



Finding the Right Material

By Malia Collins
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I grew up in a house in Hawaii where story was king—my mother and her sisters did not work, and so our days were spent surrounded by cousins and cousins of cousins, and the only way to entertain a band of children was to tell stories—it was free, it took awhile, and all of the aunties had stories to tell. I saw those stories as a way to live inside a life that was not mine.

Years later, when my son was born, my mom and the aunties came to help. They called him by his Hawaiian name and read him books and showed him pictures so he would know where I was from. They brought me food from Hawaii that was supposed to help me heal, soup made from pig's feet marrow to replace what had been lost or taken up by the baby. It was the middle of a cold and gray Idaho winter and I was entrenched in Hawaii. I wrote my first story about Hawaii that winter. I wrote about it because once my family left, the house felt empty. I wrote about Hawaii because when I was reading about it or trying to remember things about it, I got lost, lost in a different way than ever before in my fiction. I was lost as a way to stay in a world I had almost let myself forget.

I became dogged as a writer, going for the detail or image or line that was absolutely true—I had to render it on the page as clearly as I could see it in my own head, as clearly as I could smell it. (If you are ever lucky enough to visit, as soon as you step off the plane and into the humidity at the Honolulu Airport, the smell of plumeria leis and ocean water will bring you to your knees.) Since it was a place I knew so well, I found myself skimping on details or chickening out on a scene, I could hear my auntie's voices, which have since that winter taken up residence in my head, roaring and furious, like it was their own story I was skimping on.

When I started these stories, I no longer had the luxury of time and so made deals with myself—leave the computer open, if you pass it you have to write one line, if you pass it on the way back you have to write another—or, take these twenty minutes while the baby is sleeping to rewrite that piece of summary into scene. If I am reluctant to work some mornings, I'll read for a few minutes—I have books that are a guarantee to get me going, and by the time I am through with the first page, I can start writing.

I know my writing is going well when I am unwilling to come away from it—not only away from the work but come out of that space I find myself returning to again and again, where the world is charged and each thing I see—two books left on the quarter candy

machines at the airport, or a small pink tennis shoe abandoned on the side of the road— feeds the story I am working on. When I'm not writing, I'm thinking about my characters and trying to make them more real, hear the words they speak, imagine how they would look at one other if they passed, unexpectedly, on the street.

When I am walking through the world I try to find something that I can take home and use, something surprising, something that makes me stop and catch my breath, or look again, something that makes me feel like I am still in that good place, a little outside of it all, watching, quietly, trying to find my way in.

Malia Collins grew up in Hawaii. She has published stories in the *Mid-American Review* and *Puerto del Sol*. Her first children's book, *Pele and Poliahu, A Tale of Fire and Ice* came out in fall of 2005, and her next children's book will be out in October. She is a Writer in the Schools with The Cabin.