

☐ Contemporary  
Literary Criticism

**CLC**

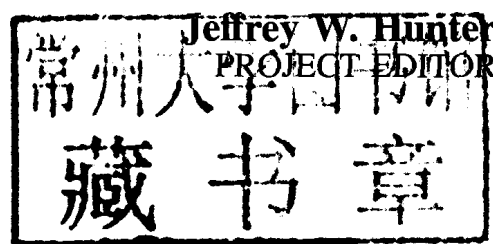
**281**



Volume 281

# Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works  
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and  
Other Creative Writers



 GALE  
CENGAGE Learning

Detroit • New York • San Francisco • New Haven, Conn • Waterville, Maine • London

**Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 281**

Project Editor: Jeffrey W. Hunter

Editorial: Dana Ramel Barnes, Lindsey J. Bryant, Maria Carter-Ewald, Kathy D. Darrow, Kristen Dorsch, Jelena O. Krstović, Michelle Lee, Thomas J. Schoenberg, Lawrence J. Trudeau

Content Conversion: Katrina Coach, Gwen Tucker

Indexing Services: Laurie Andriot

Rights and Acquisitions: Beth Beaufore, Margaret Chamberlain-Gaston, Jacqueline Flowers, Kelly Quin

Composition and Electronic Capture: Gary Oudersluys

Manufacturing: Cynde Lentz

Associate Product Manager: Marc Cormier

© 2010 Gale, Cengage Learning

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. No part of this work covered by the copyright herein may be reproduced, transmitted, stored, or used in any form or by any means graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including but not limited to photocopying, recording, scanning, digitizing, taping, Web distribution, information networks, or information storage and retrieval systems, except as permitted under Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

This publication is a creative work fully protected by all applicable copyright laws, as well as by misappropriation, trade secret, unfair competition, and other applicable laws. The authors and editors of this work have added value to the underlying factual material herein through one or more of the following: unique and original selection, coordination, expression, arrangement, and classification of the information.

For product information and technology assistance, contact us at  
**Gale Customer Support, 1-800-877-4253.**

For permission to use material from this text or product,  
submit all requests online at [www.cengage.com/permissions](http://www.cengage.com/permissions).

Further permissions questions can be emailed to  
[permissionrequest@cengage.com](mailto:permissionrequest@cengage.com)

While every effort has been made to ensure the reliability of the information presented in this publication, Gale, a part of Cengage Learning, does not guarantee the accuracy of the data contained herein. Gale accepts no payment for listing; and inclusion in the publication of any organization, agency, institution, publication, service, or individual does not imply endorsement of the editors or publisher. Errors brought to the attention of the publisher and verified to the satisfaction of the publisher will be corrected in future editions.

Gale  
27500 Drake Rd.  
Farmington Hills, MI, 48331-3535

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 76-46132

ISBN-13: 978-1-4144-3977-8

ISBN-10: 1-4144-3977-6

ISSN 0091-3421

# Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

## Scope of the Series

*CLC* provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

## Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

## Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Gale, including *CLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *CLC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *CLC* volume in which their entry appears.

A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in the series as well as in other Literature Criticism series.

An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, films, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

## Citing Contemporary Literary Criticism

When citing criticism reprinted in the Literary Criticism Series, students should provide complete bibliographic information so that the cited essay can be located in the original print or electronic source. Students who quote directly from reprinted criticism may use any accepted bibliographic format, such as University of Chicago Press style or Modern Language Association (MLA) style. Both the MLA and the University of Chicago formats are acceptable and recognized as being the current standards for citations. It is important, however, to choose one format for all citations; do not mix the two formats within a list of citations.

The examples below follow recommendations for preparing a bibliography set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003); the first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

James, Harold. "Narrative Engagement with *Atonement* and *The Blind Assassin*." *Philosophy and Literature* 29, no. 1 (April 2005): 130-45. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 246, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 188-95. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hèbert: The Tragic Melodramas." In *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*, edited by Mickey Pearlman, 41-52. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 246, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 276-82. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

The examples below follow recommendations for preparing a works cited list set forth in the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 5th ed. (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1999); the first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

James, Harold. "Narrative Engagement with *Atonement* and *The Blind Assassin*." *Philosophy and Literature* 29.1 (April 2005): 130-45. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 246. Detroit: Gale, 2008. 188-95.

Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hèbert: The Tragic Melodramas." *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*, edited by Mickey Pearlman. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. 41-52. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 246. Detroit: Gale, 2008. 276-82.

### **Suggestions are Welcome**

Readers who wish to suggest new features, topics, or authors to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions or comments are cordially invited to call, write, or fax the Associate Product Manager:

Associate Product Manager, Literary Criticism Series  
Gale  
27500 Drake Road  
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535  
1-800-347-4253 (GALE)  
Fax: 248-699-8983

## Acknowledgments

The editors wish to thank the copyright holders of the criticism included in this volume and the permissions managers of many book and magazine publishing companies for assisting us in securing reproduction rights. Following is a list of the copyright holders who have granted us permission to reproduce material in this volume of *CLC*. Every effort has been made to trace copyright, but if omissions have been made, please let us know.

### **COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL IN *CLC*, VOLUME 281, WAS REPRODUCED FROM THE FOLLOWING PERIODICALS:**

*African American Review*, v. 39, 2005 for "Reading A 'Closet Screenplay': Hollywood, James Baldwin's *Malcolms* and the Threat of Historical Irrelevance," by Brian Norman. © 2005 Brian Norman. Reproduced by permission of the author.—*Amerasia Journal*, v. 30, 2004. Copyright © 2004 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—*The Antioch Review*, v. 54, autumn, 1996. Copyright © 1996 by the Antioch Review Inc. Reproduced by permission of the Editors.—*The Black Scholar*, spring, 2003. Copyright © 2003 The Black Scholar. Reproduced by permission.—*Communication Studies*, v. 59, October-December, 2008 for "Cinematic Jujitsu: Resisting White Hegemony through the American Dream in Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*," by Kristen Hoerl. Copyright © 2008 Taylor & Francis Group, LLC. Reproduced by permission of Taylor & Francis, Ltd., <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals> and the author.—*Contemporary Justice Review*, v. 6, 2003 for "Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*: Filmmaking in the American Grain," by Dennis Sullivan and Fred Boehrer. Copyright © 2003 Taylor & Francis Group, LLC. Reproduced by permission of Taylor & Francis, Ltd., <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals> and the authors.—*Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, v. 43, fall, 2001; v. 47, spring, 2006. Copyright © 2001, 2006 by Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation. Reproduced with permission of the Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation, published by Heldref Publications, 1319 18th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036-1802.—*The Explicator*, v. 61, winter, 2003. Copyright © 2003 by Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation. Reproduced with permission of the Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation, published by Heldref Publications, 1319 18th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036-1802.—*The Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism*, v. 64, 2006. Copyright © 2006 Basil Blackwell Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Blackwell Publishers.—*Journal of Asian American Studies*, v. 6, February, 2003. Copyright © 2003 The Johns Hopkins University Press. Reproduced by permission.—*MELUS*, v. 28, winter, 2003. Copyright *MELUS: The Society for the Study of Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, 2003. Reproduced by permission.—*Modernism/Modernity*, v. 16, 2009. Copyright © 2009 The Johns Hopkins University Press. Reproduced by permission.—*Narrative*, v. 8, May, 2000. Copyright © 2000 by the Ohio State University Press. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—*New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, v. 5, December, 2003. © NZASIA - The New Zealand Asian Studies Society, 2003. Reproduced by permission.—*Papers on Language and Literature*, v. 42, fall, 2006. Copyright © 2006 by The Board of Trustees, Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville. Reproduced by permission.—*Poets & Writers*, v. 30, March/April, 2002. Copyright © 2002 Poets & Writers, Inc.. Reprinted by permission of the publisher, Poets & Writers, Inc., 72 Spring St., New York, NY, 10012. [www.pw.org](http://www.pw.org).—*Positions*, v. 12, fall, 2004. Copyright © 2004 Duke University Press. All rights reserved. Used by permission of the publisher.—*Radical Teacher*, v. 75, 2006. Reproduced by permission.—*Studies in Canadian Literature/Études en Littérature Canadienne*, v. 30, summer, 2005. Copyright © 2005 by Tyler Tokaryk. Reproduced by permission of the editors.—*Urban Education*, v. 43, April 22, 2008. Copyright © 2008 SAGE Publications. Republished with permission of SAGE Publications, Inc.—*World War II*, v. 23, December-January, 2008-2009. Copyright © 2008-2009 Weider History Group. Reproduced by permission.

### **COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL IN *CLC*, VOLUME 281, WAS REPRODUCED FROM THE FOLLOWING BOOKS:**

Bahri, Deepika. From *Native Intelligence: Aesthetics, Politics, and Postcolonial Literature*. University of Minnesota Press, 2003. Copyright © 2003 by the Regents of the University of Minnesota. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—Bhautoo-Dewnarain, Nandini. From *Rohinton Mistry: An Introduction*. Foundation Books, 2007. Copyright © 2007 Cambridge University Press India Private Limited. Reproduced by permission.—Blake, Richard A. From *Street Smart: The New York of Lumet, Allen, Scorsese, and Lee*. The University Press of Kentucky, 2005. Copyright © 2005 by The University Press of Kentucky. Reproduced by permission of The University Press of Kentucky.—Burn, Stephen J. From

**David Foster Wallace's "Infinite Jest": A Reader's Guide.** Continuum, 2003. Copyright © 2003 by Stephen J. Burn. Republished with permission of Continuum, conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.—Chen, Tina. From **Double Agency: Acts of Impersonation in Asian American Literature and Culture.** Stanford University Press, 2005. Copyright © 2005 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University. All rights reserved. Used with the permission of Stanford University Press, www.sup.org.—Chu, Patricia P. From "'To Hide Her True Self': Sentimentality and the Search for an Intersubjective Self in Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*," in **Asian North American Identities: Beyond the Hyphen.** Edited by Eleanor Ty and Donald C. Goellnicht. Indiana University Press, 2004. Copyright © 2004 Indiana University Press. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—Duncan, Patti. From **Tell This Silence: Asian American Women Writers and the Politics of Speech.** University of Iowa Press, 2004. Copyright © 2004 by the University of Iowa Press. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—Morey, Peter. From "Communalism, Corruption and Duty in Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters*," in **Alternative Indias: Writing, Nation and Communalism.** Edited by Peter Morey and Alex Tickell. Rodopi, 2005. Copyright © Editions Rodopi B.V., Amsterdam 2005. Reproduced by permission.—Najmi, Samina. From "Decolonizing the Bildungsroman: Narratives of War and Womanhood in Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*," in **Form and Transformation in Asian American Literature.** Edited by Zhou Xiaojing and Samina Najmi. University of Washington Press, 2005. Copyright © 2005 by the University of Washington Press. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.



# Gale Literature Product Advisory Board

The members of the Gale Literature Product Advisory Board—reference librarians from public and academic library systems—represent a cross-section of our customer base and offer a variety of informed perspectives on both the presentation and content of our literature products. Advisory board members assess and define such quality issues as the relevance, currency, and usefulness of the author coverage, critical content, and literary topics included in our series; evaluate the layout, presentation, and general quality of our printed volumes; provide feedback on the criteria used for selecting authors and topics covered in our series; provide suggestions for potential enhancements to our series; identify any gaps in our coverage of authors or literary topics, recommending authors or topics for inclusion; analyze the appropriateness of our content and presentation for various user audiences, such as high school students, undergraduates, graduate students, librarians, and educators; and offer feedback on any proposed changes/enhancements to our series. We wish to thank the following advisors for their advice throughout the year.

**Barbara M. Bibel**

Librarian  
Oakland Public Library  
Oakland, California

**Dr. Toby Burrows**

Principal Librarian  
The Scholars' Centre  
University of Western Australia Library  
Nedlands, Western Australia

**Celia C. Daniel**

Associate Reference Librarian  
Howard University Libraries  
Washington, D.C.

**David M. Durant**

Reference Librarian  
Joyner Library  
East Carolina University  
Greenville, North Carolina

**Nancy T. Guidry**

Librarian  
Bakersfield Community College  
Bakersfield, California

**Heather Martin**

Arts & Humanities Librarian  
University of Alabama at Birmingham, Sterne Library  
Birmingham, Alabama

**Susan Mikula**

Librarian  
Indiana Free Library  
Indiana, Pennsylvania

**Thomas Nixon**

Humanities Reference Librarian  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Davis  
Library  
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

**Mark Schumacher**

Jackson Library  
University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
Greensboro, North Carolina

**Gwen Scott-Miller**

Assistant Director  
Sno-Isle Regional Library System  
Marysville, Washington

# Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xiii

<b>Nora Okja Keller 1965-</b> .....	1
<i>Korean-born American novelist</i>	
<b>Spike Lee 1957-</b> .....	123
<i>American director, producer, screenwriter, autobiographer, nonfiction writer, and actor</i>	
<b>Rohinton Mistry 1952-</b> .....	213
<i>Indian-born Canadian short story writer and novelist</i>	
<b>David Foster Wallace 1962-2008</b> .....	288
<i>American novelist, essayist, editor, short story writer, and nonfiction writer; entry devoted to the novel Infinite Jest</i>	

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 349

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Topic Index 463

*CLC* Cumulative Nationality Index 479

*CLC*-281 Title Index 495

# Nora Okja Keller

## 1965-

Korean-born American novelist.

The following entry presents criticism on Keller's career through 2002. For additional information on her novel *Comfort Woman* (1997), see *CLC*, Volume 109.

### INTRODUCTION

Keller received the American Book Award in 1998 for her debut novel, *Comfort Woman* (1997), which tells the story of a Korean woman who was imprisoned as a sex slave in the service of Japanese soldiers during World War II. Keller's novel helped to make public the atrocities of the Japanese "recreation camps," which claimed the lives of over 100,000 women and left survivors—shamed into silence by cultural stigma—permanently damaged emotionally and physically. Keller's novel is also a moving and lyrical portrait of the relationship between a Korean-American girl and her mother—the comfort woman of the title—who struggles to protect them both from the horrors of her past. Keller's other novel, *Fox Girl* (2002), continues her interest in what the author referred to as "history that's not acknowledged." Like *Comfort Woman*, *Fox Girl* takes as its subject imperial control, in this case focusing on the abuse of South Korean women by American G.I.s in the mid-1960s. Keller's emphasis on female bonds and female strength in stories about women long stereotyped as either victims or sexual deviants has contributed to a reappraisal of notions of colonialism and patriarchy.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Keller was born in Seoul, South Korea, to a Korean mother and an American father of German descent. When Keller was three years old, the family moved to Hawaii. Keller's mother, hoping to help her daughter fit in with mainstream America, chose not to teach Keller the Korean language. It was not until 1985, when Keller was a fledgling writer studying English and philosophy at the University of Hawaii, that she became interested in her Asian heritage, a change in outlook that she attributes to her reading Maxine Hong Kingston's novel *The Woman Warrior*. While an undergraduate, Keller attended a writing workshop

sponsored by a grassroots organization called Bamboo Ridge, now a prominent publisher of local talent whose monthly study groups Keller has relied upon for feedback since returning to Hawaii from doctoral studies at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Keller was inspired to write *Comfort Woman* after attending a 1993 symposium on human rights at the University of Hawaii, where a former comfort woman, Keum Ja Hwang, delivered a lecture. Keller's short story "Mother-Tongue," which she expanded into *Comfort Woman*, won the prestigious Pushcart Prize in 1995. Upon its publication, *Comfort Woman* was perhaps more widely reviewed for its historical relevance than for its artistry, owing to the Japanese government's widely publicized equivocation on the issue of the comfort stations. The Japanese government finally admitted to the existence of the military camps in the early 1990s, but it denied any legal responsibility for them. Keller once described the initial impact of her novel: "While I was working on the novel, I'd type 'comfort women' into a search engine and come up with Martha Stewart articles about how to make a home comfortable. When I came back from my book tour, I could find actual articles written about the comfort women and my book." Keller has said that she views her second novel, *Fox Girl*, and a novel in progress as intimately connected: "I see the three novels as almost a thematic trilogy that shows that what started in the camps of *Comfort Woman* carries on into the America Towns of *Fox Girl* and then into the prostitution bars of Hawaii." Keller currently lives in Hawaii with her husband and two daughters.

### MAJOR WORKS

*Comfort Woman* gives voice to the thousands of Korean women whose shame kept them mute about their torture, beatings, and rapes in the comfort stations operated by the Japanese military during their occupation of Korea. Many of the women were simply abducted, some as young as eleven years old; others were lured into sexual slavery with the promise of jobs in the military. The narrative of the novel is double-voiced, alternating between the first-person perspectives of Akiko, the comfort woman, and her daughter, Beccah, who only learns of her mother's past after her death. By the time the story opens, Beccah's father, an American Protestant missionary,

has died. Beccah is being raised in Hawaii by her destitute mother, who is given to strange fits and trances in which she communes with invisible spirits, sometimes guiding sex slaves to the next world in the role of Princess Pari, a prominent female deity in Korean shamanism, and sometimes performing bizarre rituals meant to ward off the legendary Saja the Death Messenger, who consigned Princess Pari's parents to hell when they died without any sons. As Beccah matures, she feels both embarrassed and protective of her eccentric mother, who is known to her classmates as the "crazy lady." Akiko's strange behavior is somewhat redeemed in Beccah's eyes when her mother begins to attract well-paying clients for her services as a medium and oracle. Akiko's liaisons with the spirits unleash a flood of memories, from which the reader learns of her harrowing former life. The youngest child of a poor Korean family, Akiko was sold into slavery at the age of twelve to raise money for her oldest sister's dowry. At the comfort camp, the Japanese soldiers stripped her of her birth name, Soon Hyo. She was commanded to silence, only allowed to speak the few Japanese words necessary to service the soldiers, and assigned a Japanese name and number, Akiko 41, taking the place of Akiko 40 (formerly Induk), who was executed for insubordination when she denounced the soldiers who violated her: "I am Korea, I am a woman, I am alive. . . ." Induk becomes Akiko's guardian spirit, guiding her through the nightly rapes, an abortion with a stick, the squalor of her tiny stall, and her flight and near starvation. Akiko eventually finds her way to an American missionary orphanage. There, she attracts the attention of Rick Bradley, her future husband, who sexually assaults her while simultaneously presenting himself as her savior. Bradley casts Akiko in the role of a sinner for her complicity in acts of prostitution, and, when they reach the United States, he orders her never to speak of the camp to outsiders or to their daughter, Beccah. When Bradley dies, Akiko sets out for Korea with her five-year-old daughter, only getting as far as Hawaii. Akiko dies many years later, leaving Beccah, now thirty and an aspiring journalist, an audiotape describing her past. Beccah, who had long misdiagnosed her mother as mentally ill, must now reassess Akiko's wailings and visions as elements of her own identity.

War, enslavement, and alienation also constitute the predominant themes of *Fox Girl*. The novel is set in the 1960s, in a United States military camp in South Korea, one of the so-called America Towns. In the camp, "half-halves," the biracial bastard offspring of U.S. servicemen and Korean prostitutes, vie for the attentions of G.I.s. Children hustle black market goods and barely pubescent girls linger at the military bars, hoping to exchange sex for a passport to America. The

central characters in *Fox Girl* are three of these "throw-away children": Hyun Jin, an adolescent girl disowned by her parents; her best girlfriend, Sookie, the daughter of a comfort woman; and their teenage pimp, Lobetto. Hyun Jin sells her virginity to a gang rape. Filled with self-loathing but desperate to get out of Korea, Hyun Jin transforms herself into a "Hunni" (do-anything) prostitute. Despite Sookie's dismal pronouncements that they are doomed to lives of degradation, Hyun Jin eventually recovers her self-esteem and settles in an actual American town. She is a metaphor for the legendary Korean fox girl—a spirit who steals back the jewel taken from her by a greedy lover.

### CRITICAL RECEPTION

Initial reviews of *Comfort Woman*, aside from appreciating the novel's historical relevance, called attention to Keller's elegant prose and moving evocation of the personal and collective past of Korean women. Keller was praised for a vivid historical imagination that never crossed over into sensationalism. As Logan Hill explained in 2002, *Comfort Woman* "won rave reviews and an American Book Award, in large part because of Keller's refined equilibrium: her ability to tell a messy human story amid a grave historic tragedy without veering into pedantry or bathos."

Keller's novels have prompted revisionist critiques of patriarchy and colonialism as assaults on identity. According to critic Kandice Chuh, "In both [Chang-rae Lee's] *A Gesture Life* and *Comfort Woman*, the past is articulated in terms of an absence of self—of self-knowledge, self-possession—that is a consequence of a contemporaneously overwhelming history shaped by U.S. and Japanese imperialism." Keller's attack on military occupation—and the Korean ideal of female chastity—is rarely discussed apart from what is viewed as her feminist agenda. Critics note that Keller uses the themes of language and silence to represent Akiko's resistance to multiple forms of male oppression. Shamanism, an alternative discourse, therefore denotes the healing process, binding together the story's two narratives, which are a metaphor for the fractured identities of Akiko and Beccah.

Keller's writings have also occasioned a scholarly reassessment of the politics of identification and representation, for a variety of reasons. Scholars caution that, in the very act of reviewing Keller's works, the literary critic speaks from a position of authority, relegating Keller's subjects to a position of powerlessness. As Patti Duncan and Patricia P. Chu note, this issue becomes particularly problematic in the case of Western critics, who have been conditioned to view Asian women in terms of their victimization by the sex industry.



It has also been argued that the identities of the comfort women have been compromised by metaphorical displacement, their collective representation as a raped nation. Chungmoo Choi views voyeuristic curiosity as an additional threat to individual identity, explaining, "With the widespread publicity of this issue, the sum total of a comfort woman's life has unwittingly been reduced to nightmarish experiences of slavery for public consumption." But critic Chu believes *Comfort Woman* avoids this predicament: "[B]ecause it is limited to a single mother-daughter pair it promises to delve more deeply into the inner life of the mother and the psychological inheritance she has to offer than could be done in a vignette-driven novel of multiple families such as Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club*. At the same time, the fictional, confessional format offers an opportunity for greater candor and introspection than might have been possible in the public, legally fraught testimonies of the historical survivors of the Japanese camps."

---

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

*Comfort Woman* (novel) 1997

*Intersecting Circles: The Voices of Hapa Women in Poetry and Prose* [editor, with Marie Hara] (poetry and prose) 1997

*Fox Girl* (novel) 2002

---

## CRITICISM

Logan Hill (essay date March/April 2002)

SOURCE: Hill, Logan. "Novel History Lessons: A Profile of Nora Okja Keller." *Poets & Writers* 30, no. 2 (March/April 2002): 30-7.

[In the essay below, Hill combines biographical details with critical evaluations as she describes the genesis of Keller's novels and the thematic links between them.]

When I tell the people who know me from baby groups that I'm a writer, they usually assume I write children's books," says Nora Okja Keller, giggling, as she often does, in her Hawaiian home, where her two young daughters, two and eight, bumble about in the background. "They think I'm into happy little bunnies running through fields—that kind of stuff. So it comes as quite a shock when they get hold of *Comfort*

*Woman*. They wonder about what dark secrets I'm hiding," she says. "I get really different looks at the grocery store after that."

Readers of Keller's elegant first novel, *Comfort Woman* (Viking, 1997), a fiercely ambitious look at the legacy of a Korean woman's sexual enslavement during Japanese occupation, may be equally surprised to find that its author has such an upbeat—mischievous, even—and motherly demeanor. Keller, a politically committed writer with a deft sense of humor, says she constantly struggles "to balance the darkness with the light."

"I kind of make this distinction between my writing life and my real life," she explains. "I guess I've been living this dual life with this heavy darkness on one side and on the other my family, who give me some sort of balance."

By striking such a delicate balance in her prose, Keller was able to make *Comfort Woman* the sort of unpredictable novel that renders labels like "issue literature" irrelevant. Following her myriad curiosities, she blended the brutal history of Korea's occupation with folk mysticism, modern-day Hawaiian hucksterism, a mother's unconditional love, and a daughter's conflicted attempt to understand her mother's not-so-distant past. The resulting novel, already a staple of many college syllabi, won rave reviews and an American Book Award, in large part because of Keller's refined equilibrium: her ability to tell a messy human story amid a grave historic tragedy without veering into pedantry or bathos.

For the past four years, Keller has been at it again. Since the publication of *Comfort Woman*, she has attended to her girls during the day, participated in Hawaii's venerable Bamboo Ridge literary study group once a month, and worked on a second novel, mainly at night. On any given evening, Keller has put her daughters to bed and then begun to type on her computer, in a small quadrant of her living room sliced off by two sliding doors that her husband, a contractor, erected. For a writer who draws so much of her inspiration from dreams and so much life from such dark material, it seems an appropriate method.

The fruit of Keller's late nights is *Fox Girl* (Viking, 2002), a bleak novel about two Korean girls who work as prostitutes as they try to survive the degradation of an "America Town," or GI recreation camp, near Pusan during the Korean War. Once again, Keller has chosen to walk the fine line that separates historical imagination from sensationalism in order to expose another underimagined era of military occupation. But *Fox Girl* is also a stylistic and conceptual departure, a

more linear and plot-driven narrative. The new novel—one Keller says is just half of a larger project—will likely affirm the author's reputation as an important historical novelist and as a leading voice in Hawaiian and Asian-American letters. It will assuredly prompt a few more quizzical looks in the aisles of the Waipahu Foodland.

Some 15 years ago, a nervous, 20-year-old Keller steeled her nerves and stood up to read one of her first short stories at a Bamboo Ridge workshop. Bamboo Ridge was then, and is now, the scrappy but preeminent publisher and network for local Hawaiian writers, a grassroots organization inspired by other ethnic arts movements and founded in 1978. For a young, insecure University of Hawaii psych major, there was no group more alluring, or more daunting.

"After I finished reading there was a kind of silence," recalls Keller, now 36. "Then Eric stood up."

"Is this local literature?" Eric Chock, Bamboo Ridge's cofounder, asked flatly. "How does this advance local literature, and does this advance local literature in some new way?"

A prolonged and critical discussion of Keller's vague family drama ensued. Participants critiqued her story, pointing out the various merits of local literature and wondering "whether or not my story fit into their ideas or perceptions of local literature," she recalls. The Korea-born daughter of a German computer engineer father and a Korean jack-of-all-trades mother, Keller mistook the criticism for a personal attack. "I was crushed. I felt terrible. I'd always thought of myself as a local Hawaiian girl, so to hear him voice that sent me reeling." She slipped out the door as soon as they moved on to the next author. "And I didn't go back," she adds. "For about six years. Literally."

Nevertheless, Chock's comments would change her writing permanently. Reared on canonical classics at the elite Puna Hau Academy prep school and at the university, Keller began to reconsider her approach to literature. "My story had been set loosely in Hawaii," she says, "but it could have been anywhere. I'd had this notion that characters should be whitewashed in terms of culture or ethnicity or race in order to make them universal, but I started wondering, 'Well, why does being specific in terms of race or ethnicity cancel that out?'"

This might seem like a natural question for an undergraduate to raise these days, but it was much rarer for a Hawaiian student of that era to ask it. "Back then, the University of Hawaii English department was even against the idea that writing from here could

be literature," says Eric Chock. "The only course was called 'Writings of Hawaii' instead of 'Hawaiian Literature' because professors said there wasn't such a thing as 'literature' here."

That same year, just as Keller was discovering her local Hawaiian heritage, she came across her first Asian-American character. The novelist recalls being shocked by Maxine Hong Kingston's breakthrough 1978 memoir, *Woman Warrior*: "Kingston was writing about a character that was so different from anything that I'd ever read before in American literature, so I got to thinking of ways to link my writing more closely to my life and my Korean-American identity," she says. "After that year, I began a kind of active search for role models, a search for a literary genealogy that I could insert myself into." Broadly informed by various other literary traditions, Keller soon discovered more Hawaiian authors and found "this whole history of Asian-American writers that goes back a hundred years and that I'd been taught almost nothing about."

But the young author was still too spooked to return to Bamboo Ridge. Instead, she graduated with an English-psychology double major, and left Hawaii to pursue a doctorate in American literature at the University of California at Santa Cruz. There, her interest in Asian-American studies intensified as she pursued independent studies with like-minded graduate students and eventually began work on a dissertation that focused on Korean-American literature. Several years later, after she moved back to Hawaii to write that never-completed dissertation, Keller finally attended her second Bamboo Ridge meeting.

"I sat in this corner by myself and listened to the first story," remembers Keller. "When it ended, there was this silence, and then Eric asked, 'Is this local literature? How does this advance local literature. . . .' I couldn't believe it. It wasn't personal at all."

Chuckling at the vague memory of an afternoon Keller still teases him about, Chock admits that he used to begin all of his discussions with similar questions. "I thought, if you wanted to write a good generic story, you could go to another group," he says, "but ours was the only place where you'd get local people critiquing your work."

Over the years, Bamboo Ridge has expanded into a successful publishing house with a full catalogue of literature by Hawaiian authors (in 1997, Keller edited the Bamboo Ridge anthology *Intersecting Circles: The Voices of Hapa Women in Poetry and Prose* with writer Marie Hara), but Keller has primarily taken advantage of Bamboo Ridge's study group. The group

is less a nuts-and-bolts critique workshop than a monthly seminar where accomplished writers share almost-completed work and discuss their literary and political decisions.

"One month we might have a chapter from my novel, two poems from Wing [Tek Lum], a poem from Cathy [Song], another chapter from Gary Pak or Michelle Skinner or Lois-Ann [Yamanaka]," says Keller. "We all come and go as our lives dictate, but there's almost always something to talk about. We drink wine and eat dinner at someone's house and then after dinner we talk about the work." It's a regularly broken rule that no one may talk about the work until dinner is over.

Keller didn't have the subject of her first novel or even the thought of writing a novel on her mind at the time she reintroduced herself to Bamboo Ridge. She was writing short stories and sketches, but still planned to finish her dissertation. Then the former comfort woman Keum Ja Hwang came to deliver a lecture at the University of Hawaii, and Keller attended. Simply put, Hwang's story about the small cells where Korean women were locked up and sexually assaulted by Japanese soldiers terrified Keller. She began having violent, recurring nightmares about the women, and eventually, Keller says, "I felt like the only way to exorcise it all from my dreams was to just write it down."

She began crafting a story loosely based on Hwang's life and the little of the existing historical record that she could uncover. "I was writing and not knowing where it was taking me, constantly wondering, 'What's going to happen next?'" Keller says, "I love that, because it makes you feel like you are writing about something bigger than yourself. Like you're tapping into a larger pattern." When she brought what would eventually be the novel's first whirlwind chapter to the Bamboo Ridge reading group, Eric Chock recalls, "I'd never seen anything like it. I had to read it over and over again." Soon, the excited members of the group began to urge Keller to tie her discrete stories into a larger narrative.

"If I'd known I was writing a novel, it would have been too overwhelming," says Keller. "So I had about a dozen separate, self-contained stories by the time I finally laid them all down on the floor of my living room and tried to piece them together, like a puzzle." While taking pains to steer her young daughter clear of the literary clutter on the floor, Keller examined the stories, ordering chapters and spotting gaps. "I had one row for Akiko and one for Beccah," she says of her two narrators, the comfort woman survivor and her Hawaii-raised daughter. "Mainly, I just wrote chapters to fill in the sections in between."

The novel succeeds, in part, because of its patchwork of styles and different voices. The *Boston Globe's* Catherine Foster noted that Keller was able to "pull off what in effect seem to be two separate books—with different language, tone, and feeling—without jarring." The novel was in many ways Keller's attempt to reconcile with her own mother, and the narrative twists and twines the mother's and daughter's voices irrevocably together. In the sections told by the daughter and Honolulu obituary writer Beccah, Keller delivers a conflicted, wry account in a voice that members of the Bamboo Ridge group say is very close to the author's own.

"Whenever I was alone, I'd sing—usually something by the Carpenters or Elvis—in preparation for my discovery," says the terrible singer Beccah. "I would sing so hard I'd get tears in my eyes. My singing moved me."

In the sections written in the voice of Beccah's mother, Akiko relates feverish accounts that range from her abuse as a comfort woman to the pent-up frustration of life in a culture where even her daughter cannot understand her trauma.

Faster and faster, I scatter crumbs by the fistful [Akiko says one lonely afternoon], calling more and still more birds to come and join us, until there must be well over one hundred pecking in a frenzy at the ground and at their tails, flapping along the porch railing, hopping next to the basket where my baby girl laughs and I sing over and over, into the ball of flurry and heat made by their beating wings: Thank you, thank you for coming, thank you for coming to my party.

"Nora did some things you're just not supposed to be able to do in your first novel," says novelist Julia Alvarez. "She created that exquisite tone, with all of that balance and play and range, from the tragic to the humorous." Alvarez says Keller's approach was well suited to the complexity of her story. "Basically, as immigrants, we all come here because we want to leave something behind. There's some darkness you came from, and often it was a country like this that created that darkness," says Alvarez. "So how do you tell that story when you're living in a reality that's so secure and ironic and often has what we Latinos call this *Gringolandia*, Disneyland view of history? I don't know how—but Nora does it."

If anything, it's Keller's sense of purpose that binds all of her disparate voices and digressions—a visceral urgency that pushes everything along. "One of the things that hit me," recalls Keller, "was when Keum Ja Hwang said, 'One of the reasons why I'm coming forward is that everyone I knew passed away during the war and now I have no one left to shame.'" Work-

ing in a long tradition of writers who have memorialized the victims of their cultures' holocausts, Keller consciously bears witness for people who couldn't speak for themselves. And though the novel was reviewed perhaps more for its historical relevance than for its prodigious artistic achievement, Keller says it never bruised her ego.

"While I was working on the novel, I'd type 'comfort women' into a search engine and come up with Martha Stewart articles about how to make a home comfortable," says Keller. "When I came back from my book tour, I could find actual articles written about the comfort women and my book. You know, we all wonder what effect any of our written words can have on the real world, so for me, it was incredible to be tied into that whole history and growing awareness."

Keller's commitment to history and its ineluctable links to the present led her to the subject of her second novel, *Fox Girl*. Keller had initially begun work on a novel entitled "Cibaji" (or "The Seed-Bearer"), a less political family drama about a woman who bears a child for another woman, but by the end of the *Comfort Woman* book tour, she says, "I'd talked about it so many times that it wasn't interesting to me anymore." The premise of *Fox Girl* was harder to shake. "I just became fascinated because, like the comfort women camps, these areas [America Towns] are a bad secret that nobody ever acknowledges or talks about," says Keller. "They were a buffer between the American military base and the real Korean society, a kind of a no-man's-land."

Whereas Keller's nights had been racked with dreams of comfort women during the writing of her first novel, she says the brutal America Town of *Fox Girl* "invaded more of my waking life." Historical texts like Cathy Moon's *Sex Among Allies* documented the macro-history of the communities that serviced American GI bases; Keller's toughest challenge was imagining the daily life and the particular, prematurely toughened voices of her young protagonists. Hyun Jin and Sookie, two girls who have turned to prostitution in order to survive, began to creep into the background of Keller's daytime hours. "I've heard actors say that when they get into a mind-set of a character they start taking on traits," explains Keller, tensing a bit even at the memory. "I started feeling much more cynical, like Hyun Jin or Sookie, and I was very glad when the book was done. It was a very uncomfortable place to be."

"Uncomfortable" is an understatement. In the chaos of Keller's crass America Town, a young mother munches on boiled wieners while explaining condoms to her

prepubescent daughter. American GIs boo a teenage girl off a sex-show stage because erotic tricks with vegetables are passé. Parents disown their mixed-race children, and a pregnant protagonist is taunted, "Tell me: outside of America Town, where else in Korea could your child, your little GI baby, fit in?" All the while, poor women hustle to seduce American soldiers as their children unwittingly pick up stray verses of classic Yankee songs, like, "This is my weapon, this is my gun, this is for shooting, this is for fun."

The novel could easily have been a sensational exposé or a saccharine tale of triumph over adversity, but Keller managed to craft a novel that's something of a no-man's-land itself, a survival story that's hardly uplifting, a furious indictment that's rarely dogmatic. Furtive sparks of black humor illuminate the narrative's darkest moments; bruising realities dull characters' simplest hopes. Still, for all the novel's painstaking attention to period detail, it's impossible to ignore its all-too-contemporary relevance.

"My take on *Fox Girl* is that it's really about *us*; it's a reminder of how we're treating new immigrants here," says Bamboo Ridge cofounder Darrell Lum. "In Honolulu there are still whole streets of 'Korean bars' where Korean bar girls work—and local people are just as guilty of racism and bias as anybody else. When you walk past them, you often don't really think about the girls, or the patrons, as people. It's kind of like they don't count somehow, and Nora's making them count." Lum, who watched the narrative develop in workshops, believes that *Fox Girl* is fundamentally a grim rebuke to more sunny tales of immigration. "Aside from native Hawaiians," he explains, "everyone here has had some person, within their family or past immigrant generations, who has taken a job like that, because it was one of the few jobs they could get."

Keller's novel finally ends in the "Korean bars" of Honolulu, explicitly connecting the legacy of America Towns to more contemporary exploitation. "I think *Fox Girl* may be *more* risky than *Comfort Woman*," says Berkeley professor Elaine Kim, a seminal figure in Asian-American studies. "*Comfort Woman* took on Japanese occupation, but this is the United States. You know, a lot of readers like minority writers who are either blaming themselves or their community and who are humorous about doing it. People loved to see Maxine Hong Kingston attacking Chinese patriotism, they loved reading about how the Afghan women have burkas and Chinese women have bound feet, and so on. That's always been great for selling books, but Nora doesn't do that."

On a warm January afternoon, speaking into a cordless phone as she wanders through her home, Keller describes her hopes for her third novel, a sequel to



*Fox Girl* that will pick up strands of her latest novel where it ends in the Korean bars of Hawaii and that will extend her imagined history “at least up until the 1980s. I see the three novels as almost a thematic trilogy that shows that what started in the camps of *Comfort Woman* carries on into the America Towns of *Fox Girl* and then into Hawaii,” she says as a gaggle of children race into her home, ready for a trip to the Honolulu Zoo. “I’m sorry, wait a second. *Where are your shoes?*” Keller asks her daughter. “*You’re bare-foot!* Let me find your shoes. Sorry,” she says into the phone. “She lost her shoes. Anyway,” Keller says, switching gears effortlessly, “in Korea, to this day, you have generations of these women, who came back from World War Two as comfort women, whose children were prostitutes in America Towns, and whose grandchildren work near American bases now.”

Keller’s friends marvel at her ability to shuttle between her work and family life. “It’s breathtaking how quickly she can go down into that place in herself that is just so painful, yeah, and stand there at that place of truth and record it,” says writer Lois-Ann Yamanaka, a good friend of Keller’s, “and then she just brings herself back to cook dinner or whatever, yeah.” Yamanaka, also a mother, says that she and Keller often talk about a passage by Maxine Hong Kingston. “Maxine said that a mother has to be able to write with the baby in one hand and a pen in the other, yeah. That’s what Nora does. She just switches gears so quickly. The baby’s asleep? Okay, I can write. There’s no warm-up, yeah. She’s trained herself to do that.”

“My writing makes my family life better and my family life makes my writing better,” says Keller, whose eight-year-old is already writing short stories and poetry and reading them with her in public. Keller, who says she wrote *Comfort Woman* as much to reconcile with her mother as to recover a history, explains, “I want to help my girls understand their history as Korean Americans living in Hawaii, because it’s a history that nobody taught me.”

So if Keller has looked back and focused clear-eyed on some of the most awful elements of history, she has found some present-day inspiration in role models like Kingston, her Bamboo Ridge colleagues, and her daughters. For now, Keller looks to maintain that balanced perspective by writing at night and playing with her kids during the day, in a pool her husband has jokingly named the “Comfort Pool,” since it was paid for with her first-book royalties.

“I still don’t really have a social life,” she offers, laughing as she searches for those lost shoes in order to take her children to the zoo. “Yeah, it’s just my girls and my writing group. That’s pretty much it. And that’s just fine.”

**Nora Okja Keller and Young-Oak Lee (interview date winter 2003)**

SOURCE: Keller, Nora Okja, and Young-Oak Lee. “Nora Okja Keller and the Silenced Woman: An Interview.” *MELUS* 28, no. 4 (winter 2003): 145-65.

*[In the following interview, Keller describes her childhood and education, her influences, and her methods of composition. She also provides insight into her female characters and the messages of her novels.]*

*Nora Okja Keller (1965-) is a writer based in Hawaii. She was born in Seoul, and her family moved to the United States when she was three. After studying English and Psychology at the University of Hawaii, she earned her master’s degree in American literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz.*

*Her first book, **Comfort Woman** (1997), is inspired by the testimony of Keum-ja Hwang, who had the courage to break the silence of half a century and talk about what the colonizer did to her and to her country during World War II. In 1941, Hwang, at the age of twenty, was tricked into the Japanese military scheme of mobilizing Korean young girls, as many as 200,000, as sex objects for soldiers. Keller’s novel evoked a sensational response from readers in many countries and served as a catalyst for addressing issues of colonialism, patriarchy, sexuality, and gender.*

*Keller’s second novel, **Fox Girl**, was published in April 2002 by Viking and shows Keller’s continued interest in the silenced status of women. Using the Korean legend of the fox girl, Keller directs our attention to women who struggle to survive at the lowest rung of the social ladder as prostitutes.*

*This interview is an integration of an email interview with an in-person interview, when Keller came to Berkeley to give a reading of **Fox Girl** on April 30, 2002. I have merged these parts into a continuous flow of conversation.*

*[Lee]: You say that being raised by your Korean mother involved a lot of absorption of Korean sensibilities and culture. Could you be more specific about this? For instance, do you mean that she helped shape the world of your imagination by telling you stories or folktales?*

*[Keller]: Not so much my mother, but my older brother and older sister, told me very many folktales and stories before so I grew up with those types of stories in my mind. Of course, there’s always food. There’s always customs. . . .*

*And the way you make a judgment on things, the way you shape up your opinions?*