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## A Conversation with Kai Hart Hemmings

### Abstract

Kai Hart Hemmings is best known for her first novel, *The Descendants*, and its film adaptation directed by Alexander Payne and starring George Clooney. Her new novel, *The Possibilities*, was a New York Times bestseller. She has also published *House of Thieves*, a collection of stories. While visiting Butler in the fall of 2014 as part of the Vivian S. Delbrook Visiting Writers Series, Hemmings talked with Booth's Robert Helfst about Hawaiian identity, road trip research, and finding her voice.

### Cover Page Footnote

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January 2, 2015

## A Conversation with Kauai Hart Hemmings

by Robert Helfst

*Kauai Hart Hemmings is best known for her first novel, *The Descendants*, and its film adaptation directed by Alexander Payne and starring George Clooney. Her new novel, *The Possibilities*, was a New York Times bestseller. She has also published *House of Thieves*, a collection of stories. While visiting Butler in the fall of 2014 as part of the Vivian S. Delbrook Visiting Writers Series, Hemmings talked with Booth's Robert Helfst about Hawaiian identity, road trip research, and finding her voice.*

**Robert Helfst:** Kauai, in your novels you've written about resort-town economics, trust and estate law, and even more complicated things. What sort of research do you do before the actual writing happens?

**Kauai Hart Hemmings:** I kind of mix it up with reading historical documents that I find online about the town or certain people. I cover a broad spectrum. I write while I'm doing the research so what sticks is what gets into the book. If there's something that I feel I don't have the authority to talk about, or if I want a different layer, then I'll investigate for relevant details. Also, I have to actually go to the place. Like Hawaii or Breckenridge: I lived there, but I had to go back and take another look. Things change. Just to be able to see and talk to people or go to restaurants—that's all part of the research too.

**RH:** Your work features a very strong sense of place, and these beautiful settings become characters alongside the cast in your work.

**KHH:** I guess as they should in any book. In *The Possibilities*, they drive from Breckenridge to Colorado Springs so I drove the same route. I actually went and

scouted the places that they would go to or that I had written about, and I just wanted to make sure that I got it right and didn't miss any details. At the same time, it's a fictional world and sometimes the geography doesn't add up.

**RH:** One line from *The Descendants* that's fostered a lot of discussion is when Scottie looks at her family as they're discussing what kind of Hawaiians they're going to be and says "Well, your kind." What were you driving at here? What is your interpretation of that line?

**KHH:** I feel there are certain limitations when you identify with a certain culture, and I'm not sure sometimes what it means to be Hawaiian. I think she didn't really know either. It probably felt different for the King family, who are Hawaiian, to identify themselves as Hawaiian when they're such big land owners, and they go to the private clubs and attend the private schools. Yet that makes them no less authentic as Hawaiians. I guess that's how that felt. People feel the need to claim their race in different ways.

**RH:** I think that gets us toward some larger ideas of identity that it seems you're exploring through these characters who are navigating their heartbreak.

**KHH:** I didn't want it to be so Hawaiian-centric because I really wanted to show this Hawaiian man, and that's not how he identifies himself and that's probably not how most people would identify themselves. I just wanted to tell a story from his point of view.

**RH:** Several characters from *The Descendants* make an appearance in your short-story collection *House of Thieves*. Matt, Scottie, and Joanie all appear in "The Minor Wars." Racer and his lost girlfriend appear in one piece as well. Do you frequently find yourself returning to characters from your shorter works?

**KHH:** No, I've never done that before. I did that intentionally almost as a wink for those who have read the short stories to see those characters in a different light and to see them continue. I just thought it would be kind of fun.

**RH:** I understand that it took you longer to nail down Sarah St. John's voice in *The Possibilities*. Can you tell me a little about the development of that narrator and her story?

**KHH:** I didn't know whose story it was. There were a bunch of characters who no longer exist but were in early drafts. I finally settled on her and felt the same way that I did when I was writing Matt King in that it was finally going somewhere, and I

enjoyed being in her head. So I think it just took me a long time to find her as a character. She was a minor character in earlier drafts, never having much to do. For some reason or other I turned her into the main character, and that's when it took off.

**RH:** I really enjoyed and am interested in Lyle, Sarah's father in the novel. He's so quirky and yet he's this really stabilizing force. How did he come about?

**KHH:** I don't really know how anyone comes about until I start writing and they say something. I just liked the things that came out of his mouth. In the earlier versions he was Cully's father, who was married to Sarah, and it was his book. It was Lyle's novel, and it just didn't work. And yet, I wanted to save him somehow. I reworked it and reimagined him, and that's sort of how it came about. I'm always interested in male and female relationships within families, and it was a good way to sort of bring out the history of Breckenridge and the people who are from there and who have lived there their entire lives.

**RH:** That's interesting that you talk about the relationships between male and female characters. There are always very interesting interplays between the female characters that end up being these big power struggles—whose mourning is better, whose relationship with her father is stronger. How do you develop these status plays, the back and forth barbs?

**KHH:** How do I develop it? I guess I have poor answers for these kind of things. The way I develop it is by writing it, and then reading it and revisiting it and trying to construct it as I think it would actually play out in life, and maybe constructing it in a way that's actually entertaining (I hope) to readers. But I don't think I can sit down and ruminate over how I am going to address power plays. I don't really know how other people write, but I can't do that. I don't even know what I'm intending sometimes as far as what something means in a scene—I just want to write the scene and get the characters from one point to the next.

**RH:** A central part of your work is the weight of the past, and the secrets that these people leave behind that build into these sorts of driving forces. I think there are definitely some secrets that come to light in both *The Descendants* and *The Possibilities* that are shocking. It's gotta be tricky to build that sense of suspense in the reader, the shock and hurt. Are these things you uncover in the writing process?

**KHH:** It's sort of what I uncover on my own, and a lot of it isn't meant to shock. It's sort of just about doling out information in a timely way where you want to create some suspense, but not frustrate the reader. I feel like the suspense in *The Possibilities* is really something different. I mean the secret isn't really that she's pregnant. I feel

that you kind of know at the beginning, and it shouldn't be too much of a shocker. The suspense, if you can even call it that, is just what's going to happen now and what kind of choices are they going to make and how are they going to get along from this point forward? It's tricky for every writer to know when to hold back and when to reveal.

**RH:** I've seen the word tragicomedy used to describe your writing. You strike this great balance between humor and sadness when writing about the deaths in these families. How do you achieve this?

**KHH:** I don't know. I don't do it intentionally. It's just sort of my voice. I tend to back away from sentimentality, yet I'm talking about tragic subjects, so it's bound to be sad and the humor just comes from how these characters would respond. I think that's what life is like. I've never had a day that I haven't been worrying about something or that I haven't laughed about something. That's just sort of inevitable that life is like that, and so my fiction is like that.

**RH:** I found a lot of humor in your characters' dialogue, particularly when they're self-aware enough to know that their intended messages did not land. How do you strike those beats in the dialogue?

**KHH:** I guess you're just sort of writing what you've heard before. You're involved in these characters, and you're just letting them speak. I don't know how other writers answer these questions about "how do you do this" because it's not like you have a strategy or something. I just let them talk, and I pull back when I feel like it's too much and too entertaining or too quirky. I kind of let them go. It's always building toward some sort of point and moving that scene forward. I like reading dialogue, and so I like writing it as well and using that as a tool versus just interior monologue.

**RH:** You're mostly known for your fiction, but you published a beautiful piece about your adoption in *The Guardian*. Is non-fiction something that you plan on returning to?

**KHH:** No, I don't think so. I write essays when someone asks me to, and they're always a struggle. I never like doing it until it's over, and then I realize I did like that. But I don't think I'll ever set out to write a larger non-fiction project.

**RH:** How did your experience growing up influence your writing?

**KHH:** It must have influenced me in some way. I'm not sure directly how. I grew up with a semi-famous dad in Hawaii, and I guess a child just contends with her famous

forefather and trying to make her own name. But really my experience is just that I grew up in Hawaii, and I think I left and didn't plan on writing about it—thinking that ironically it wasn't exotic enough. Maybe I needed space from it in order to write about it. So I don't know how I was influenced, but it left enough of an impression that I wanted to go back and write about it because I had not seen it in fiction before.

**RH:** How does being a mother affect your creative process? How do you protect your writing time and your creativity?

**KHH:** I don't protect it because I can't—it's impossible. I don't have a job and so it's all on me. That's that. My son takes a lot of time. I write when I can, and they're in school for a lot of the time and I'm just fine with it. I write enough, I get enough done, and I like that writing and my career isn't my center, isn't the main focus of my life. It'd be too luxurious. It's just a book. These are just books to me. They're wonderful and important, and yet the kids are sort of a reminder that there's much more. I do not take myself seriously and they're the reason for it. Well, partly. And I like it. I like it just like that.

**RH:** You're a fairly active user of the social media community—Facebook, Twitter, Instagram.

**KHH:** Yeah I guess so.

**RH:** Does technology affect your writing? How do you contend with this additional distraction?

**KHH:** I think it's horrible. It's so distracting, and I've been slowly backing off of Twitter just because it's been boring me lately. But every now and then I'll do something. And even Facebook I've slowly backed off of. I've created an author page on Facebook because I don't want to have to maintain a personal website. Instagram I do because I love it. It's just my photo storage. I love Instagram, and I don't get bored of seeing other people's pictures. I feel like I get to know people through their photographs and I love it and everything else I'm kind of backing away from.

**RH:** What authors or novels have influenced your writing?

**KHH:** Wallace Stegner I love. I'm reading Jennifer Egan right now, and I think she is just magic. She does no wrong and everything she has written I have just adored. I found her story collection when I was in grad school. I think everyone knew of Amy Hempel, Jennifer Egan, and Lorrie Moore, but they were all new to me. I had never really read contemporary fiction and so stumbling upon these writers just made my

own voice and my own work possible. I felt like I could speak. I wasn't an Updike, that kind of writer: I didn't have that kind of confidence. Women like Hempel, Egan, and Moore showed me that my voice was valid. I love them for that. I also love Peter Cameron, who taught at Sarah Lawrence. Sheila Kohler is one of my favorites.

**RH:** Why do you write?

**KHH:** I can't help it. I almost feel like now I wanted it so bad and once I decided to be a writer then that was it. I had to publish something. And then when I published something it became "This is my job now." And I don't have another job. And this is so wonderful. I am so excited and now I need to keep my job. That's kind of why I write. I still write because I still read and whenever I read something I want to talk back and give my input or say my story and so I'm constantly inspired because I'm constantly reading or watching films or just observing the life around me and just thinking "Gosh, that is so funny," and "I can't believe someone just said that," and then I want to go home and write about it. It's a good gig. Whenever I complain, I have to remember this is going well so far.

Robert Helfst writes fiction in his apartment, in his cubicle, and he would in the shower if paper and laptops were waterproof. This is the Butler MFA candidate's first published interview.