

MOLOKA'I

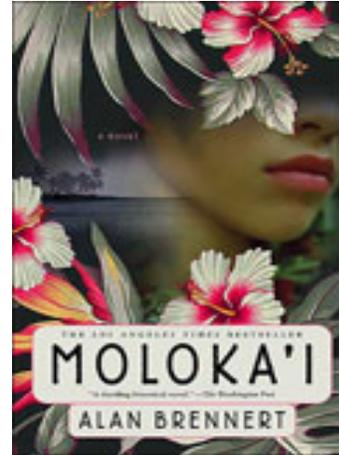
by Alan Brennert

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Discussison Questions

- 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 Nahoā, 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?

Alan Brennert discusses *Moloka'i*

What prompted your interest in the subject of leprosy, or Hansen's disease as it is now called?

Well, first and foremost, I love Hawai'i. The first time I set foot there, twenty-four years ago, I felt as if I were coming home. The place and the people have drawn me back year after year, and the history of the Hawaiian people is one that holds a special fascination for me. I visited Moloka'i for the first time in 1996, but it wasn't until three years later that I began reading about Kalaupapa, the leprosy settlement on the island's north shore. And the more I read, the more I came to understand that here was a compelling, true-life story that had never fully been told before.

Did your research include a trip to Kalaupapa itself?

Yes, of course. As well as many, many days spent at the Hawai'i State Archives, the Bishop Museum, the Hawai'i Historical Society, the Honolulu Medical Library, and other institutions. When I first began my research, I searched in vain for one book that might present a comprehensive overview of the history of Kalaupapa, from its beginnings in 1866 to the present. It didn't exist. I had to write it, or at least an outline of it. Before I could write my novel, I first had to write myself a history of Kalaupapa.

With the help of bookfinder.com, I acquired an extensive library of books--on Kalaupapa, Hansen's disease, Hawaiian history--dating back to the 1880s. From disparate sources I cobbled together a timeline of the real-life history of Kalaupapa and the people who lived there. It's nearly thirty pages long and is a detailed chronology of the people and events that make up the history of the settlement. I was quite flattered when the librarians at the Bishop Museum expressed interest in obtaining a copy for their archives, which I was happy to send them.

How much of *Moloka'i* is based on fact, and how much is fiction?

Nearly everything in it has a basis in fact. The details of life on Moloka'i came in part from letters and journals in the Hawai'i State Archives, where I actually held in my hands letters on yellowed paper, written over a century ago by leprosy patients exiled from home and family. It was moving and humbling. I wanted to do right by these people who have been largely forgotten by history--I wanted to present their story as no one else has.

I read oral histories and biographies of patients, distilled them down to their common elements, and made that the armature of Rachel Kalama's life—on which I then expanded and embroidered. Rachel is entirely a fictional character, but the events and people that shape her life are inspired by actual people and events. Many of the book's supporting characters are actual people: Brother Dutton, Mother Marianne, Ambrose Hutchison, Lawrence Judd, J.D. McVeigh, Drs. Oliver and Swift and Goodhue and Fennel and Sloan, and many more. Even what happens to the character of Leilani is based on actual medical case histories.

The most famous name associated with Moloka'i is Father Damien de Veuster, the Catholic priest who went to Kalaupapa to minister to the sick, and who himself died of Hansen's disease. Yet he has only a very small role in your novel. Why?

As fine a man as Damien was, he was just one man who died of leprosy...out of thousands of other men and women who lived and died there, pretty much anonymously. But because Damien was white, and a priest, he has commanded the world's attention all these years. I like to think that he'd find this as unjust as I do. I felt while writing the book that I was in some small way giving voice to those whose voices have been lost to time, and I hope they'd approve of what I've done.

What relevance does the story of Kalaupapa hold for us today?

Leprosy was once considered as incurable as AIDS is now; both unfairly stigmatize the people who suffer from them. Leprosy victims in the 19th century were quarantined as zealously as SARS patients are today. But the prejudice, fear, and abrogation of civil rights suffered by Hansen's patients is far and away more terrible than anything AIDS or SARS patients have yet suffered, and casts a cautionary light on our own society's attitudes toward those with fatal, communicable diseases.