

## Book and Media Reviews

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and even intersect at times with those of the Americans and the Japanese; they seldom touch, however. For the people of Peleliu, the battle was “an unmitigated social, cultural, and environmental disaster” (215). It is their attachment to their island that separates their memories from those of the Americans and the Japanese. Until their voice finds a featured place among the contentious and disparate histories of the battle over Peleliu, the war over memory and commemoration will go on. To his great credit, Stephen Murray has done much to redress the imbalance and injustice.

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*For a Song*, by Rodney Morales.  
Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press,  
2016. ISBN 978-0-8248-5882-7, 505  
pages. Paper, US\$19.00.

Rodney Morales’s new novel, *For a Song*, represents a significant development in his already varied oeuvre, which includes a collection of short stories (*The Speed of Darkness*, 1988); a memorialization of George Helm and Kimo Mitchell (*Ho‘i Ho‘i Hou*, 1984); and his first novel (*When the Shark Bites*, 2002). As an extension and elaboration of that earlier novel, Morales’s most recent foray into the noir genre is an effort to bring the genealogy of Chang Apana (the historical figure who was the basis for the fictional and Hollywood film character Charlie Chan) into a decolonizing, de-orientalizing, and thoroughly contemporary frame through the

protagonist Kawika Apana. According to recent historical work by David A Chang (“Borderlands in a World at Sea: Concow Indians, Native Hawaiians, and South Chinese in Indigenous, Global, and National Spaces” [*The Journal of American History* 898 (2): 384–403]), Chang Apana was hānai-ed (adopted) into the family of a Kanaka Maoli (native Hawaiian) woman, Kahaulelio, and a Chinese man from the Pearl River Delta, C Y Aiona. Both Chang Apana and C Y Aiona came from the same ancestral village, suggesting that similar genealogical logics of adoption were operating in southern China and in Hawai‘i.

However, Morales’s Kawika Apana is anything but his literary ancestor. Instead of rounding up Chinatown gamblers with a bullwhip like Chang Apana, Kawika is a down-and-out reporter-turned-private-investigator, recently divorced. We first meet him in the novel’s opening scene, set in the elite Honolulu neighborhood of Portlock, where Kawika has conned a group of white-collar gamblers into parting with thousands of dollars. Close to dawn, his lawyer-host pressures Kawika into accepting a high-speed boat in lieu of the cash—a boat that not only becomes his new place of residence but also serves as his entrance into a classic noir narrative of entrapment.

Apana’s first job in his new digs is to find Kay Johnson, the missing daughter of Minerva Alter and the late Lino Johnson (a Hawaiian musician somewhat reminiscent of George Helm), who in the novel was murdered in Chinatown some eighteen years earlier. Apana discovers

that Kay, in addition to having been a struggling actress, was making a documentary film about human trafficking in the Asia-Pacific region and that she had also stumbled on the possible reason for her father's death. Apana's investigation of Kay's disappearance leads him all the way back to his days as a reporter investigating Lino's murder, a case that had eventually forced Apana to leave his job.

The current novel reminds this reader of some of the elements of Morales's early fiction—especially the way in which the streets and districts of Honolulu become characters. Certain kinds of activities occur in particular locations—local color and gentrification in Chinatown, corruption in elite suburban locations like Hawaii Kai and Black Point, questionable mainland filmmaking in Kailua, and precarious wage labor in the impoverished local enclave of Kalihi. A theatrical production featuring the Las Vegas strip, which eventually spills out into Apana's Honolulu, reminds this reader of stories in *The Speed of Darkness*, where the changing geometries of Hawai'i's racial politics of "local" alliance are mapped out over the cityscape. But the Honolulu of *For a Song* is worlds away from *Speed's* multiethnic scene, where local youths move through the urban landscape speaking pidgin and seeking out drugs, surf, girls, and music. In this novel, we are in *Speed's* future, where the city's cross-ethnic local alliances have been weakened by the influx of mainland and Asian wealth. The new Honolulu is a global city whose corrupt local politicians and police chief pander to the mainland haole (white) world of

film and record producers. The funding for projects comes from elsewhere, just like the crystal meth that finds its way to the United States and Hawai'i from Mexico and Canada. The local characters who have not lost heart—Kay and her mother Minerva, Sal the bartender, and the Perry brothers—are set against local politicians, even the Hawaiian would-be governor, Kamana.

Two things about *For a Song* stand out for this reader that make it markedly different from the author's earlier works. First, Morales does not shy away from creating complex and strong female characters who, in noir fashion, withhold key details and reveal them under duress—often when it is too late for the detective to intervene. Indeed, in Apana, Morales creates a character whose tortured loneliness makes him repeatedly vulnerable to Minerva, Mia, and even Kay. Second, like Robert Towne's Jake Gittes in *Chinatown*, Apana is pulled into multiple vortices, which slowly grind him down physically and psychologically, the confusion of intricate plot entanglements threatening to tip him from his moral compass. The final dramatic scenes of the novel are painful to read, but they also bring to the fore the cleansing, sardonic wit of Morales's early youthful protagonists. *For a Song* is definitely worth reading, as it marks, at least for this reader, a major turning point in Morales's work.

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