

Meḷaḷ with Robert Barclay
Interviewed by Mary Alexander
3 July 2018

Robert Barclay, who resides in Kāne‘ohe, Hawai‘i, is the award-winning author of *Meḷaḷ*, a novel that takes place in the Marshall Islands. Published in 2002, *Meḷaḷ* was short-listed for the 2003 Kiriyaama Prize, selected for the Barnes and Noble “Discover Great New Writers” program, won the Harriet Goldsberry Award, and was long-listed for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2004. The book is currently being adapted into a film titled *Until the Dolphin Flies* which will be jointly produced by Te Maka Productions in Hawai‘i, Freshwater Pictures in Australia, and Blueskin Films in New Zealand.

When Barclay was nine, he moved with his family to Kwajalein in the Marshall Islands where his dad accepted a job as an engineer for what would become the U.S. Star Wars Program. He loved growing up in the Marshall Islands fishing, diving, and exploring old bunkers (Adams). He left Kwajalein after high school, but continued to visit and even worked there for awhile. He completed *Meḷaḷ* as his Masters thesis in Creative Writing at UH Mānoa (Kiste 208), and currently serves as an English professor and the Language Arts chair at Windward Community College (“Robert Barclay,” Windward). He has three other books in print: *Hawai‘i Smiles* (2009), a collection of short stories; *HI Conflict: “Pilot”* (2016), a screenplay co-written with Stacy Fukuhara; and *Pasifika*, a novel released in June 2018. All are available for purchase on *Amazon.com*.

In general, what inspires your writing?

Being in time and place mostly, and also odd things that catch my attention. I like imagination and the creative process to be somewhat mysterious; otherwise, things seem to tend toward formula fiction/film, which I don't like.

How did you get the idea to write *Meḷaḷ* and to depict the dual parallel realities of both the physical realm (Rujen and his family) and the traditional Marshallese spiritual realm (Etao, Noniep)?

Time and place. I lived there and was about 17 at the time the novel takes place. I think any writer is drawn to writing about his or her formative years. Kwajalein was a wonderful place for me, but there was also a darkness to being there that I didn't think about until after I left. I wanted to explore that and write something that accurately captured that time and place, with as much complexity as I could without getting away from telling a good story. The dolphin scenario, absent the church stuff, actually happened, so I had that in my head. I don't know how I got the idea to use Etao, etc., but it made sense to me immediately. They were in my head too, I guess, since childhood.

Why was depicting the Marshallese spiritual realm essential to this novel? How did you learn about traditional Marshallese spiritual figures and mythology, and was that challenging to do?

I don't know if it was essential, but it was my choice, I guess, so far as my imagination led me to do it. Marshallese mythology has characters that I heard about as a child, and they and their stories provide another way of looking at things, a non-western way of explaining the nature of good and evil, of chaos and change, among other global phenomena, beginning with creation itself. Too often these stories and perspectives are erased/replaced; take Princeville on Kauai for example: those ridiculous Greco/Roman statues posing about. As I got into the novel, I did a lot of research on these traditional stories at Hamilton Library, and I was impressed at how organic and alive they were. Thus I got the idea to feature them in the '80s as characters in the novel.

On one level, while we may think the rowdy American teenage boys swamp Jebro and Nuke's boat, on another level, the disaster has been caused by Etao, who tells Noniep, "I'll make sure those friends of yours really need to make themselves a canoe!" (142). I interpreted this as meaning that while we may see the novel's Marshallese characters are victims, another possibility is that their ancestors are actually running the whole show. Is this interpretation on the right track?

Orwell invented the character Big Brother, but when we invoke that name as a way of making sense of our surveillance society and increasingly totalitarian government, we're not blaming Orwell, a real Big Brother, or the British. When we read the story of Pandora's Box, we don't arrive at the conclusion that Greeks or actual little demons are responsible for all the evil in the world. The blame for the atrocities the US committed in the Marshall Islands falls squarely on the US. The sinking of the boat in the novel is the fault of Boyd. Again, mythological characters and their stories operate as lenses into philosophically and spiritually understanding such global phenomena as evil, chaos (one of Etao's qualities, balanced by others), kindness, love, etc. It's the same way stories of Pele provide insight into the recent volcanic eruptions, and even their relation to the flooding on Kaua'i, as was described by UH Professor Ku'ualoha Ho'omanawanui in a recent news story. "Victims" is such a loaded word, saddled with a sense of helplessness, but that's not who my characters are. Sure, Jebro and his brother lose their boat and almost die, but they're angry about it and want compensation. This whole extended scene is a metaphor for what the US has done, capsizing these people, and if you read or listen to Marshallese voices—Tony DeBrum, Darlene Keju, Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, among many others—you see the same thing, a demand for justice.

If there's one idea you'd like your readers to consider after reading *Meḷal*, what would that be?

Consider caring about the Marshall Islands and its people, before they're swamped by ignorance and rising seas; and promoting peace over the horrors of never-ending war.

Have you ever had a chance to visit any off-limits islands like Tar-Wōj? Have you ever seen the Runit dome of nuclear waste storage at Enewetak atoll? If so, what were these experiences like?

I've not been to Enewetak, which is about 350 miles from Kwajalein, but I've been to Tar-Wōj and it is a beautiful island and, of course, also off-limits. A lot of Marshallese people I know feel strongly connected to these islands they can only infrequently visit.

Have you received any feedback from Marshallese readers on *Melal*, and if so, what have they said?

Yes, I've heard from many Marshallese people, and the responses have been positive.

Pasifika was just released this month, and I have not had a chance to read it. Could you tell me a little about it? I am guessing from the blurb on *Pasifika* on the Lō'ihī Press website ("A startling vision of the near future [that]...follows a group of desperate and disturbed Americans on a horrific and at times darkly comic journey") that it might be a dystopia. I'd call it pre-apocalyptic rather than dystopia. Foreign interest in the Pacific, outside of the usual plundering of resources, gets excited by two main desires: the region as a place to indulge uninhibited sexual desire, and as a proving ground for global apocalypse. Seems like an odd pair so *Pasifika* dives into the relationship between these desires.

Do you have any future writing projects in the works?

Yes: screenplays, novels, stories.

You can find Robert Barclay's books in local bookstores or online at Lō'ihī Press (<http://lohipress.com/bookstore/>), as well as at Amazon.com and other online retailers.

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