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Band of Authors

The Massie Case meets its match in The Renshi Ladies.



FROM LEFT, POETS ANN INOSHITA, JEAN YAMASAKI TOYAMA, JULIET S. KONO AND CHRISTY PASSION.
PHOTOS: DAVID CROXFORD AND AARON K. YOSHINO

*T*his story is the unwanted

family heirloom

the ugly vase,

the chipped china,

the bastard child everyone whispers about,

but no one calls by name.

—Christy Passion

And, just like that, in the last stanza of the opening poem, Christy Passion, one of the authors of *What We Must Remember*, throws down the gauntlet to her three collaborators: Juliet S. Kono, Ann Inoshita and Jean Yamasaki Toyama. Members of a writing group, the women had taken an oath to write a series of linked poems, *renshi*, each one igniting the next. Raising the stakes, they'd publish in real time, online, every two weeks on the Bamboo Ridge website. Going all-in on the choice of a subject, they would reanimate, like spirit mediums, perhaps the most inflammatory 20th-century story in Hawai'i, the Massie Case.

In an age of HBO, Netflix, web series and podcasts, it may seem counterintuitive to claim that a poem is the best way to tell a complicated true-crime story.

The O.J. trial of its day, it was a national scandal based on a rape accusation by Navy wife Thalia Massie against five young men of color: Asian, Native Hawaiian, mixed. Mainland opinion demanded punishment, even lynching; the Territorial government, the Navy and the local press set out to steamroll judge and jury. When a vigorous defense resulted in a mistrial, Thalia's enraged mother-in-law, Grace Fortescue, masterminded the abduction—from the courtroom steps—of a freed defendant, Joseph Kahahawai. Tied to a chair, he was tortured and murdered.

The book's approach is risky and fresh, but do the poets have anything to add to the story? In addition to two excellent, recent works on the case by local academics David Stannard and John Rosa, there have been four popular books from the 1960s, a trashy '80s TV mini-series, a once-suppressed 1960 play by Dennis Carroll, period broadsheets, newspaper articles and even, earlier this year, an opera. How do you make it new?

I am the ghost of the green dress Thalia

wore when she said she was abducted

*by five “Hawaiians”
and brought to a place,
dark, isolated, desolate,
in Ala Moana*

—Juliet S. Kono

The inspired choice of the dress is one of many voices from limited points of view, including those who, due to caste or class, had no say (three of the four survivors never gave an interview). We hear the mother of the victim, sorrowing; we go inside the minds of the perpetrators, including Grace Fortescue, as she stews and lays plans; we join the struggle in the jury room. The poems advance the story by psychological as well as chronological stages.

In response a counterbalance develops.

A mother calls a princess,

Abigail Kawānanakoa, who calls

a heavyweight:

William H. Heen, born of Hawaiian and Chinese parents,

educated at Hastings Law School, first non-haole judge appointed

—Jean Yamasaki Toyama

The poor and brown may lack power, but they keep score. As the authors note in autobiographical commentaries following the poem, local memories of the case run long and deep. It’s not a chance or infrequent occurrence, getting arrested or run in by the police for the crime of your class and color. And, it’s why the Massie Case still matters.

Even readers without skin in the game may be gobsmacked by the details. Of all the twists and turns, probably the most incredible is the arrival of Clarence Darrow, defender of the Scottsboro Boys, ACLU leader, hero of the downtrodden:

All my years of fighting for the rights of blacks—

to have it come to this:

I received a cable with the prospect

of defending

*Mrs. Grace Fortescue and three men
who killed a native Hawaiian man.*

*They're paying a good sum for
my services.*

—Ann Inoshita

See how it works? In an age of HBO, Netflix, web series and podcasts, it may seem counterintuitive to claim that a poem is the best way to tell a complicated true-crime story. But this stunning communal project makes the case and more. More personal than a podcast, untethered by nonfiction's tendency to exhaust a subject (and reader), *What We Must Remember* gallops, thrillingly, like one of Shakespeare's history plays.

A bonus: The individual commentaries at the end are more than grace notes. They restart the story, as each poet discusses the challenges and doubts she faced. They didn't start as experts, and their immersion in research is a journey much like the one we take, diving with them into the past. The project makes witnesses of us all.

As a work of community, one that mirrors the effort to defend the boys from Kalihi and Makiki, *What We Must Remember* is a welcome milestone for Bamboo Ridge as it approaches its 40th anniversary. Like other BR books that become part of Island lore, this one won't sit on the shelf unread. Most copies will soon be sandy and salty from being taken to the beaches, parks and downtown streets where all this went down in 1931, places where, if you squint, it can still seem like yesterday.

Bamboo Ridge Press, 2017, 182 pages. bambooridge.com for details.



Juliet Kono



Ann Inoshita



Jean Toyama



Christy Passion