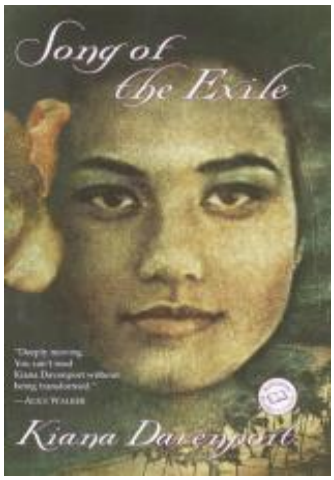
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Song of the Exile

by Kiana Davenport



About the Book

In this epic, original novel in which Hawaii's fierce, sweeping past springs to life, Kiana Davenport, author of the acclaimed Shark Dialogues, draws upon the remarkable stories of her people to create a timeless, passionate tale of love and survival, tragedy and triumph, survival and transcendence. In spellbinding, sensual prose, Song of the Exile follows the fortunes of the Meahuna family--and the odyssey of one resilient man searching for his soul mate after she is torn from his side by the forces of war. From the turbulent years of World War II through Hawaii's complex journey to statehood, this mesmerizing story presents a cast of richly imagined characters who rise up magnificent and forceful, redeemed by the spiritual power and the awesome beauty of their islands.

Discussion Guide

1. Keo's jazz mentor emphasizes the importance of knowing a tradition before experimenting with it. To what traditions is Song of the Exile indebted? How does Kiana Davenport borrow and blend various narrative traditions?Greek mythology, Hawaiian folklore, chronicles of war?to create her own?

2. Discuss how the structure of the novel mirrors the workings of memory. What does the novel show us about the past's place in the present?

3. A number of landscapes are traversed throughout the course of the novel's action; some seem to exert a greater influence on character than others. What do we learn about the extent to which place shapes character? And how can character shape place? Also, how does the novel challenge or uphold traditional notions of home?

4. Much of Song of the Exile chronicles characters' attempts to bring their interior lives into some sort of harmony with the exterior world, the world of others. What sort of obstacles most often appear between the two? Which prove the most formidable, and why? What resources do Keo, Sunny, or Malia find or find lacking when confronted with trial?

5. What was your understanding of the term "comfort women" before reading this novel? From where did you derive your knowledge? What notions were undermined or supported? To what extent can a work of fiction color one's consciousness or effect social change, however modestly?

6. Kiana Davenport has spoken of the importance of resisting the temptation to depict the Japanese lieutenants as utter villains, noting the inherent humanity each of us possesses?however damaged it may be. Does she succeed in avoiding caricatures of evil? What light does Song of the Exile shed on the nature of cruelty and violence, particularly during wartime?

7. The novel is replete with exiles. What are the various songs of each one, and what is the significance of singing or at least making the attempt? What are the perils of silence?

8. Threats to freedom appear throughout the novel, some more conspicuous than others. Provide examples of the way notions of freedom differ from character to character. What restraints are imposed internally, and externally? How? Which prove most difficult to break?

9. Follow the shifting role of music in Keo's life, and explain the ways in which it opens up or limits his character. How does his means of expression compare to Malia's or Sunny's? What might Davenport be proffering about the role of creative self-expression in one's life? Or the extent to which one person can comprehend another?

10. How pointed are the politics in Song of the Exile? Do you see this as a novel with an agenda? If yes, what? Does a novelist have a responsibility to engage the politics of the time he or she chronicles? Why?

11. Hawaii itself emerges as a character in the novel. What sort of transformation does it undergo? How does its evolution compare to that of the central characters? What forces are at work on each? Which are unique to place?

12. Kiana Davenport has said that the writers she admires most get at the truly difficult themes through the subject of family. What is the role of family in Song of the Exile? How do abstractions such as freedom, happiness, and meaning find expression in the author's handling of family?

13. What is the dominant tone of the novel?

14. Samuel Johnson famously remarked that "the only end of writing is to enable the reader better to enjoy life or better to endure it." How does Song of the Exile measure up to his criteria?

15. At the novel's close, Oogh reminds Keo of the many voices we never hear, the "many meanings we never get." He then adds, "Perhaps we are all lost, and found, and lost again. Perhaps only amazement keeps us alive." Look at Song of the Exile through the lens of Oogh's wisdom.

Author Bio

Kiana Davenport is descended from a full-blooded Native Hawaiian mother, and a Caucasian father from Talladega, Alabama. Her father, Braxton Bragg Davenport, was a sailor in the U.S. Navy, stationed at Pearl Harbor, when he fell in love with her mother, Emma Kealoha Awaawa Kanoho Houghtailing. On her mother's side, Kiana traces her ancestry back to the first Polynesian settlers to the Hawaiian Islands who arrived almost two thousand years ago from Tahiti and the Tuamotu's. On her father's side, she traces her ancestry to John Davenport, the puritan clergyman who co-founded the American colony of New Haven, Connecticut in 1638.

Kiana is the author of the internationally bestselling novels: SHARK DIALOGUES, SONG OF THE EXILE, HOUSE OF MANY GODS, and THE SPY LOVER. She is also the author of the collections HOUSE OF SKIN PRIZE-WINNING STORIES and CANNIBAL NIGHTS, PACIFIC STORIES Volume II. Both have been Kindle bestsellers. She has just published her third collection, OPIUM DREAMS, PACIFIC STORIES, VOLUME III.

A graduate of the University of Hawaii, Kiana has been a Bunting Fellow at Harvard University, a Visiting Writer at Wesleyan University, and a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts grant. Her short stories have won numerous O. Henry Awards, Pushcart Prizes, and the Best American Short Story Award, 2000. Her novels and short stories have been translated into twenty-one languages. She lives on the Big island in Hawaii.

Critical Praise

"Reading this novel is an overwhelming experience. . . . Davenport's prose is sharp and shining as a sword, yet her sense of poetry and love of nature permeate each line. "

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