

Author Interview: Mary Rokonadravu
by Mary Alexander
13 June 2018

Out of a field of nearly 4,000 entries, “Famished Eels” by Fijian writer Mary Rokonadravu won the 2015 Commonwealth Short Story Prize for the Pacific Region; Rokonadravu was shortlisted for this prize again in 2017 with “The Brief Insignificant History of Peter Abraham Stanhope.” Her writing is fueled by her passion to give Fijians a voice in a world that threatens their authentic existence and often tries to speak for them: “I live and write in a fragile democracy. A small island country beset by issues of climate change and globalisation – I belong to peoples at the frontlines of loss and ultimate disappearance without having found a voice. It is not an easy space to inhabit. For too long, others have told our stories and that has always been painful to witness” (qtd. in Flood).

Of Fijian, Indian, and European ancestry, Rokonadravu was born on the rural island of Koro and educated at Levuka and the University of the Pacific in Suva. In 2008, she edited the first anthology of Pacific prison writing entitled *Shedding Silences: An Anthology of Writing from Fiji Prisons*. Two essays can be found on *Medium*: a critique of *Moana* entitled “Defining Good Practice in Cultural Exchange” and an homage to her mother entitled “Kasaya: The Woman Who Taught Me to Write.” Among other responsibilities, Rokonadravu teaches at the University of the Pacific in Suva as a visiting academic where she continues writing novels and “empowering the agency of Pacific peoples and challenging societal norms that perpetuate systems of injustice” (qtd. in Waqua).

Q: Who are your favorite writers? More specifically, which writers have had the biggest impact on your own writing? Are there any contemporary Pacific Islander writers that you would recommend?

What I read the most: non-fiction. A lot on scientific research and technology, specifically on media and digital technology and its impact on society. In literature, it’s poetry I read a lot. Naomi Shihab Nye, Khalil Gibran, Abu al-Qasim al-Shabi, Ahmed Fouad Negm, Hala Mohamad, Seamus Heaney, Mazen Maarouf, Manal al-Sheikh, Yehia Jaber, Al Khadra, Claudia Rankine... In fiction, it’s Luis Borges, Margaret Atwood, Alice Munroe, Sarah Orne Jewett, Willa Cather, Poe, Somerset Maugham, Rose Tremain, E. B. White. I am a voracious reader of children’s stories – folktales and fairy stories from other cultures and I follow the works of illustrators. Pacific Islander writers: Epeli Hau’ofa (essays and papers), Mere Taito (poetry), Sudesh Mishra (poetry)... Top of the list for stories: oral storytellers from my childhood.

Q: As you write fiction, whom do you consider your primary audience? The reason I’m asking is that I suspect your primary audience is Fijians, and I really like that because it adds authenticity and power to your writing.

I have never really thought about audiences when I am writing. I think writing from an area of remoteness and zero publishing infrastructure influenced this greatly. I just wrote from childhood, then in adulthood, it took a serious turn – but audiences were never in

my mind because the thought of actually sharing work was almost an impossible dream. So to begin with, I just wrote because stories arrived and I had to tell them.

In an interview I did for Commonwealth Writers, I mentioned that I did not grow up in a home that had books (which is why I support public libraries) and when I immersed myself in books, I remember a grandaunt telling me that if I did not reduce reading, I could risk going mad. I also wrote ALL the time. In my school notebooks to begin with, then in exercise books, before I accessed proper journals. Even this was seen as strange. But those in my immediate family circle supported my whims and that has probably made all the difference. So yes, I wrote, but to share them or think of an audience was nil.

Strangely enough, I have received very little attention in Fiji, although I must add that it is local responses that I have found interesting. Does this now qualify as the audience I write for? I am unsure.

Q: Is it challenging to find time to write fiction among your other responsibilities?

Yes, it is EXTREMELY challenging. I would love to find the space and time to do uninterrupted writing but my reality makes that utopian. The fact that there are no writing residencies, fellowships, or support networks in Fiji and the Pacific further compounds this issue. On my part, I am working hard to ensure future writers in the islands do not face the same problems I am currently facing.

Q: In the [podcast](#) on the 2015 Commonwealth Short Story Prize website (“Mary Rokonadravu--Pacific Winner”), you say the 1987 coup and the three coups after that as well as the civilian government takeover deeply “impact[ed]” you and “fuell[ed your] creativity.” You explain: “I’m interested in people who basically don’t leave the country, because I have been one of them, and a lot of my family have actually left the country, but then there are those who actually remain....So you have the diaspora who are abroad, but for me a large thing that I explore in my writing are the people who remain, the people who continue to live in this country and call it home, and they inspire me more than anything.” Why is it important for you to write about the people who remain?

People who remain in the aftermath of political upheavals or natural disasters bear the responsibility of picking up the pieces, healing, and rebuilding at ‘home’ – the physical sense of ‘home’. It is usual for mass migrations to occur in the aftermath of such events and media foci are on the issues of migrants, refugees, and on the complexities of countries that receive such groups to offer people a home and new beginnings. Thereon, integration or the lack thereof becomes an issue. Diaspora communities grow and assume new identities and a certain new power. While diaspora communities provide huge economic benefits in terms of remittances, and face the trauma of flight and dispossession, there is an unspoken, and maybe, unexplored or little researched gap that exists between diaspora and those who remain.

I am of the view that given opportunity for better education, access to media, publishing, and certainly, more political freedom, diaspora communities have the privilege of speaking and writing. This is preceded by the increased opportunity to THINK. Those

who remain do not necessarily enjoy the same privileges. And nobody thinks or talks about the freedom to think – we take it for granted. Entire families, communities, and societies operate on a day-to-day basis without asking themselves whether or not they are thinking.

The ability to think of one's reality, think about one's journey or history, think without limits, is a rare phenomenon, a gift. Storytelling and writing of literature permit us these gifts. We cannot see ourselves in the mirrors others create and offer us. We need our own mirror. Literature is that mirror. A country without a living oral storytelling practice that discusses contemporary issues or a vibrant publishing industry with an active reading society is dead. Such a country will have an annual GDP [Gross Domestic Product] but it will remain without a soul, without reflection, without the ability to see its faults, without truth in its grasp. And it will generate a population of half-formed individuals. Weak people who lack imagination that there could be something better, that we are capable of better, that we deserve better. Populations that measure worth in dollars and do not possess the imagination, will, and fight to see beyond themselves, that one can contribute to building something for people yet unborn and be satisfied with anonymity.

In a world that has degenerated into pettiness that celebrates a poached egg, a tattoo, a duck face, or a sacred pagoda shrine silhouette between one's thighs as an achievement on *Facebook* or *Instagram*, there is slim hope for values such as humility, respect, wisdom, hard work, to name a few. I think I write because I have hope. It's the one thing I hold on to.

I write in celebration of people who remain because their stories need to be told, particularly when the world is not so interested given its current preoccupations. Their world view, their perspective of events is important. And in a big way, they are the ones who can save the world. The ones who remain and make it work are the only ones who can show us the way. I think if you were to put it into a photograph of a group, I'd be the one writing about the one not in the picture. The forgotten ones. Sometimes people do not even remember that they matter. That their neighbourhood, their town, their village, their part of the world matters. Until they see it on paper. Then they feel immortalised. "Famished Eels" did that for a few people in Fiji.

Q: "Famished Eels" has led me to try to understand the tension between the descendants of the indentured Indian laborers who were brought to Fiji to work the plantations and the indigenous Fijians. In your homage to your mother posted on *Medium*, you explain that you are adopted and of mixed Indian, Fijian, and European descent. Do you feel your ancestry positions you uniquely to write about contemporary Fiji? Does it help you to be "a bridge" like the narrator in "Famished Eels," and does that multi-faceted perspective feel at times like both a blessing and a burden as it does to the story's narrator?

I think that to an extent, it does position me uniquely. I understand multiple perspectives, and yes, it is both a blessing and a curse. On bridging like the narrator in "Famished Eels," I think that is the ideal to aspire to, her comfort in that position. In comparison, while I see myself in middle ground and do see myself as a bridge, I have thus far had

very limited success at actual ‘bridging’. So, it becomes a curse. But it is a blessing for my writing.

Q: Although I am not certain of each writer’s gender, by my count, only 15/64 of the writers in Albert Wendt’s classic Pacific literature anthology *Nuanua: Pacific Literature in English since 1980* are women--and of these 15, about half write poetry, which is a “slimmer” genre than prose. What is it like to be a contemporary Fijian woman writer? Do you feel any discrimination or have you faced any criticism?

It is extremely lonely to be a contemporary Fijian woman writer and for various reasons. Firstly, poets probably enjoy more events and camaraderie as they churn out pieces faster and have the luxury of regularised events which they organise themselves (and are great!). Prose writers do not have network or support. I think the nature of the craft plays a huge influence on this as well. Prose takes a longer, sustained effort and I have not shared much writing in progress.

I would not say there is outright discrimination based on gender but gender plays an enormous role in the hard data you have extracted from the anthology *Nuanua*. Gender-based expectations in cultural, economic and religious contexts determine the lack of head space and creative space for women writers in Fiji, and probably most of the Pacific. I have always believed that the question on gender and writing has been a little skewed in that a lot of talk is around the act of writing – but before we arrive at writing, we need the requisite space for THINKING. So the questions ought not to be about women writing or not writing but whether women in their lived lives, actually have time and space to THINK, to reflect, to dream, and to orient themselves in their own realities. You need ‘intellectual’ freedom – the freedom to think, to be bored, to wonder, to question, before you are compelled to write – so the writing comes afterward.

In this regard, I have lived a very privileged life. I was always given the space to THINK (on a very physical level). And I have never been afraid of facing my “blank” mind during the dry periods. There never really is a dry season for writers. Everything is, or leads to, lushness. I’d say all writers need this space, and women writers, seldom, if ever, really do enjoy this.

Q: In “Famished Eels,” the protagonist is the family’s storyteller who’s been singled out to tell her father the truth about the photo of his grandmother. As a person who’s been looked down upon his whole life as an outsider, he seems to long to know where his grandmother came from in India as a way to validate his existence--and even seems to suggest that his daughters return there and buy land. As I read the story, the narrator leaves Fiji because she cannot bear to break her father’s heart by telling him the truth: that his grandmother was not a virginal Hindu kidnapped on a religious pilgrimage, but a girl who had been sexually active with 10 men by age 13 and had killed her first 8 children and a man, too; the love story between her and the prophetic turmeric farmer she met on board the ship is probably apocryphal, as well. In the end, the narrator decides not to tell her father the truth and instead emphasizes his lineage’s future via the next up-and-coming family storyteller. Am I interpreting this story correctly? At its heart, is this a story about

a quest for identity? Do we let a miserable past define us--or do we accept it in all its complexity, cherish what we can, and move on? How do we live with the sins of the past?

You're right. She is going to tell the truth, but quickly diverts to focus on the new storyteller.

I'd say it is about the quest for identity. For me, the story is a single thread I picked out in my first job – The Historical Port Town of Levuka (UNESCO World Heritage Site), Fiji's first capital and home to its European population, is where I attended school and where my family had property. I grew up with genealogies and family histories being thrown around meals, afternoon teas at churches, and on the streets on almost a daily basis. It was beautiful but I learned very quickly in childhood that there are always multiple perspectives, that not every family has the same version of history or events, that memory is tricky. And probably most significant, that individuals themselves had multiple versions based on how it served their interest.

I have been very blessed in that I learned these lessons very early in life. Some enter adulthood to discover these things and have a difficult time adjusting.

I'd say the sins of the past are part of us. We choose what we travel with and with whom. The overall objective is to survive. To survive the night and make it into another day. How good we make it depends on us.

Q: As I read the story, there is a lot of subtle--and not-so-subtle sea imagery. Of course, the most prominent image is that of the hungry eels, with the larger eels cannibalizing the smaller eels as the tidepools in which they are stuck shrink in the drought. There are also various images of hunger that are both negative (such as above) and positive, such as the hunger that will bring the young Saskatchewan storyteller home from the diaspora to embrace her Pacific roots. As an outsider reading your story, it's tough for me to tell if the image of the hungry eels should be taken at face value--for it certainly is powerful enough--or if this image also alludes to stories such as that of Abaia, the magical Melanesian eel who lives at the bottom of freshwater lakes and protects the lake's inhabitants from those who try to eat them, and/or Sina, the maiden pursued by a phallic eel who ends up becoming the first coconut tree.

In this story, it can be taken at face value – a father is reaching into his childhood to explain a grave political situation to his daughter, one which she will have to survive and he is trying to spare her the pain he suffered.

Q: One characteristic I noticed about your essays on *Medium* is your inclusion of visuals. For example, in “Defining Good Practice in Cultural Exchange,” your visuals of P.T. Barnum’s “The Feejee Mermaid,” Ringling Brothers’ “Tribe of Genuine Ubangi Savages,” and the “What Is It--an Animal or a Human” visuals brought your points alive about the egregious racism perpetuated against people of color by Caucasians. I wanted to tell you these visuals really helped my freshman comp students understand your ideas. How important are visuals to your writing?

When you write a piece of fiction like “Famished Eels,” are you conscious of conjuring up images for your readers?

I have received a lot of comments about imagery in my writing. I do not conjure them up consciously. However, I have a very ‘visual’ mind and I am very detailed because I do not come from a humanities background (not to say they don’t!). I took sciences in school then had to switch to the arts at university but I’ve been told my mathematical brain is very much active and influences a lot of my writing. And I write based on mental photographs. If I cannot see it in my mind, I cannot write it or feel it to write.

Q: “The Brief, Insignificant History Of Peter Abraham Stanhope” is the tale of an Indo-Pacific-Caucasian man whose son is implicated in a robbery and is beaten to death and raped while awaiting trial. There are many examples of anal and buttocks imagery in this story--which seems to imply the protagonist, the eponymous Peter Abraham--is *screwed*. His heart is broken, and so perhaps out of shame or solidarity, he decides to join his only son in death. (Living for his diasporic daughter is not enough.) The irony of the story surrounds his careful preparations for death, like making sure of disposing of his toenail clippings in the trash bin and putting a new roll of toilet paper in the bathroom for those who will find his body.

Am I close with this interpretation? Is there anything you can add to point me to this story’s meaning? My favorite lines in the story are these because I could relate to them: “...should the most faithful of genealogists in his family tree piece the details, as they did over the years, only names and years surfaced like jettisoned flotsam. Floating. Meaningless. Unattached to ship, person, or place. His many bloods cursed him to nothingness on all sides.”

I have never been able to explain the story. Others have and the most accurate, I believe, is that it’s about male depression. When it was presented in a forum as such, I realised the truth in it because I have always found how Pacific island men handle issues such as intimacy, depression, and violence.

My questions have always been: How do families survive this? And, how can we live our lives ignoring this? I guess the story came from this space.

Q: At the end of “Kasaya: the Woman Who Taught Me to Write,” you say you are working on a novel set far away from Fiji. How is that novel going? Do you have any other texts in the works that readers should look out for? If so, is there a place where readers can find them online or purchase them? (I tried to find *Shedding Silences: An Anthology of Writing from Fiji Prisons* but it seems to be out of print.)

I have never really worked on anything except novels. The short stories I put out are extracts of longer works; they have never been short, which is why I format my short stories in numbered sections – they are extracts from different parts of longer works, and my best attempt at weaving a cohesive whole that fits the short story genre.

I have not published a novel because the requirement from literary agents is the first three chapters or 50,000 words printed and mailed. It had always been a question of economics – I cannot afford that. I have always wanted to extract pieces to enter into short story competitions but there is also the requirement for credit cards and online payments. I did

not allow myself a debit card until this year and do not believe I will ever get a credit card (personal choice). These realities are difficult for other countries to understand. I only got to enter the Commonwealth Short Story Competition because it did not require a fee. A lot of my work now is on easing these restrictions for other Pacific island writers. But since winning the Commonwealth Short Story Prize (regional) in 2015 and being shortlisted in 2017, I've been put in touch with a UK agent who does not require this.

I have a story online at <http://www.fjjspeakerscorner.com/>

Q: You are a teacher as well as a writer. Is there any advice you'd like to give to students (and possible future writers)?

I believe that children must first be introduced to a sense of physical space (nature in its pristine state), oral storytelling within families and communities, then a library and books, before ever touching a smartphone.

Works Cited

- Flood, Alison. "First-Time Fijian Author Scoops Award in Commonwealth Short Story Competition." *The Guardian*. 28 Apr. 2015. www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/28/first-time-fijian-author-scoops-award-in-commonwealth-short-story-competition. Accessed 4 June 2018.
- "Mary Rokonadravu." *Adda*. www.addastories.org/writer/mary-rokonadravu/. Accessed 4 June 2018.
- "Mary Rokonadravu--Pacific Winner, 2015 Commonwealth Short Story Prize." *Soundcloud*. soundcloud.com/commonwealth-writers/mary-rokonadravu-pacific-regional-winner-2015-commonwealth-short-story-prize/s-DbTWU. Accessed 4 June 2018.
- Rokonadravu, Mary. "The Brief Insignificant History of Peter Abraham Stanhope." *Adda*. www.addastories.org/peter-abraham-stanhope/. Accessed 13 June 2018.
- . "Defining Good Practice in Cultural Exchange: Disney, *Moana*, and the Issue of Cultural Appropriation--A View from the Pacific Islands." *Medium*. 16 Oct. 2016. medium.com/@tulani/defining-good-practice-in-cultural-exchange9031ed412506. Accessed 13 June 2018.
- . "Famished Eels." *Granta*. 28. Apr. 2015. granta.com/famished-eels/. Accessed 6 June 2018.
- . "Kasaya: The Woman Who Taught Me to Write." *Medium*. 4 Oct. 2016. medium.com/@tulani/kasaya-the-woman-who-taught-me-to-write-449135b6fabf. Accessed 13 June 2018.
- Waqua, Mariana. "Writers' Night: A Review." *Facebook*. 4 June 2018. www.facebook.com/artalkfiji/photos/a.2071855319702760.1073741842.1847798248775136/2071856749702617/?type=3&theater. Accessed 5 June 2018.