



The Tattoo

Chris McKinney

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“A book about ‘the sins of the fathers.’ . . . A gritty, troubling book.”—*The Honolulu Advertiser*

“The other Hawai‘i, the one tourists never get to see.”—Ian MacMillan

Ken Hideyoshi is the new guy in Halawa Correctional Institute. He’s tough looking, a hard case, observes his cellmate Cal—the mute tattoo artist of the prison, a wife murderer. *SYN*, a gang symbol, is tattooed on his hand, and he has a Japanese emblem inscribed on his left shoulder. He asks Cal for a tattoo on his back, in kanji script, of Musashi’s *Book of the Void*.

While he is being worked on, he tells Cal his life story, a tale of hardship and abuse. Motherless, he was raised by a distant father, a Vietnam War veteran, in the impoverished hinterlands. In his teen years he hung out with the native Hawaiian gangs and was drawn into the Hawaiian-Korean underworld of strip bars and massage parlors. His ambition and proud samurai spirit seem, inevitably, to lead to his downfall.

Chris McKinney is of Korean, Japanese, and Scottish descent. He was born in Honolulu and grew up in Kahaluu. He portrays the native Hawaiian experience from the inside, where children of mixed ethnicity grow up far from the clear water and pristine beaches of the rich visitors’ resorts.

From the Trade Paperback edition.

The Tattoo Details

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From Reader Review The Tattoo for online ebook

Anthony says

This book isn't winning any awards but I have to say that it snuck up on me and I finished it in a day. I think that what it lacks in craft it more than makes up for in plot.

Sherilyn says

Reminded me of Once were Warriors. Same grittiness.

Yoonmee says

Although the story line was intriguing and I although I enjoyed the book, I can't bring myself to give it more than 3 stars. The writing just felt like, well, it felt like a writer's first book -- which it was. Still, it could have used a better editor, many transitions felt choppy, the use of the tattoo-ing time to frame the story felt a little bit contrived, and way to often McKinney told rather than showed us what Ken was thinking.

I'm going to give McKinney another chance because I enjoyed the story, wanted to find out what would happen, and found his subject matter interesting (the underbelly, poor, criminal side of Oahu). Hopefully his writing improves with his next few books! Still, if you're interested in Hawaii and/or in Asian American literature, I'd recommend this book.

Ray says

Overall I enjoyed this book because it wasn't a book that was just happiness and sunshine, it seemed real. It seemed like real life problems were involved. The book was about a character named Ken Hideyoshi. Ken Hideyoshi moved to Hawaii when he was younger and experienced abuse from his distant father after his mother died. The story of Ken Hideyoshi goes back and forth from his life when he was younger and the current time where he is serving in a correctional institute. Ken is the new guy at the correctional institute. He soon makes a friend named Cal, a mute tattoo artist that had his wife murdered. Ken quickly noticed that Cal had SYN tattooed on his hand. He asks Cal for a tattoo on his back, in kanji script, of Musashi's Book of the Void. The story goes on with Cal giving Ken the tattoo while Ken telling him about his life. I did enjoy this book and would recommend this to other people that like books that include real-life problems.

Lynn says

I'm a Haole transplant in Hawaii from NY. I read this book so I could tutor an at-risk student here. This was a fascinating read for so many reasons.

Firstly, it is a look into the poor, adolescent culture that teaches boys that survival means being able to fight,

and an illustration of how much easier it is to be involved in the drug culture, and how difficult it is to escape the caste system.

Secondly, the book illustrated some reasons why anger and resentment at the dominant white culture erupted. Ken was Japanese and had to defend his racial identity against Haoles, Hawaiians, and other ethnic groups. Claudia was part Korean, and suffered constant racial jibes from Ken's father. The Hawaiian young people were resentful of how their home was overtaken by foreigners. Koa, Ken's Hawaiian friend, "hated all of them...They'd taken his land. They killed his culture and therefore they'd taken his humanity." Cal, the white tattoo artist in prison, who had a Nazi tattoo, thought "I'd been a student of hate, too."

Thirdly, one must wonder about Ken's father's influence and how he might have turned out differently if his mother, and educated Japanese woman, had lived. Her influence was always at the back of his mind, which is probably why he strove to be a better person. Environment won, and he ended up a murderer in prison. The prison system! A very fair indictment.

Lastly, McKinney illustrated how young people here are brought up to love and respect the ocean and its creatures. Surfing, spearfishing, and diving were all part of those young people's lives.

I know I will be looking for more of Chris McKinney's books. I think this should be made into a film. It's quite a story, one that I loved reading and was sorry when it ended. I taught language arts to adolescents for 32 years. If it were not for the gritty language and brutality, I would recommend it as classroom reading. Parental permission would be required. I promise, students will love it.

Wendell says

I wanted to love this book, I really did. I was born and raised on Oahu's north shore and went to UH. McKinney's settings in Honolulu and on the windward side are my old stomping grounds. In addition, I've taught in prisons (and taught prison lit), and working-class and prison issues are among the themes I'm most interested in seeing dealt with in fiction. Based on the (overly) positive reviews here, I ordered a copy because I was anxious to see how a writer had combined those elements.

Unfortunately, this is not a great book, and it's not a great book because Chris McKinney is not yet a great writer. His weak points significantly mar **The Tattoo.**

First, McKinney's "framing device" - the felon, Ken Hideyoshi relates his life story to the "haole" tattoo artist, Cal, who can no longer speak because he "got his throat cut." Fair enough. If what we are reading is Ken's story, as related to (and presumably, later written down by) Cal, Ken's language should reflect speech. It doesn't. Ken's prose is literary, flowery, and sometimes even a little on the purple side. So why the expedient of Cal, who remains a silent, smiling, and essentially addle-brained cipher?

One answer is the rather heavy-handed symbolism of "silencing" the haole so the "local" can speak. It's interesting, but the effect is the opposite of the one intended: Ken is permanently "mediated" by Cal--that is, he speaks always through the hated haole. But why can't Ken speak for himself? Why does the story require Cal to "deliver" Ken's memories when Ken is perfectly capable of doing it for himself?

As a corollary, McKinney's narrative choice necessarily means that we are "told" everything in the past tense and can never experience anything in the book's fictional present tense. (The only thing that's in the book's present is the creation of Ken's tattoo.) The result flattens and mutes the drama and tension. We know the important events are all in the past; we know that Ken came through them. The emotion that's recounted takes on a second-hand veneer.

Second, there's Kinney's rendition of pidgin, which is painful to read when it isn't simply odd. As a writer, I'll be the first to say that it is a devilish task to put Hawai'ian pidgin on paper in a way that isn't incomprehensible or that doesn't make it sound like baby talk. But McKinney (and his editors) needed to find a better way. The lexical system that McKinney hits on is neither phonetic, consistent, nor logical: "hea" for "here" (when heeah might make more sense) or "stranga" for strange-ah, in which the soft "g" sound is lost. In addition, McKinney's ear is sometimes tin, and there are half-pidgin, half "standard" English sentences that I'll wager McKinney never heard anyone say. For example, "You must be from da mainland," in which the speaker uses "da" for "the," but pronounces the "must" of "mus' be" correctly; or "I went arready put mine," in which the "arready" is accurate, but the "wen" is lost in that grammatical "went." In the end, all of this becomes a huge distraction.

Third, there's a point-of-view problem that lurks in the background throughout the text but which stands up and shouts in the epilogue whose events neither Cal (nor Ken) can possibly know. Insisting on staying with Ken (or with Ken-through-Cal), in fact, means a limitation of POV that's a shame, and it creates situations in which Ken must explain, rather awkwardly, why he knows something that he didn't witness. Since the voices of the women in this story, especially that of Claudia, are as interesting as Ken's, the novel would have been opened up considerably via the use of alternating chapters or some other device that would have made her POV available.

Though Ken's story is certainly intriguing, the reader is left with the sensation that he's not the most interesting character (Koa, for that matter, is). In addition, his last-chapter philosophizing--which the novel's shape essentially requires--rings an extremely false tone.

The prizes and accolades that McKinney has garnered for **The Tattoo** come in part because he has written about something that no one else has. Perhaps he deserves them for that reason alone. We're anxious to see ourselves named in fiction in the islands, and not by outsiders but by our own. On the other hand, the arts scene in Honolulu is so inbred and so affected by "small pond" syndrome that it's difficult to know where merit truly lies. There was much in **The Tattoo** that resonated in my experience, but that could just as well be said about the scrapbooks I keep. Meanwhile, the great book about Hawai'i by someone who is of the culture and who knows it intimately is waiting to be written.

Mary says

This book would make a better movie than a novel. The strongest parts of the book were the descriptive action and imagery. I also enjoyed the poetry and pictures. Sometimes the flow of the story faltered because plots or characters were not further developed. McKinney started out strong in his writing, but not sure if he didn't have a good editor or just lost his juice from the middle on. I was frustrated at the points of the book where he would introduce a character, a relationship between characters, or a story line...but then never revisited it. Then the last chapter (before the epilogue) seemed rushed (e.g. jumped over months w/in a paragraph) and he resorted to using too many clichés in his attempt to bring some quick closure to several themes he introduced (e.g. Koa & Kahala's volatile relationship; Ken overcoming fear of sharks and his relationship w/sea; Claude's relationship w/Ken's dad).

Monkey says

I liked this book and the subject was interesting in that I've been to Hawaii, but it's not somewhere I'm overly familiar with, so I liked reading about a different culture. I don't think the writing is great, and while the story is looking to show the dark side of the island- I thought some of the plot was overreaching and then slightly not believable. I did think he did a good job talking about what it feels like to live on an island like Hawaii which is pretty unique and both a part of the US but also very much not- and is very isolated, but has a ton of diversity.

Anyway overall I liked it but didn't think it was excellent.

Charlie says

Read this for my Sociology course, very interesting. However the talking in Pigeon made it difficult to understand, and analyse.

Joy says

Warning explicit language throughout, adult themes, peril, adult situations and themes

I didn't hate this book. I do hate that my High School children's English teachers are making this required reading.

Laurie Tomchak says

Read for the second time for a book group. Well written, true to local reality. However, it is not a pleasant book to read. The characters are all flawed and rather unlikeable, though all have their moments and their reasons.

Kori-Jo says

This book was written by a local writer from Hawaii. It delves somewhat into the side of Hawaii that people don't see or want to talk about. But if you're from Hawaii then you know it's not all paradise, in regards to the human aspect.

It also goes into the "samurai" mentality that many Japanese American men still perpetuate. I don't believe this is true for all Japanese American men as this book portrays the extreme end of the spectrum, but from my own experiences I know there are quite a few.

Jade1257 says

This was a good story. I disagree with some of the other reviews. It was smart to write the pijin (and yes, I purposely spelled it that way), with some words "un-pijined" in their spelling, because if it was written exactly phonetically, word for word, it would have been difficult to understand for someone who is not familiar with it. The reading would become too much of a chore. I also didn't think it was a mistake to tell the story from one point of view and had no problem with what tense was being used. It's true that everyone is a critic. The truth is that it was told well and the main character was heroic in his own way and easy to like in spite of all the unsavory things he did, the hallmark of a story well told. As for the racism being offensive, no kidding. Racism is always offensive, that's a no-brainer. The story was the complete opposite of glorifying racism though. If you think Hawaii isn't full of racism exactly as the story portrayed, you have your head in the sand or you just never lived here. I see and hear it every day and it is painful that it still exists in the world anywhere to such a degree, but one look at world news makes it obvious that it does, and not just in Hawaii. It's become such a familiarity that some people don't see the ugliness in it clearly, or at all. Holding on to a culture becomes the justification for it, but that kind of feeling changes a culture into something else already. It's a false justification. Anyway, I liked the story, but wished for a happier ending, like I still wish for a healthy, peaceful, joyful world.

Matt Worthington says

In 2002, I saw this on the shelf at the Hale Koa Hotel's shoppette and grabbed it along with some other books for the long flight back East. I had read some truly awful books earlier that year and when the blurb mentioned that it was a first novel from a junior college English teacher I settled in for what I thought would be a hefty helping of the liveliest pretentious awfulness.

It never materialized. In hindsight I was kind of an asshole to think what I did, but this isn't about me.

The Tattoo is a coming of age story.

It's also a 'Sins of the Father' story.

It's also a gritty crime novel.

It's also a tale of doomed romance.

And a window providing the briefest of glimpses to the Asian and Polynesian experiences in the US in general, and Hawaii (Hawai'i?) in particular.

Okay, so I was right about the pretentious part...sort of, because if you do what you say you're going to do it's no longer pretentious and Mr. McKinney actually does manage to pull it off...sort of.

It reads like a first novel. The voices get muddled. The symbolism is a bit clunky, with Ken at one point actually pausing to tell us what the Tiger Shark symbolizes, and the blue cats thing could have used a bit more work or have just been discarded entirely. The grittiness gets a bit overplayed. Dialogue is a little stilted in places. I actually thought the pidgin in the book was pretty good in that it was apparently phonetic

and thus comprehensible. So yeah, gold star for use of dialect.

The story and characters are believable and engaging. The social commentary is there but not obnoxiously so. It drags in spots but picks back up quickly enough. When I got to the end I didn't have to go back and see if I missed something, but I did wind up re-reading the book almost right away. I'm still not sure what I find most appealing about *The Tattoo*, but I feel confident in saying that it was worth a few hours of my life. Mr. McKinney's later work has steadily improved, which to me confirms my suspicion that the problems with the first book were mostly kinks to be worked out.

So...good story...style problems...generally worthwhile. Give it a try. You could do much much worse.

C.L. Walters says

Three Reasons: *The Tattoo* by Chris McKinney

This is a solid book, but not necessarily because it's the "best" writing. Instead, it's a solid book for 1) the content that is accessible to the Hawaii Local and the island teen, 2) the nicely developed images especially with respect to the symbolism of the shark, and 3) the way the story lingers with you long after finishing the prose.

That said, there are negatives. 1) there are overly contrived moments that seem born of convenience instead of being character driven, 2) the pidgin is distracting and needed work for authenticity and 3) the point of view needs work.
