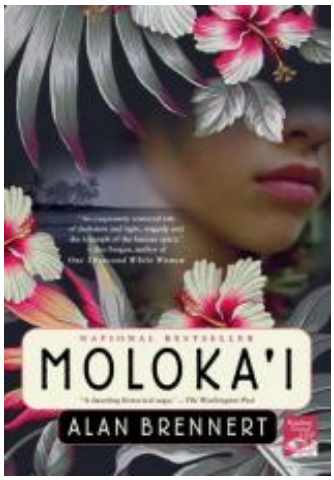
Moloka'i

by Alan Brennert



About the Book

Moloka'i is the story of Rachel Kalama, a young native Hawaiian girl growing up in Honolulu at the end of the 19th century, who at age seven is diagnosed with Hansen's disease, taken from her family, and exiled to the leprosy settlement on a remote peninsula on the island of Moloka'i. It is the story of her life there, the friends who become her family, the man she falls in love with and marries, the child she is forced to give up, and her eventual, miraculous release from exile.

Though a work of fiction, **Moloka'i** is based very much on fact. The author weaves real, historical patients and caregivers--from Father Damien to Mother Marianne Cope to the governor of the Territory of Hawai'i, Lawrence Judd--into the fabric of the story. Most everything in the novel has its basis in history, but the book is far more than that; it is the moving story of a woman's life, a life that sadly had too many counterparts in the real world.

Discussion Guide

1. The book's opening paragraph likens Hawai'i in the 19th century to a garden. In what ways is Hawai'i comparable to another, Biblical, garden?

2. Given what was known at the time of the causes and contagion of leprosy, was the Hawaiian government's isolation of patients on Moloka'i justified or not?

3. How is Hawai'i's treatment of leprosy patients similar to today's treatment of SARS and AIDS patients? How is it different?

4. What does 'ohana mean? How does it manifest itself throughout Rachel's life?

5. What does surfing represent to Rachel?

6. Rachel's mother Dorothy embraced Christianity; her adopted auntie, Haleola, is a believer in the old Hawaiian religion. What does Rachel believe in?

7. There are many men in Rachel's life--her father Henry, her Uncle Pono, her first lover Nahoa, her would-be lover Jake, her husband Kenji. What do they have in common? What don't they?

8. Rachel's full name is Rachel Aouli Kalama Utagawa. What does each of her names represent?

9. Did you as a reader regard Leilani as a man or a woman?

10. Discuss the parallels and inversions between the tale of heroic mythology Rachel relates on pages 296-298, and what happens to Kenji later in this chapter.

11. Imagine yourself in the place of Rachel's mother, Dorothy Kalama. How would you have handled the situation?

12. The novel tells us a little, but not all, of what Sarah Kalama feels after her accidental betrayal of her sister Rachel. Imagine what kind of feelings, and personal growth, she might have gone through in the decades following this incident.

13. In what ways is Ruth like her biological mother? How do you envision her relationship with Rachel evolving and maturing in the twenty years between 1948 and 1970?

14. Considering the United States' role in the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy, was the American response adequate or not? In recent years a "Hawaiian sovereignty" movement has gathered momentum in the islands--do you feel they have a moral and/or legal case?

Author Bio

Alan Brennert is the author of HONOLULU and MOLOKA?I, which was a 2006-2007 BookSense Reading Group Pick and won the 2006 Bookies Award, sponsored by the Contra Costa Library, for the Book Club Book of the Year. In addition to novels, he has written short stories, teleplays, screenplays, and the libretto of a stage musical, Weird Romance. He won an Emmy Award and a People?s Choice Award for his work as a writer-producer on the television series "L.A. Law," and he has been nominated for a Golden Globe Award and for the Writers Guild of America Award for Outstanding Teleplay of the Year. His story ?MaQui? won a Nebula Award. He lives in Sherman Oaks, California, but his heart is in Hawaii.

Critical Praise

"[An] absorbing novel?Brennert evokes the evolution of -- and hardships on -- **Moloka'i** in engaging prose that conveys a strong sense of place."

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Publication Date: October 4, 2004
Paperback: 400 pages
Publisher: St. Martin's Griffin
ISBN-10: 0312304358
ISBN-13: 9780312304355