

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.

Praise for the Book

"*Moloka'i* is a haunting story of tragedy in a Pacific paradise."

—Robert Morgan, author of *Gap Creek*

"Alan Brennert draws on historical accounts of Kalaupapa and weaves in traditional Hawaiian stories and customs.... *Moloka'i* is the story of people who had much taken from them but also gained an unexpected new family and community in the process."

—*Chicago Tribune*

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

—*National Geographic Traveler*

"Compellingly original...Brennert's compassion makes Rachel a memorable character, and his smooth storytelling vividly brings early twentieth-century Hawai'i to life."

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

Courtesy of St. Martin's Griffin

About the Author

Title: Alan Michael Brennert

Known As: Bryant, Michael; Brennert, Alan; Brennert, Alan Michael (American novelist)
American Novelist (1954 -)

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PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born May 30, 1954, in Englewood, NJ; son of Herbert Edward (an aviation writer and sheet metal operator) and Almyra E. (an apartment rentals manager) Brennert; married Paulette Claus, 1996. Education: Attended William Paterson State College, 1972-73; California State University, Long Beach, B.A., 1977; University of California, Los Angeles, graduate study, 1977-78. Memberships: Writers Guild of America. Addresses: Home: Los Angeles, CA. Agent: Molly Friedrich, Friedrich Agency, 136 E. 57th St., New York, NY 10022. E-mail: alan@alanbrennert.com.

CAREER:

Freelance writer, 1978--. Worked on television series, including *Buck Rogers in the Twenty-fifth Century*, story editor, 1979-80, *The Twilight Zone*, executive story consultant, 1985-87, *L.A. Law*, supervising producer, 1991-92, *Odyssey 5*, consulting producer, 2002-03, and *Enterprise*, consulting producer, 2004-05.

AWARDS:

Writers Guild of America Award nomination for outstanding teleplay in a dramatic series, 1983, for "Closed Circuit;" *Kindred Spirits* was named one of the most outstanding books of the year by the University of Iowa's Books for Young Adults Program, 1985; Emmy Award for outstanding drama series, Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, 1991 (with others), and nominations for outstanding writing in a drama series, 1991 (with others), and outstanding drama series, 1992 (with others), all for *L.A. Law*; Nebula Award for short story, Science Fiction Writers of America, 1991, for "Ma Qui."

WORKS:

WRITINGS:

NOVELS

- *City of Masques*, Playboy Press (Chicago, IL), 1978.
- *Kindred Spirits*, Tor Books (New York, NY), 1984, reprinted, Forge (New York, NY), 1999.
- *Time and Chance*, Tor Books (New York, NY), 1990.
- *Batman: Holy Terror* (graphic novel, illustrated by Norm Breyfogle), DC Comics (New York, NY), 1991.
- *Moloka'i*, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 2003.
- *Honolulu*, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 2009.

SHORT STORIES

- *Her Pilgrim Soul and Other Stories* (also see below), Tor Books (New York, NY), 1990.
- *Ma Qui and Other Phantoms*, Pulphouse (Eugene, OR), 1991.

Work represented in anthologies, including *Soul: An Archeology, Readings from Socrates to Ray Charles*, edited by Phil Cousineau, HarperCollins (San Francisco, CA), 1994; *Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman Present Treasures of Fantasy*, edited by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman, HarperPrism (New York, NY), 1997; *The Year's Best Science Fiction: Fifteenth Annual Collection*, edited by Gardner Dozois, St. Martin's Griffin (New York, NY), 1998; and *The American Fantasy Tradition*, edited by Brian M. Thomson, Tor Books (New York, NY), 2002. Also contributor of short stories to periodicals, including *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*.

OTHER

- "Closed Circuit" (television play), *Darkroom*, American Broadcasting Companies, Inc. (ABC), 1981.
- "Her Pilgrim Soul" (television play; also see below), *The Twilight Zone*, Columbia Broadcasting System, Inc. (CBS), 1985.
- (With Jeff Melvoin) "Outpost" (television play), *CBS Summer Playhouse*, Columbia Broadcasting System, Inc. (CBS), 1989.
- (Author of book) *Weird Romance: Two One-Act Musicals of Speculative Fiction* (contains "The Girl Who Was Plugged In," based on a short story by James Tiptree, Jr., and "Her Pilgrim Soul"; first produced Off-Broadway at WPA Theater, 1992; revised version produced as a staged reading Off-Broadway at York Theatre, 2004), lyrics by David Spencer, music by Alan Menken, Samuel French (New York, NY), 1993.
- (With J.D. Feigelson) *The Lake* (television play), National Broadcasting Company, Inc. (NBC), 1998.

Author, sometimes under pseudonym Michael Bryant, of more than thirty scripts for television series, including *Buck Rogers in the Twenty-fifth Century*, *China Beach*, *L.A. Law*, *Outer Limits*,

Simon and Simon, The Mississippi, The New Adventures of Wonder Woman, and The Twilight Zone. Author of comic book scripts for *Detective Comics, Batman: Black and White, Brave and the Bold, Daredevil, Christmas with the Super Heroes, and Secret Origins.*

Sidelights

Alan Brennert is the author of novels, short stories, and plays for both stage and television. According to a contributor to the *St. James Guide to Horror, Ghost and Gothic Writers*, Brennert "believes in ghosts. Not literally, perhaps, but he recognizes that most people's lives are perpetually haunted by images of 'phantoms: ' the people we've lost touch with, the people we've never met, the people we no longer are, the people we may or may not become. And while conveying this philosophy in fiction logically leads Brennert to forms of the ghost story, the results are rarely horrific, for his spirits are usually benign, ready to help characters better understand themselves and possibly gain a second chance in life."

Among Brennert's popular novels is *Kindred Spirits*, the story of a man and woman who separately attempt suicide at Christmas and who, while recovering in the hospital, meet on a spiritual plane and become friends. Upon reawakening, the pair forget their otherworldly meeting and go their separate ways but remain changed by their experience. Observing that the tale is sometimes "cloying," the *St. James Guide to Horror, Ghost and Gothic Writers* contributor nonetheless found that the characters eventually "transcend self-pity ... and their final happiness seems fully earned."

Among the author's numerous dramas is *Weird Romance: Two One-Act Musicals of Speculative Fiction*. First performed in 1992, the musicals include music by Alan Menken and lyrics by David Spencer. The first play, "The Girl Who Was Plugged In," is based on a story by James Tiptree, Jr. Set in 2061, it is a love story featuring a bag lady who is given a new body created from several cells collected from a placenta. "Her Pilgrim Soul," based on a story by Brennert, features a holographic image that develops an individual life, which includes a potential relationship with its creator. Writing for *Back Stage*, Roy Sander called "Her Pilgrim Soul" an "ultimately touching blend of romance and the supernatural."

Published in 2003, Brennert's novel *Moloka'i* features Rachel Kalama, a native Hawaiian with leprosy. The story follows Rachel beginning in Honolulu in 1891 on through to the 1960s. Rachel contracts leprosy, and she is eventually sent to the Kalaupapa leprosy settlement on the isolated island of Moloka'i to be cared for in a hospital staffed by Catholic nuns. Except for her father, Rachel has no contact with her family. Many of the young friends she does make end up dying. It is only her relationship with Sister Catherine that helps her make it through the tough times. The novel follows Rachel as she witnesses historic events in a changing Hawaii. The author also details the disease of leprosy and the search for a cure, which occurred in the 1940s with the advent of sulfa derivatives. Eventually, a cured Rachel returns to Honolulu only to find that the sleepy village she left behind is now a major metropolitan city. "Leprosy may seem a macabre subject, but Brennert transforms the material into a touching, lovely account of a

woman's journey," wrote a reviewer in *Publishers Weekly*. Noting that the novel is "not a comfortable read," a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor nevertheless called *Moloka'i* "certainly instructive."

Brennert returns to Hawaii for his 2009 novel, *Honolulu*. This time Brennert tells the immigrant story of a young Korean girl named Regret who becomes a "picture bride" and travels to Hawaii in 1914. In an interview for the *Copperfield Books* Web site, the author commented on why he chose a young Korean woman as his protagonist. He remarked: "I became fascinated by the role of women in Korean society; it was probably a more oppressive environment for women than in any other Asian culture of the time. It wasn't hard to see why so many women jumped at the chance to become picture brides: to gain a degree of freedom and adventure in their lives that they might never have experienced had they stayed in Korea. It struck me as an ideal motivation for my protagonist."

Although Regret is promised to be married to an affluent man who would provide her with an education, she instead is matched with a poor laborer who takes out his embitterment and anger on his new wife. Regret ends up renaming herself Jin and eventually decides to forge a new life. Helped by a group of fellow "picture brides," Jin's growth into a prosperous life coincides with the growth of Honolulu from a small territorial capital into a large city made up of people from numerous cultures. The events in Jin's life mix with actual events in Honolulu's history, including the notorious Massie Affair of 1932, in which authorities wrongly accused five Hawaiian men of raping a naval officer's white wife. Writing for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Regan McMahon called *Honolulu* "a moving, multilayered epic by a master of historical fiction, in which one immigrant's journey helps us understand our nation's 'becoming.'" In a review for *Booklist*, Carol Haggas commented that the novel is "immense in its dramatic scope yet intimate in its emotive detail."

Brennert once told *CA*: "Throughout my career I've tried to divide my time between writing books and writing for the screen. In actual practice, for many years the majority of my work was done for television, with occasional books and short stories written in between script assignments. With the success of my novel *Moloka'i*, however, this ratio has been happily reversed and I'm now able to write novels full-time, with occasional sidebars of script work.

"The characters of my novels have also changed since *Moloka'i*. My earlier novels, character-driven contemporary fantasies, had fair amounts of autobiography in them. *Kindred Spirits*, as I told *CA* back in the day, had its roots in a period of my own youthful despair. *Time and Chance* was written shortly after my mother's death at the age of sixty-seven, and much of her is present in the character of Richard's mother, Elsie (Elsie was my mom's middle name). And I've written elsewhere of how 'Her Pilgrim Soul' was written as a farewell to a friend who died much too young, at thirty-seven.

"But these days I find myself more interested in historical lives. Maybe this is part of the process of maturing: When we're young we think our feelings and experiences are unique and we can't stop talking about them; but as we grow older we start to see things in a logical perspective, and realize how much of what we go through in our lives has been happening to human beings for millennia, and that our lives are just part of a larger story. Whatever the reasons, I'm now a historical novelist. Writing historical fiction is in some ways similar to writing fantasy: in each genre you're creating a different world for a reader to experience. In fantasy you have to craft a world in which fantastic things happen plausibly and realistically; in historical fiction you're creating a past world, one that also has to be realistically crafted or it will not convince. I find I enjoy doing this, both the research and the writing, and though I continue to write the occasional fantasy short story (such as the one I recently published in Carol Sterling's 50th anniversary *Twilight Zone* anthology) I think I've found my niche as a novelist. I'm currently researching a new novel, and though it's set in one of my childhood haunts in New Jersey, the time period is more that of my parents' era (primarily the 1930s, 40s, and 50s).

"It's been immensely gratifying to find a whole new readership with these novels, but it's been equally satisfying to hear from readers of my fantasy, television, and comics work, who've followed me to this new genre. My career has really been all over the map, and I truly appreciate all those who've taken this journey with me."

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

BOOKS

- Lofficier, Randy and Jean-Marc, *Into the Twilight Zone: The Rod Serling Programme Guide*, Virgin (London, England), 1995.
- *St. James Guide to Horror, Ghost and Gothic Writers*, St. James Press (Detroit, MI), 1998.

PERIODICALS

- *Back Stage*, July 3, 1992, Roy Sander, review of *Weird Romance: Two One-Act Musicals of Speculative Fiction*, p. 24.
- *Booklist*, February 15, 2009, Carol Haggas, review of *Honolulu*, p. 30.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, September 1, 2003, review of *Moloka'i*, p. 1086.
- *Library Journal*, January 1, 2009, Beth Gibbs, review of *Honolulu*, p. 77.
- *New York Times*, June 23, 1992, Mel Gussow, review of *Weird Romance*, p. C14.
- *Publishers Weekly*, September 1, 2003, review of *Moloka'i*, p. 63; October 20, 2008, review of *Honolulu*, p. 29.
- *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 21, 2009, Regan McMahon, review of *Honolulu*, p. E2.
- *Time*, July 6, 1992, review of *Weird Romance*, p. 77.

ONLINE

- *Alan Brennert Home Page*, <http://www.alanbrennert.com> (October 14, 2009).
- *Copperfield's Books Web site*, <http://copperfieldsbooks.com/> (February, 2009), "Alan Brennert Interview."

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Author Interview

An Interview with Alan Brennert

Q: What inspired you to write *Moloka'i*?

A: In a roundabout way, it was a book by Harriet Doerr called *Consider This, Señora*—a wonderful novel about a group of expatriate Americans living in Mexico—which got me thinking about exploring the bonds of community in an exotic locale. Since I've been in love with Hawai'i for half my life, that seemed a natural choice. When I visited Moloka'i for the first time in 1995, I found it a unique and beautiful place, even for Hawai'i, and thought about setting a contemporary story there. But the more I researched Moloka'i, the more I learned about Kalaupapa and came to realize that this was the community I should be writing about.

Q: What prompted you to make your main character a woman?

A: The novel crystallized in my mind the moment I read that whenever residents of Kalaupapa had a child, that child had to be taken away from its parents, or else risk coming down with leprosy as well. In that instant, literally, I knew I would write about a young girl taken from her family, who grows up on Moloka'i, falls in love, gives birth to a child...and then has that child taken from her, even as she was taken from her own mother. I wanted to tell the story of the ordinary people who had to make such heartbreaking sacrifices. People torn from their home, their careers, who had to forge new lives for themselves under difficult circumstances. There were scores of books about Father Damien, but few about the patients who were sent to Moloka'i against their will. Damien was a great man, who did great good at great cost to himself...but because he was white, and a priest, his story commanded the world's attention almost to the exclusion of all others at Kalaupapa. I think he'd find this as unjust as I do. In writing *Moloka'i* I felt 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.

Q: How did you go about your research?

A: At first I searched for a single book that would present a detailed overview of the history of Kalaupapa. No such luck: There was information out there, but scattered among hundreds of disparate sources—books, newspapers, magazine articles, and the files of the state archives. It took about a year before I could see Honolulu in the 1890s in my mind's eye, including six months cobbling together a twenty-seven-page chronology of the settlement: the names of patients, administrators, doctors; the construction of buildings, the opening of stores—not merely pivotal events but the progression of everyday life at Kalaupapa. (When I mentioned what I'd done to the helpful librarians at the Bishop Museum, they asked for a copy for their archives; and I'm proud to say there's one there now, along with a copy of *Moloka'i*.)

Q: Do you start from page one and go from there, or do you write a scene from later in the story and fit it in later?

A: I know some writers who can skip around, but I'm too linear for that; I have to start at the beginning and plow on through to the end. Still, I always knew that the story would end on the beach at Kalaupapa, with Rachel's daughter looking out at the waves breaking on "the peaceful shore." I even knew I'd use that exact phrase, in deliberate contrast to the line in the Robert Louis Stevenson poem. (I didn't know, however, that Rachel's granddaughter would also be there; she invited herself along later.)

Q: So do you find that your characters—as some writers claim—surprise you by doing things you hadn't planned?

A: What writers usually mean is that you get to know your characters better in the course of writing about them, which may require some later adjustments. That happened to me with Rachel. Originally I considered having her move back to Kalaupapa at the end, as some patients did in real life; but by the time I reached that point in the story, she told me, "Forget it, pal! I'm staying on Maui with my sister." It went against her character to go back after finding some of her family.

Q: What was it like to write from the point of view of a different culture?

A: I've gone to Hawai'i so often, and for so many years, that it feels like a second home to me. I've always been fascinated with its people, its history, and mythology... for me there was no greater joy than in reading and writing about it. Every day I got up and couldn't wait to get started working on *Moloka'i*. It truly was a labor of love, and I hope that that love shows in the writing.

Courtesy of St. Martin's Griffin

Discussion 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 Nahoahoa, 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?

Courtesy of St. Martin's Griffin