

## A New Path to Paradise

By Catherine Browder

Book Review:

*Cookie Lily: Stories*, by Mary Troy. Southern Methodist University Press, 2004.

For many of us, the Hawaiian Islands conjure up a Technicolor landscape more likely inspired by travel photos than experience. Fortunately, the over-heated paradise of the imagination is not the Hawaii that concerns Mary Troy in her most recent story collection, *Cookie Lily*. Her Hawaii is a quirky place; cultures clash and ethnicities meld and no one finds much peace. Even with their subversive humor, delicious absurdities and pitch-perfect dialogue, Troy's island stories contain a world of hurt.

A sensual landscape exists in these 10 stories but as a deceptive backdrop. While the plumeria blooms and the surf pounds, the drama takes place among a cast of remarkably original characters involved in often-hilarious, always-offbeat situations. Here, daughters of colorful ancestry struggle against self-engrossed mothers, while expatriate *haoles* try to "pass" by working on their tans. Here, characters give each other "the stink eye" and resist "growing into their people."

When the jaunty narrator of "Island Entertainment" meets her new neighbor, an aging homosexual and day-care operator, he is not at all what she expects. Introducing herself, she explains why she, a Mainlander, stayed on. Her blunt remarks provide, on one level, a sly way to read these stories.

"It's more than the thick, clean sand and the salt air. . . . 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." I hoped I had not offended him, but I

did not know how else to explain it. "It all evens out here," I said.

The quiet and satisfying "Talk Story" involves Lena Yim, née Kihara, who is unsure how her recent marriage came to pass. Lena is unsure of many things, including her parents' relationship. An old-fashioned leftie, her mother rants while her long-suffering father takes refuge in his tent. Their marriage, her marriage, her difficult job managing one of husband's restaurants: all confound her. To regain a sense of who she is and what she wants, Lena talks story, a traditional island way of defining "who we were, how we got here, what any of the passed-down wisdom had to do with us. The stories made it all clear."

Troy is a master of the opening paragraph. Not one entry into a story fails to engage our interest. As "Beach Dogs" opens, "Kiki Young ordered Lonnie something-or-other from *Blessed are the Poor*, a 2 a.m. local cable show. . . ." What follows is a tale of a daughter's revenge against an ambitious and dishonest mother ("Mummers"). The dogs in questions involve Mummers' business empire, a beach chain of hot dog stands. In "Falling In Love," terse news of a suicide effectively sets up the action. Skeptical Dorothy worked with the deceased Gladys, and the event has confirmed that you must never expect too much. When Dorothy overhears two young girls on the bus talk hopefully about boyfriends, she turns around and says, "Things don't go according to plan. And if they do, either it's not enough, or it's over too soon." What is really at stake is her tentative living arrangement.

In the delightful title novella, Lily shares much with the love-shy, disappointed Dorothy.

Things really were simple. . . . One action followed another. If you fell in love with someone, he left. If you made love, you got pregnant. If you were thirty-two and broke, you moved back in with your mother and tried yet another path to success.

The new path is a cookie business. The unfaithful boyfriend/father may, or may not, return. The mother in question is a depressed Eurasian beauty who coos failure into Lily's ear. Yet Lily acquires a new lover who is enchanted with her just as she is. Not everyone admires her choice, however. When the feckless old boyfriend intrudes upon the love nest, and the lover in his underwear, Tom yells at her, "Lily . . . You can't even buy boxers with snaps anymore. Where'd you find this guy?" As one who's experienced life as a plain woman with wiry hair (a gift from her neglectful Portuguese father), Lily finds strength in her affair. By the time her child arrives, she is ready for at least one act of courage.

Occasionally, a cast of characters overwhelms a story. The funny and fast-paced beauty contest tale, "The Most Beautiful Girl in the World," includes so many family elements that we feel as if we're watching a juggler toss nine balls at once. The effort makes us dizzy. Troy also has a fondness for the quick-stop ending—a strategy to exit a narrative at its emotional peak. Instead, we're sometimes left stranded on a startling image, in lieu of closure.

But this is a quibble over taste. More important, Troy's Hawaii is a necessary corrective to our imagined one, a droll yet clear-eyed view of how luckless women retrieve their lives—and not a tourist among them. Perhaps her greatest achievement lies in her totally original situations, where hilarity and sorrow come hand in hand. Clearly, Mary Troy is one of those blessed writers who can find a story anywhere and breathe it into life.