Hillary had one of her millennium dinners and we had this very distinguished scientist there, who is an expert in this whole work in the human genome. And he said that we are all, regardless of race, 99.9 percent the same. Now you may find that uncomfortable when you look around here. (Laughter.) But it is worth remembering. We can laugh about this, but you think about it. Modern science has confirmed what ancient faiths have always taught: the most important fact of life is our common humanity. Therefore, we should do more than just tolerate our diversity—we should honor it and celebrate it. (Applause.)

—William Jefferson Clinton
State of the Union, January 27, 2000

In 1981 we published the three-volume Asian-Pacific Literature text, a sampling of outstanding writing from twenty-four countries and island groups. With Hawai‘i as our primary audience, we were not surprised that the most popular of the three volumes was the first, the one presenting a generous collection of works about Hawai‘i. (By no coincidence, none of the authors was named Twain, London, Maugham, Stevenson—or Michener!) In those days, with Bamboo Ridge Press and its followers just getting started, our volume was probably the single best source of what has come to be called “local literature,” writing both by and about people of all ethnicities who have lived most of their lives in Hawai‘i.

Over the years, both the students who learned about their literary heritage from Asian-Pacific Literature and their
teachers have told us how much they valued that unique experience. And, often, they have asked whether replacement copies are available. Regrettably, the first printing of our groundbreaking set was the last, and replacement copies of Volume One have not been available for about fifteen years. The success of Growing Up Local, co-published with Bamboo Ridge Press in 1998, led us to revisit the earlier work with an eye to republishing "Hawai‘i," this time in a volume complete unto itself.

We liked what we saw, and this book is the result. No, it is not exactly what we published in 1981. By adding a few selections, dropping a few, and slightly reorganizing the mix, we hope to have made Island Fire more appealing, accessible, and representative than the original.

Because Asian-Pacific Literature was a textbook intended for classroom use, each of its reading selections was accompanied by a set of student activities. We have dropped those activities in hopes of giving this book a more universal audience, both inside and outside the classroom. For those wanting to use Island Fire as a textbook, we publish a teacher's manual of classroom-tested activities and strategies for each selection. It is available from the Curriculum Research & Development Group (CRDG) at the University of Hawai‘i, Mānoa.

What has not changed in any way is our belief in the power of stories to bring diverse people together through a sense of shared community. Here's what we said in the Introduction way back then:

Storytelling, whatever form it takes, is one of the most important bridges to understanding between human beings. It gives us the opportunity to express our most exciting experiences and our most important beliefs in ways that invite friendship and good will. And it is through the stories we
exchange between friends that we communicate our truest theology, mythology, and philosophy; our history, psychology, sociology, and language. We communicate our shared humanity through our stories.

Perhaps that is why many thoughtful, well-educated people believe that creative literature is the best source of disciplined knowledge about what makes us the way we are. Finely crafted creative literature is, after all, nothing more than an extension of the art of talking story, and its best examples tell us as much about ourselves as they tell about the characters they depict. When we read, we actually become the characters we are reading about, and when we are finished reading we have necessarily received, evaluated, and incorporated many of the attitudes and perceptions of those same characters. By as much as any literary experience changes us, we become that much more understanding of the people that literary experience represents. The more understanding of other people we become, the closer we are to being members of their cultural communities.

In short, friends, welcome to the ‘ohana, the family.

—Cheryl and Jim Harstad