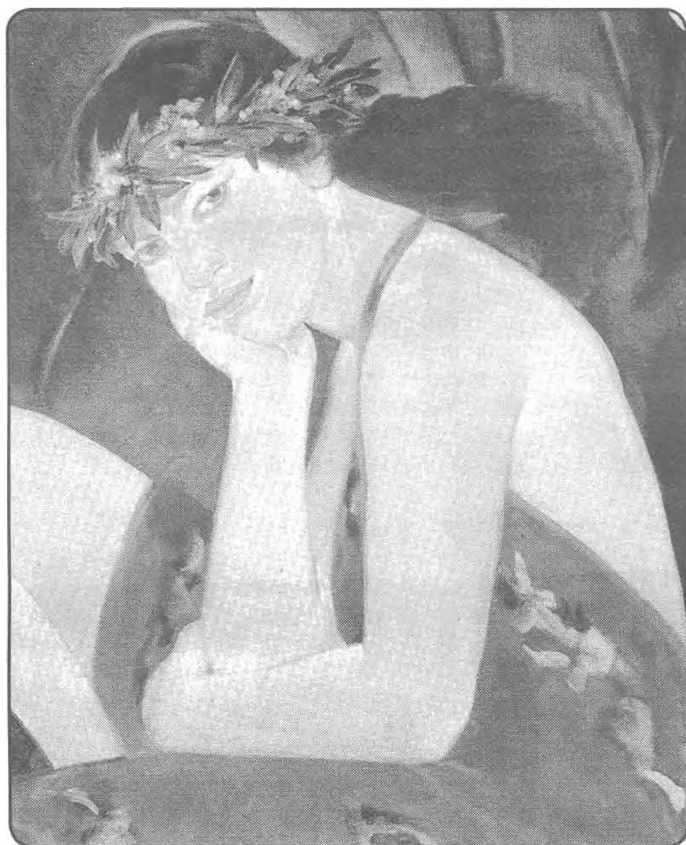
In “Cookie Lily,” Troy uses Hawaii’s idyllic landscape primarily as a means to juxtapose the characters’ difficult struggles. She said it’s “interesting to set unfulfilled desires and needs, insecurities and injustice against the true beauty that surrounds all the characters almost all of the time.”

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 characters going, as does a faith that no one can lose all the time.” Lily, for example, the heroine of the book’s title novella, is struggling with the aftermath of her most recent failed relationship (including a baby on the way) and a string of unsuccessful businesses (“jewelry design, the massage service, the one-of-a-kind clown macramé wall hangings and plant holder business”). But even as she starts yet another sure-to-fail venture, baking cookies in her mother’s kitchen, Lily manages to concentrate on the blooming poinsettias along the driveway and the fact that there’s “hope in beginning something in January.”

Troy noted that escape is another prevalent theme throughout her book. For example, Lily – who has always appreciated beauty – eventually becomes the housekeeper for a wealthy couple. In this new job, she’s able to retreat from her worries for a brief time each day by enjoying her employers’ beautiful furnishings, “an atmosphere that said trouble should be left behind at the main gate leading to the home.”

In “Fantasy,” Ellen finds an escape from her tendency to “always be pulled and stretched, letting herself be formed and reformed to please those she loved” by hiding out at a Korean bar all night and imitating Naomi, a tough, glamorous hostess. Dorothy, in “Falling in Love,” tries to flee from a painful divorce by moving from the mainland to Hawaii, imagining that no one could be unhappy in Honolulu; even the name “Honolulu” was fun to say. And in “Luau,” Syd Yasuda attempts to escape her Japanese heritage by dating a Hawaiian and befriending a *haole* (a negative term in Hawaii used to describe a white person).

“Luau,” the collection’s first story, is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the diversity of cultures saturating the pages of “Cookie Lily.” Troy’s characters are also Polynesian, Filipino, Chinese and Portuguese, and they all endure their own ethnic stereotypes. Troy said she experienced Hawaii’s racial prejudices firsthand while surrounded by co-workers of Japanese descent. “I



Detail of cover art: “Mele Kalikimaka ‘89” by Pegge Hopper

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was not liked or welcomed at first for being a *haole* – the white devil as it were – who is known to be a loud, rude schemer, not to be trusted. ... I overcame the prejudices eventually and have some very dear friends back there still, but people [would say] things to me like, ‘You don’t even seem *haole*.’ I was not able to change their minds about *haoles*, just about me.”

Overall, though, Troy said she was “impressed with the diversity” in Hawaii. She appreciated the population’s ability to be politically incorrect by judging an ethnic group with broad stereotyping, while at the same time not taking it too seriously since there were so many groups to vilify at once. This idea comes across in the story “Island Entertainment,” when the main character, originally from the Midwest, tries to explain to a friend why she never wants to move back home:

*“It’s more than the thick, clean sand and the salt air,” I said. “It’s because Chinese here are stingy pakés, Filipinos are bok-boks, Arabs have halitosis, Koreans are manic paranoids, portagee 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 Café 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. **S**

“Cookie Lily” by Mary Troy
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