

Interview with Elizabeth Miki Brina

[00:00:11] **Sachi** Hello, I'm Sachi Argabright. And this is Reading Women, a podcast inviting you to reclaim the bookshelf and read the world. Today, I'm talking to Elizabeth Miki Brina about her memoir, *SPEAK, OKINAWA*, which is out from Knopf. You can find a complete transcript of this episode on our website readingwomenpodcast.com. And don't forget to subscribe so you don't miss a single episode.

[00:00:34] **Sachi** So we're very excited to have Elizabeth on our podcast today. I absolutely loved her memoir, and I'm so excited to be speaking with her about it today. A little bit about Elizabeth. . . . She is the recipient of a Rona Jaffe Bread Loaf Scholarship and a New York State Summer Writers Institute Scholarship. And she currently lives and teaches in New Orleans.

[00:01:02] **Sachi** And, you know, this book talks a lot about her experience as a biracial individual who is half white and half Okinawan. And for those of you who might not be familiar with Okinawa, it is a island off of Japan. It's own prefecture. So it's technically a part of Japan, but it was its own native island before it was fought over by the Chinese and the Japanese and the US. And it came kind of to this agreement after much fighting that the Okinawan people and land would be sold to Japan and that the US would occupy part of the territory. And we still currently have military bases there today.

[00:01:50] **Sachi** So Elizabeth's parents met while her father was stationed in Okinawa and her mother was a cocktail waitress. And this book really talks about her relationship with her mother and father and how that has changed throughout her life and how her experience through childhood and leading to adulthood, how that's shifted. And in addition to the chapters about her own personal life, it's also peppered in with chapters about Okinawan history.

[00:02:23] **Sachi** And this book resonated with me so much because—as some of our listeners might know; I think I've mentioned it before—I am also biracial. I am half white and half Japanese. So because of that kind of relationship between Japan and Okinawa, Elizabeth and I had a lot in common. My father met my mother while he was stationed in Japan when he was in the Navy. And so being biracial and being an Asian American biracial individual whose family was a military family in its background, I related so much to this book and was constantly taking pictures of screenshots and sending it to my sister because it was so similar to our experience. And I've never read a memoir like this that I saw myself so completely. And so I've been telling everyone, you know, how much I love this, and they should pick it up. I really feel like it hasn't gotten enough buzz. And so I'm so excited that we are able to highlight this wonderful conversation that I had with Elizabeth Miki Brina today. And I'm so excited for our listeners to hear it. So without further ado, here is my interview with Elizabeth Miki Brina about her memoir, *SPEAK, OKINAWA*.

[00:03:46] **Sachi** All right, well, welcome, Elizabeth! So excited to have you on the podcast today.

[00:03:58] **Elizabeth** Thank you so much. I'm so happy to be here.

[00:04:01] **Sachi** Great. Well, I personally am very excited to discuss your memoir, *SPEAK, OKINAWA* today. I loved your book so much. And honestly, I feel like it's not praised enough as it should be. So we're super excited to be highlighting it on our platform

today because I feel like it's a truly special piece of work, probably going to be one of my favorites of this year.

[00:04:26] **Elizabeth** Oh, thank you. That makes me really happy.

[00:04:29] **Sachi** Yeah!

[00:04:29] **Elizabeth** Good to hear.

[00:04:31] **Sachi** Yeah. So for context for our listeners, I—like Elizabeth—I'm a biracial individual. My mother is from Japan, and my father is from America. And my parents met when my father was stationed in Yokohama while he was in the Navy. And so, Elizabeth, I resonated with your childhood experience so much, just having parents from two different worlds. And, you know, having that military background within the immediate family, I think adds another dynamic to the family as well. And so this book, you know, resonated with me more than any other book that I read because I feel like there's not a ton of literature out there about the biracial experience or even, you know, in addition to that . . . military family and also from either kind of like the Japan . . . Okinawa type relationship type thing. So I just want to thank and applaud you for even writing this book and putting it out there because that representation meant so much to me.

[00:05:41] **Elizabeth** Thank you so much. Yeah, it's been amazing to hear the responses like that. There's so many of us out there that we didn't know about before. So I feel very connected to a community.

[00:05:59] **Sachi** So for those of our listeners who might not have heard of your book, could you give us a quick synopsis about what it's about?

[00:06:06] **Elizabeth** It's essentially about healing my relationship with my mother and also through that, healing the relationship with my heritage, my mother's side of my heritage. For most of my life, I grew up really just estranged from my mother and wanting to reject her. My mother is a native of Okinawa, and my father was stationed on the island after he fought in Vietnam. And that's how they met. And then we moved to . . . Well, they moved to the United States. And I grew up in a predominantly white suburb of upstate New York. And everywhere I saw was white and American. And I saw my mother as this outsider and how she made me an outsider. And I blamed her for that. So I was very embarrassed and ashamed of her growing up. And it's a story about learning about everything that she went through and sacrificed to come to the United States and how everything that she went through and how that informed her upbringing of me. And I couldn't understand without understanding her history, without understanding, Okinawan history, my history. So it's a story about reconciling with that.

[00:07:39] **Sachi** Yeah, absolutely. And one of the first questions that came to my mind when I knew we were sitting down today is that so much of your book is centered around your parents, especially your relationship with your mother. And so as I was reading this book, you can definitely see that distinct shift between the relationships and perceptions you had about your mother and father in the adult passages versus the childhood passages. There's this contrast and this difference. What I'm curious about is how kind of those shifts took place because your book really shows the goalposts of then and now rather than, you know, the journey of maybe how you've got there. And I think each and every one of us—in my mind, the biracial community—has this push and pull constantly, right? Of not feeling 100 percent, you know, one part or the other. The only thing, at least

for me that feels 100 percent is that I'm 100 percent biracial. And my even relationships with my family and especially my parents have changed and shifted over time. And I think that is so indicative of that biracial experience. So how did that kind of journey and maybe some shifts and turning points look like for you?

[00:09:02] **Elizabeth** Mm hmm. It's still something I'm constantly grappling with. And I'm still coming to new insights, even after, like, pouring it all out into this book. But like I said before, I grew up in this white suburb. And I constantly looked to my father. Like, my father was the one who could guide me. My father was the one who could teach me the way to be in this world. And my mother just seemed. . . . This is coming from a child's standpoint.

[00:09:36] **Sachi** Right, yeah.

[00:09:38] **Elizabeth** Like, why can't you show me anything, right? Like, why is it so difficult for you to navigate this world? And so I, you know, I thought of her as weak, as someone who couldn't take care of me. But she was, you know, she was constantly taking care of me in ways that I couldn't see until. . . .

[00:10:03] **Sachi** Until you're older!

[00:10:05] **Elizabeth** Yeah, exactly. And then you look back. And you're like, oh my goodness. Wow. How did . . . how did you do all that without any recognition for it?

[00:10:13] **Sachi** Yeah.

[00:10:14] **Elizabeth** And yet she still kept going. And that's . . . and that's why I just admire her strength so much. And it was a lot of just growing up and seeing the dynamics, also the gender dynamics as well, understanding the more nuance of these systems. Right? Colonialism, imperialism, racism, and seeing how that put my father and her . . . and how she was just living in this family where her culture was not dominant. And so that gave me much more like a sympathetic, generous view of of what she had had to deal with, how much harder it was for her than my father. And becoming a woman and being like, wow, like being a woman is really hard. And seeing her in that way, just as not as my mother, but as a woman who is dealing with all the misogyny. I mean, that's a system that came into play as well to being a . . . being a cocktail waitress, you know, at a nightclub in Okinawa and serving these soldiers drinks. And that was one of the things she told me later in life, how she got paid a dollar for every drink she got a serviceman to buy for her. Just the dynamics of that.

[00:11:41] **Sachi** Yeah, right.

[00:11:42] **Elizabeth** You know, using her sexuality, right? Using her, just objectifying, having to objectify herself to make a living. And yeah. And so just understanding how all that was sort of coming together in my family and manifesting in the dynamics of my family. And it really . . . that's what it is. It's just the. . . You talked about turning points. But that's what was so hard to capture because it happened so subtly and so gradually and over time. One of them was definitely seeing my mother as. . . . The inspiration for the book was going to my mother's baptism. And she had recently joined the Rochester Japanese Christian congregation. And it's a church that's . . . all the members are are Japanese. And almost all of them are women. Like, I think there's like two Japanese men there. And almost all of them are women. Almost all of them are around my mother's age. And all the women around my mother's age were married to white American men who

served in the military. And that was the first time it kind of dawned on me like, this is not . . . I'm not a totally isolated incident. My family. . . .

[00:13:02] **Sachi** Yeah, no! I had the same experience when my. . . . So my dad was a chief in the Navy. And every year, they would have an annual Navy award ceremony for all the chiefs and officers. And you would . . . they would bring their family members. And so my parents would go to the ceremony. And then they'd have this party at the end. All the kids would come down, and they had dance floor and all the stuff. I walked into this conference room, this ballroom. And almost—definitely more than half—but like a shockingly large amount that even me as a child realized that almost every one of those Navy soldiers were married to Asian women.

[00:13:44] **Sachi** And, you know, as a kid, you're just like, "Oh, wow, everyone's got an Asian mom like me." And now as an adult, I say, "Wow, like that is a distinct pattern that arises from, you know, a lot of different factors"—that you lay out very well in one of the chapters of this book, that I have it in a later question. We could definitely talk about that as well. It is this shared experience, and it does play to a lot of these different aspects of our history and our cultures. And it's no surprise either. I think my dad. . . . My parents are no longer together. After they split, my dad noted that a lot of people who he knows in the Navy that married these women from overseas, they're not together anymore. And I think that's telling. And it just makes me realize a lot of different things about my family and then a lot of the military families that we had because I grew up on Navy bases for most of my life, that it is this kind of systemic-type cycle that we live in. And it's something that isn't really talked about a lot. And I felt very. . . . It's kind of like whenever you're on the base and you're isolated to it, you feel like it's so normalized. And then when my dad got out of the military, when I was in middle school, and we moved back to a very predominantly white suburb—like you had mentioned. We're in Ohio, but.

[00:15:17] **Elizabeth** Close enough.

[00:15:18] **Sachi** Exactly, right? You know, apples and oranges. Right? I realized that that is not the norm. And that's not really discussed. And my family was very different than all of the other families around me. So I totally, totally get and understand that as well.

[00:15:35] **Elizabeth** Yeah. And how much has to be explained. Right? With . . . to explain the way these two people came together is. . . . It's so far reaching into the past that, yeah, it's bewildering. And it gave me a lot of. . . . It just . . . it helped me so much to understand my mother and myself, to learn about that.

[00:16:05] **Sachi** Right, yeah. So the. . . . It kind of leads very nicely to the next thing I was hoping to discuss today. There's a passage in your book that I literally took a picture of it. I sent it to my sister because it just, I felt like, pinpointed a lot of what my family had experienced. And I'll paraphrase it here, but it kind of notes that while people from different cultures might ultimately get along, you know, if they fall in love and start a family, those cultures and histories are forced to confront each other and potentially upset each other when you bring that unit long term. And this resonated with me so much because I feel like sometimes we as a society, we praise and encourage interracial couples to get married and start a family. And that's wonderful. But there's also this other side of the coin that, you know, you can't really solve racism or cultural clashes by having biracial children.

[00:17:04] **Sachi** I even think it makes things more complicated. Honestly. I feel like my existence and my identity has been complicated for most of my life. And so I feel like it's a

constant struggle for me—again, like you were saying—to have people understand what it's like to be a biracial individual, to have to explain, you know, the family dynamics that I've had or my life experience or, you know, what it's like straddling these two different communities that don't fully accept me either way. Right? So I really wanted to hear kind of your thoughts around that passage and the themes and the message you are really getting to with that paragraph because it resonated with me so much. And I'm like, if this . . . if people could just see this, like, I think this would really help explain the dynamics of interracial families and ultimately, you know, mixed-race children that are a result of that.

[00:18:00] **Elizabeth** Yeah, I mean, I know it's huge. And I think it's about, you know, it's really about learning a language. Right? Like a . . . and everything that's baked into our communication with each other, that I think if you're aware of it, you could be more sensitive to it. But I was not aware of it for so long. So there's so much that got lost in translation. I'm trying to think of examples of how my mother's history was, you know, it was just denied. For a long time, I didn't know the difference between Okinawan and Japanese.

[00:18:43] **Sachi** Right.Yeah.

[00:18:44] **Elizabeth** And then. . . . But she's my mother. And she's living in this family that doesn't acknowledge that or doesn't doesn't openly discuss it. And that was the problem, too, is that my father—just his background and how he grew up—he was very much like, you know, race doesn't matter.

[00:19:05] **Sachi** Oh yeah, I definitely got that too.

[00:19:08] **Elizabeth** You know, like, it's not important. What's important is your character. What's important is what you do in life.

[00:19:14] **Sachi** And you work hard. And you justify your place in society because you worked hard and not because of X, Y, Z, different things that you would experience, right?

[00:19:25] **Elizabeth** Exactly. And not also who you were born as. Right? And because that's so un-American. Right? Like, it doesn't matter. You know, it doesn't matter where you were born or what family, you know. . . . Who you're born as and how the world sees you, how that just affects everything. . . . And this clash came a lot from me not understanding where my mother was coming from. There are so many countless examples. But one of them that just kind of dawned on me recently was how my mother, like, really hates camping. When we would go on vacation and we would travel to different places, like my father and I favored the more kind of like rustic, charming, like what we . . . like, rustic, quaint. And for my mother, this, you know, was really traumatizing. Like she grew up without running water. She had to, like, get water from the well and bathe in her yard. So. And it would disappoint me that she always wanted to stay at a Holiday Inn. And I was very condescending towards her, just like, oh, you don't . . . you don't understand, like, corporate . . . you know . . . like, corporate America. And what that meant to her . . . like Holiday Inn meant just safety, security, clean.

[00:20:45] **Sachi** Running water!

[00:20:45] **Elizabeth** Exactly. Exactly. Like these are very predictable. This is a very predictable place. That's just one example of growing up that I never understood about her until I . . . until I understood her. And this is more like class than culture. But it comes in all

the time with the apology. My mother's an extremely apologetic person and very accommodating, just very kind and generous. And again and again, I interpreted that as weakness because, you know, here we're supposed to not necessarily not apologize, but to. . . .

[00:21:27] **Sachi** Be individualistic. You want to . . . you want to work. We're not a collective society like in the East. And so it's like, you got to be that person to look out for yourself because if you're . . . if you give too much to other people, they're just going to walk all over you. Right?

[00:21:44] **Elizabeth** Exactly. And everyone has to do that. Everyone has to do that for that to work. Right? Like everyone. . . . Both, like to be very apologetic society or to be an individualistic society, in order for it to work, everyone has to be like, "Okay, well, I guess I'm just going to be myself, my own contained unit and just take care of myself and not think of other people." Or, "I have to be part of a whole, and everyone has to think of themselves as part of this whole." And that's where my mother is coming from. Right? Like, it's just. . . . She would just be so preoccupied with others, those comforts, other people's needs. So. And that's just because of the community that she grew up in.

[00:22:24] **Sachi** Mm hmm. Yeah, absolutely. And one of the other themes that I feel like is woven throughout. . . . You know, there are undertones of this kind of internalized racism throughout the book, how you were maybe embarrassed to to be Asian American or half-Okinawan. And, you know, a lot of Asian Americans, including myself or even people of color in general, experience some type of internalized racism—usually what I think is, you know, early in their lives, if not their whole life. Right? So I think if we want to discuss that experience and how dangerous it can be, but also how it does really inform that relationship with your mother, is how you see yourself too because you're a part of your parents. Right? So when you have this struggle and relationship, and you kind of see weakness or a lack of respect with a family member, then part of that goes to you inside, right, as that form of internalized racism. And I feel like, you know, internalized racism isn't talked about enough in literature or mainstream media. But so many people experience it. And I did appreciate how you highlighted that in your book. And I was curious to know if there was kind of this potential struggle or push and pull to put that to paper because I could only imagine how difficult that would have been to really express that so openly in this book. But I didn't know if you wanted to to mention that or talk about that as well.

[00:24:06] **Elizabeth** Yeah, like you said, it was a lifelong struggle. It's been a lifelong struggle. And still, I said before, things are coming to light. New new things are coming to light constantly because it seeps so deep into your psyche and gets repressed. So. But by the time I was putting it to paper, it was very cathartic and something that I . . . it was something I needed to do because I wanted to . . . definitely not excuse myself, but explain myself for how mean I was to my mother. I'm not trying to absolve myself. I'm just trying to put it in context. Because of the world, because of the '80s and '90s, that I thought anything and anyone that wasn't white was inferior. What we constantly saw on television, what we constantly saw, listened to on the radio. . . .

[00:24:56] **Sachi** Or read in books even.

[00:24:57] **Elizabeth** Yeah, exactly. At school. At school even. Like a white, white, white, white, white. There was nothing for, like, speaking to us or our experience or praising it or celebrating it at all. And I thought that, okay, this is. . . . This is who I need to be—as close

as I can get. I remember even thinking, even mildly thinking to myself, like, well, good thing I'm half white. You know, because. . . .

[00:25:25] **Sachi** Yeah.

[00:25:25] **Elizabeth** Like, yeah, exactly. Like, I, you know, like, I almost stand a chance here. And then . . . and it became just like just rejecting my Asian-ness. And that also went along with rejecting my mother because she was my Asian-ness. And being so, so grateful for any, any attention that I got from white people because those were the only people I knew. They were being poisoned by it too. Right? Like they're also looking and seeing and seeing white, white, white, and also thinking that anyone who's not white is inferior. And so it's just like this feedback loop of "I'm inferior. And people treat me as I'm inferior. So I'm inferior. So I get treated as I'm inferior." You know, that's . . . it's . . . and it's so entangling, you know. It's really hard to get out of it and see it from outside once you're . . . once you're so in it.

[00:26:20] **Sachi** And it's funny. I don't know if you experienced this, but I definitely experienced it maybe towards the end of high school and into college where. . . . You know, my whole life I was like—very similar to what you're saying—blend in, you know, be. . . . I feel like I kind of have tendencies to want to be kind of like a perfectionist because I'm like, well, if I'm great at everything, then they have to accept me. Right? Like, if I'm really good at my studies or, you know, I was in musical theatre. If I do all these things, then maybe they'll look to me as someone who is capable or can help them or, you know, is someone who could be a leader.

[00:27:03] **Sachi** Then there's this shift where all of a sudden, "Whoa, you have such a cool name." Or, "You're half Japanese? That's so cool." And then you get praised for being different. And it's like this whiplash effect, right, of being like, wait, I'm cool now? Like, um, what? It's almost like, "Well, yeah. Now everyone in our community is white. And now we're grasping for being our individual selves and blossoming and being this new person. And it's like, wow, you're so lucky to have this really cool thing about you." And I'm like, that's not what you guys were saying when you were raking me through the coals in my childhood and making fun of my name and saying that all I eat is sushi at home and all this stuff. Like the aspects of what societal pressures and expectations and these boxes that they try to put us in sometimes is so jarring sometimes. Like I even just thinking about it, I have all these, like, thoughts racing in my mind. So that's why I'm having trouble getting the words out.

[00:28:12] **Elizabeth** Yeah. That . . . that was so similar to things that I experience, like that kind of turn of just like, "Oh, you're cool because you're half Asian." And then I have to like perform it, you know. Like then I have to be like, okay, now I'm leaning in. Like, you know. . . .

[00:28:29] **Sachi** Yeah! And now I'm like, oh, I have to learn how to be Japanese now because I suppressed it so much. I'm like, okay, time to learn, you know, the islands and, you know, the cuisine and the proper pronunciation because people will then start. . . . And now you become the encyclopedia for all of Okinawan and or all . . . of all of Japanese culture. And so everyone says, "Hey, yeah, you know, so like I've heard of Kobe beef, like that's from Japan. Right? Tell me everything about Kobe beef." I'm like, excuse me, what? Like, okay, let's all Google together because I don't know. Like, I tried to suppress this for so long. And now I feel like I have to be the resident expert because everyone now says, "Well, okay, instead of me trying to do my own research or trying to figure this out myself,

like you're just going to tell me, right? And teach me." And it's like, oh, my gosh, this is exhausting. Either way is exhausting.

[00:29:23] **Elizabeth** Yeah, exactly. So exhausting. But I was so like, "Oh my god, you're interested in me now?!" Like, wow. Yes. Okay. I'm like just like doing back flips, like, trying to. . . . Like, what do you want me to be? Like, what . . . who do you want me to be right now? Great.

[00:29:39] **Sachi** Yeah! I'll cook! I'll be the encyclopedia for you!

[00:29:42] **Elizabeth** Right. Right, exactly. It's exhausting and demeaning. But also it's just. . . .

[00:29:50] **Sachi** Offensive.

[00:29:51] **Elizabeth** Yeah. Offensive. Yeah. And also, like even as an adult when it still happens, I try so hard to be like, okay, they. . . . Like, you know when someone's just genuinely curious. Right? And like. . . . And it's hard not to get mad, but it's also hard to not to be polite. Right? I just feel like, okay, I will. I will answer your questions. Like, okay.

[00:30:18] **Sachi** It's almost like. . . . I almost take it to the point where it says, you know, "I'll answer this question. But I'm not the expert, so you should still Google it." I've only been to Japan three times. So. Yeah. But then, like even in that experience, though, like sometimes I have these thoughts, even after saying something that—which you should say, you know, to really stick up for yourself, right? You should be able to say, "You know what, I don't know. Like, you should probably just look it up."—I still sometimes, after leaving that conversation, have some guilt to be like I wish I would have known. . . . There's something about this culture that I don't know. I feel like I'm doing myself a disservice that I don't know enough about my own culture. Right?

[00:31:13] **Elizabeth** Yeah. I feel bad for not knowing.

[00:31:16] **Sachi** Yeah.

[00:31:16] **Elizabeth** Absolutely. Just like, well, why don't I know? Like, I should know that. And, yeah, and then I carry the guilt. And, I don't know, this other person just gets to walk away.

[00:31:29] **Sachi** They just get to say, "Huh."

[00:31:30] **Elizabeth** They feel all good about themselves just being. . . . Yeah.

[00:31:32] **Sachi** Yeah, "I guess they don't know that. Cool. Like, okay."

[00:31:36] **Elizabeth** Yeah.

[00:31:37] **Sachi** "I'm just going to get dinner now."

[00:31:37] **Elizabeth** Right.

[00:31:39] **Sachi** Oh geez. Well, I want to shift gears a little bit to some of the other aspects of the book, which were some of the chapters about Okinawa. I'm going to be

honest, even though I'm half Japanese and just talking about gaps in our knowledge even—that's a good segue, I guess—I knew an embarrassingly little amount about Okinawa before I even read this book. And so I really appreciated the structure of your book, which moves back and forth between your life and the history of Okinawa.

[00:32:15] **Sachi** And I found it very interesting that you wrote a lot of the Okinawa chapters in first person from the country's point of view, as if it is a character. And I thought this was such a smart and expert choice. And I feel like I didn't even realize it until the second Okinawa chapter that I was like, oh, wow, wait. And I flipped back to the first one. I was like, oh, these are written in first person! And I feel like that was so smart because I feel like it makes the reader feel the weight and the impact of the stories and history. And I feel like it makes it, you know, easier to enter this place of empathy when you can place yourself in the shoes of the Okinawan people because you're in that point of view. And so I'm really curious to know what drove you to make those chapters first person because I thought this was such a brilliant move on your part.

[00:33:11] **Elizabeth** Thank you so much. And yeah, a lot of those chapters that I wrote in the Okinawan chapters in first person plural are ones that I'm most proud of. So it wasn't until I started writing this book. . . . Or that I got the idea that I have to write this book. . . . And I started researching the history. That's when I first learned Okinawan history. So no need to feel embarrassed. I knew that it was such an essential part of my coming of age, really. The reconciling with myself and with my mother. Knowing this history and feeling like it explained me. I didn't know how to make it feel close. I grappled with it for so long. And then I have to give a shout out because I stumbled upon the book *THE BUDDHA IN THE ATTIC* by Julie Otsuka. It's one of the most gorgeous, devastating books I've ever read. And it was all done in first person plural. And then I was like, okay, I'm going to try this. You know, completely stole an idea. What did Picasso say about artists? Something like that, like, you know, like real artists steal?

[00:34:35] **Sachi** Yes, piecemeal everything from other people.

[00:34:36] **Elizabeth** Yeah, I take it. I'll take it. You know. But it also really . . . writing in that voice, yeah, it made all these events and history more accessible to me and feel . . . and actually really feel like they were a part of me. And it allowed me to tell the story in a way that wasn't this distant history textbook, you know, like written by a white person. You know, like it allowed me to tell the story to myself in a way that felt like me. It was a way for me to claim this history as mine, which is something that I had never done before.

[00:35:19] **Elizabeth** And I needed to show that, like, you know, the past . . . basically, I'm just thinking of all the . . . everything that had to happen and all the suffering that had to occur in order for me to exist. I mean, that's like very mind blowing. The, you know, the battle of Okinawa . . . so devastating. But that's the only reason why my dad was stationed on the island. You know, not the only reason, but, you know, like that started it off. And everything that led up to the battle of Okinawa, it helped me just understand my place in the world. You know, and I still have reservations about it. Just like what we were talking before, because I'm not fully Okinawan. I'll never be fully Okinawan. So it does seem like a bold, you know, like a bold statement to be like now I'm speaking for this island. I feel like in a way, I'm speaking . . . I'm speaking to my white side from my Okinawan side. You know, like, you know? It's just . . . it's something. . . . It's like, I need to tell you this.

[00:36:26] **Sachi** Right.

[00:36:28] **Elizabeth** This is why you're like this.

[00:36:30] **Sachi** Yeah. That's a really great way of putting it. I never really thought of it that way. But that is . . . is probably truly what many of us—when we are uncovering a lot of the different aspects of our heritage that might have been suppressed in the past—that's ultimately what you're reckoning with, right? Is saying, hey, you know, I . . . it's almost like, hey, I've given this side of me all the attention, and now I'm focusing on this. And oh, hey, other side! Like, this is why this is important. This is why we've been feeling some type of way our whole life is because of this thing we've ignored our whole lives. Right? So.

[00:37:10] **Elizabeth** Yeah, exactly. Like, hey, I exist too. Yeah, I'm here. Yeah. Yeah. It's really. . . . It's an announcing. It's . . . yeah.

[00:37:20] **Sachi** I do want to kind of end our conversation on a happier kind of note. I know we've. . . . Our listeners are probably like, "Wow, they really tackled some heavy topics." But one of my favorite parts of the book too—just because I felt like it was this great contrast of these wonderful kind of warm and fuzzies these that I got—was the trip that you went on that mirrored your family's—or your parents'—honeymoon in Japan but forty years later. Honestly, it made me want to go back to Japan. I was like, oh, man, I miss it. I want to go back. And so I really thought that that was really, really very kind of a very touching part of the book. And that's also part of the kind of adult side of your goal posts that I talked about, right? And how you are uncovering things actively about your parents and their relationship and about your mother and all of these different things by going on this recreation of their honeymoon. And so I have so many questions about it. I'll narrow it down to like what was . . . what was the best part of that trip? And like what was the biggest kind of eye-opening thing that you learned about your parents and how maybe some of your relationship with them shifted during that trip?

[00:38:45] **Elizabeth** Mm hmm. Oh, man. Yeah, that's all. . . .

[00:38:49] **Sachi** Loaded question!

[00:38:51] **Elizabeth** Oh god. Because that trip was . . . whew! And again, still, I'm like, wow. Like, all the things that it opened up in me. The best part of the trip . . . so much . . . but it had to be coming to Okinawa. I didn't know what to expect. I hadn't been there . . . I hadn't been there since I was twelve. And there's a chapter before about how I visited when I was twelve, and I was like a complete brat, an awful, awful person. But I didn't know what to expect. I didn't. . . . And I have never been greeted with just such warmth. And I'll never forget it. The one scene—I call it a scene now because it's written—but it was my first day arriving in Okinawa.

[00:39:38] **Sachi** Yeah.

[00:39:39] **Elizabeth** And they made this big party for us. And I had just, like three days before I left for Japan, broken up with my fiance. And, you know, which definitely made the color change.

[00:39:51] **Sachi** Right.

[00:39:54] **Elizabeth** Put a little damper on it. At this party, they all . . . It was in the middle of us eating dinner. My uncle made an announcement. And he told—like, it was all in

Japanese—and he told everyone to, like, bring me my gifts. And I didn't know what was going on. But they . . . but they all stood. And they gathered around me. And they gave me wedding gifts, which was just like a red envelope with yen inside. And I had no idea what was going on. I'm like, "Mom, what's happening?" And they're like, "These are wedding gifts." And I was like, "Oh my god." Like, I'm like, "Do they know the wedding's canceled?" And she's like, "Yeah, they know." And I'm like, "Oh my god." But, you know, and I was just crying. But the fact that they, you know, and these are people that I had met once or twice.

[00:40:49] **Sachi** Right, yeah.

[00:40:49] **Elizabeth** It just it. . . . And just that demonstration of, "We're family; we're still your family. And we care about you. And we know you have a broken heart. And like, here! And here's some money!"

[00:41:03] **Sachi** Right. This will make it better!

[00:41:05] **Elizabeth** Yeah! Just something. Just some sort of show. And it was . . . and it was just so beautiful. And yeah. I'll always, always carry that with me. Always be very, very grateful for that. And then that's just . . . and that's just who they are all the time.

[00:41:21] **Sachi** I feel like that's . . . that to me, I'm always shocked when I go back to Japan. I've only. . . . Again, I've only been there three times. First time, I went was when I was eighteen, so I never even went as a child. I'm sure I would have been a brat as well. But I'm always shocked every time I go back—even though I've only been there a handful of times—at how wonderfully loving and accepting and how interested my extended family is whenever I come back. And I can't even speak Japanese. And they ask so many wonderful questions, you know, about—you know, we try to go back every five years or so—and they ask about what's happened the last five years like it was, you know, "What happened yesterday, last time I saw you?" Right?

[00:42:12] **Sachi** So it just. . . . I feel like it . . . for . . . because similar to your family, like, my mom was the only one who moved over here after she met my dad. Like, I think a lot of people when I say, "Oh, yeah, my mom immigrated from Japan," they assume that, you know, a bunch of other family members from my mother's side is here. And I say, "No, it's just my mom." And so I didn't grow up knowing my aunts and uncles and my extended family. And oh, by the way, when I go see them, I can't talk to them because I'm not fluent in Japanese. But it doesn't matter because they still . . . they still love you. And it . . . I think it just makes it. . . . That to me, as well, was so eye opening, just going halfway around the world to someone who can't even communicate you with language, but they can communicate you with love and things like those gestures that you mentioned of the envelopes. And I think that's something truly special and something that probably a lot of people don't understand unless you have your entire half of family that doesn't live in the same country or speak the same language as you. So I think that that's definitely something that resonates with me as well.

[00:43:30] **Elizabeth** Yeah. And I think that's when I began to realize that. . . . Because, you know, especially as a writer too or someone who's like very . . . like loves books and loves reading and loves talking. . . . Something I missed with my mother, you know, like I thought, like, we can't ever know each other because we don't speak the same language. And I think that like. . . . It was after that trip, you know, when I started to realize, like, no, we have some . . . we still share something. We still very much communicate with each other, but not in the ways that I realized before. You know, like, I think all of her gestures

before, I think I began to understand them more. Like, oh, these are gestures. This is communication. This is love. Yeah. And I just need to listen. You know. Yeah. So.

[00:44:26] **Sachi** All right, well, thank you so much. It was truly a pleasure. I am so thankful and honored to have the opportunity to talk to you today. It was truly the highlight for me for probably many weeks. This was wonderful.

[00:44:43] **Elizabeth** Thank you so much. I feel the same. This was great.

[00:44:47] **Sachi** And that's our show. I'd like to thank Elizabeth Miki Brina for talking to me about SPEAK, OKINAWA, which is out from Knopf. Many thanks to our patrons, whose support makes this podcast possible. This episode was produced and edited by Kendra Winchester. And our music is by my mom, Miki Saito with Isaac Greene. You can find us on Instagram and Twitter (@thereadingwomen). Thanks for listening.