

MOLOKA'I

by Alan Brennert

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An Interview with Alan Brennert

“I wanted to tell the story of the ordinary people who had to make such heartbreaking sacrifices.”

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

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“It truly was a labor of love, and I hope that that love shows in the writing.”

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.



A Note on Alan Brennert

Alan Brennert was born in Englewood, New Jersey, to Herbert E. Brennert, an aviation writer, and Almyra E. Brennert. Since 1973 he has lived in Southern California, where he received a B.A. in English from California State University at Long Beach and studied screenwriting at UCLA.

In addition to novels, Alan has written short stories, teleplays, screenplays, and the libretto of a stage musical, *Weird Romance*, with music by Alan Menken and lyrics by David Spencer. His short story “Ma Qui” was honored with a Nebula Award in 1992; and he earned both an Emmy and a People’s Choice Award for his work as a writer-producer for the television series *L.A. Law*.

He has also contributed to such series as *China Beach*, *Simon & Simon*, and the 1980s revival of *The Twilight Zone*. “But in television and film,” he says, “sometimes your best work is never seen”—which eventually inspired him to write something that people would get to see, the novel *Moloka’i*.

Alan is also the author of *Honolulu*, which the *San Francisco Chronicle* called “a moving, multilayered epic by a master of historical fiction” and *The Washington Post* hailed as one of the best books of 2009. He is at work on a new novel set at the legendary Palisades Amusement Park in New Jersey.

For more information about Alan and his work, or to contact him about speaking to your reading group, visit his Web site, www.alanbrennert.com.



Get to Know
the Author



Voices of Kalaupapa

The first boatload of exiles to Moloka'i landed on January 6, 1866. Among the nine men and three women was one J. D. Kahauliko, who on February 1 wrote this beseeching letter (originally in Hawaiian) to T. C. Heuck of the Board of Health—one of the earliest written records we have from a patient at Kalawao:

“Sometimes the most eloquent voices take the most prosaic form.”

Dear Sir,

An opportunity has been afforded me to inform you how we are getting along in Moloka'i. There is plenty of food on the land here, in Moloka'i. But there is one thing that we are in need of which we inform you of, and that is the want of a Kamaaina (old resident)...to show us where the me'a ai [food] grows on the pali... We all (the lepers) desire to get some of the food that is on the pali. But as we are all strangers on the land we cannot therefore go and [find] it, what is growing on the pali. Therefore one of the Kamaainas came and said to me that “if you desire me to go and get you something to eat then I can go, because we have been so instructed by the Board of Health.” He started to go and get something to eat for us, together with one of the lepers. But while the man was going up with one of the Lepers, our Luna [superintendent] L. Lepart rushed after the man, and with great anger brought him to our houses, and asked us, who ordered the man to go up mauka....He told us all that we had no right to send any man (or Kamaaina) to go up and get anything to eat for us. If you want anything to eat, you must get it yourselves....

(Signed) J. D. Kahauliko





Sometimes the most eloquent voices take the most prosaic form. Consider these excerpts from an official inventory—by schoolteacher and eventual luna Donald Walsh in 1867—cataloging conditions and contents of each household in the settlement:

No. 1 House

1 Pot. 1 Pint tin. 1 Water Can. 1 Lamp. 1 Knife. 1 Spoon.
Inmates [sic] Kameo [possessions] Makings of shirt.
1 good red blanket. No pants. Kila (child) 1 blanket
1 frock 1 old pants

REMARKS - These are father & son the wife lives with them. The house seems pretty well provided with necessities.

No. 4 House

1 Pot. No Water Cask/w can. 1 Lamp. 2 Dishes. 1 Knife.
2 Spoons.

Inmates - Kaahu. 1 Blanket 1 gown Napua. 1 Shirt
1 old pants 1 cloth pants Kepilina. 1 gray blanket

REMARKS - Kaahu is in the last stage of leprosy....
This house is cold, filthy, and wretched. It leaks.

No. 38 House

1 pint tin. 1 Knife. 1 Spoon

Inmates - Kaiokalani/woman. 1 blanket. No clothes

REMARKS - This is the most wretched of all the houses.
I do not think she sleeps in it.



From Robert Louis Stevenson:

They were strangers to each other, collected by common calamity, disfigured, mortally sick, banished without sin from home and friends. Few would understand the principle on which they were thus forfeited in all that makes life dear; many must have conceived their ostracism to be grounded in malevolent caprice; all came with sorrow at heart, many with despair

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*"All came with
sorrow at
heart."*

and rage. In the chronicle of man there is perhaps no more melancholy landing than this of the leper immigrants among the ruined houses and dead harvests of Moloka'i. But the spirit of our race is finely tempered and the business of life engrossing to the last. As a spider, when you have wrecked its web, begins immediately to spin fresh strands, so these exiles, widowed, orphaned, unchilded, legally dead and physically dying, struck root in their new place... fell to work with growing hope, repaired the houses, replanted the fields, and began to look about them with the pride of the proprietor....And one thing is sure, the most disgraced of that unhappy crew may expect the consolations of love; love laughs at leprosy; and marriage is in use to the last stage of decay and the last gasp of life.



On May 10, 1873, a young Catholic priest arrived on Moloka'i, little realizing that one day his name, Father Damien de Veuster, would be irrevocably linked to the island:

I am sending this letter by way of the schooner Waniki to let you know that from now on there ought to be a permanent priest in this place. Boatloads of the sick are arriving, and many are dying. I sleep under a pu hala [tree] while I wait for the lumber to build a rectory such as you would judge appropriate....You know my conviction; I wish to give myself unconditionally to the poor lepers. The harvest appears to be ripe here. Pray, and ask others to pray for me and for all here.



Already resident at Kalaupapa was royal-born Peter Kaeo, cousin to Queen Emma. He had the wherewithal to maintain a comfortable existence for himself, including two servants, but was not unaware of the poverty and desperation around him. From Peter Kaeo to Queen Emma, August 11, 1873:

Deaths occur quite frequently here, almost daily. Napela [the luna] last week rode around the Beach to inspect the Lepers and came on to one that had no Pai [taro] for a Week but manage to live on what he could find in his Hut, anything Chewable. His legs were so bad that he cannot walk, and few traverse the spot where His Hut stands, but fortunate enough for him that he had sufficient enough water to last him till aid came and that not too late, or else probably he must have died.



In 1884 the Board of Health assigned a distinguished physician, Dr. J. H. Stallard, to review conditions at Kalaupapa. Part of his stinging indictment:

The excessive mortality rate alone condemns the management [of the settlement]. During the year 1883, there were no less than 150 deaths...more than ten times that of any ordinary community of an unhealthy type. The high mortality has not been caused by leprosy, but by dysentery, a disease not caused by any local insanitary conditions, but by gross neglect.

*"We've got
some feelings.
Just tell the
world how we
really are in
here."*



Father Damien himself succumbed to leprosy on April 15, 1889, but he lived to see the arrival of Mother Marianne Cope and the Sisters of St. Francis, who would carry on his work. From the writings of Sister Mary Leopoldina Burns:

One could never imagine what a lonely barren place it was. Not a tree nor a shrub in the whole Settlement only in the churchyard there were a few poor little trees that were so bent and yellow by the continued sweep of the birning wind it would make one sad to look at them.



In 1889, Robert Louis Stevenson wrote about the children on the island:

The case of the children is by far the most sad; and yet, thanks to Damien and that great Hawaiian lady, the kind Mrs. Bishop, and to the kind sisters, their hardship has been minimized. Even the boys in the still rude boys' home at Kalawao appeared cheerful and youthful; they interchange diversions in the boys' way; are one week all for football, and the next the devotees of marbles or of kites; have fiddles, drums, guitars, and penny whistles; some can touch the organ, and all combine in concerts. As for the girls in the Bishop Home, of the many beautiful things I have been privileged to see in life, they, and what has been done for them, are not the least beautiful.



By the time writer Jack London visited in 1907, Kalaupapa, under new luna J.D. McVeigh and physician William Goodhue, was undergoing a remarkable transformation. From Jack London, The Cruise of the Snark:

When the *Snark* sailed along the windward coast of Moloka'i, on her way to Honolulu, I looked at the chart, then pointed to a low-lying peninsula backed by a tremendous cliff varying from two to four thousand feet in height, and said: "The pit of hell, the most cursed place on earth." I should have been shocked, if, at that moment, I could have caught a vision of myself a month later, ashore in the most cursed place on earth, and having a disgracefully good time along with eight hundred of the lepers who were likewise having a good time [at the racetrack]....They were yelling, tossing their hats, and dancing around like fiends. So was I....Major Lee, an American and long a marine engineer for the InterIsland Steamship Company, I met actively at work in the new steam laundry, where he was busy installing the machinery. I met him often, afterwards, and one day he said to me: "Give us a good breeze about how we live here. For heaven's sake write us up straight. Put your foot down on this chamber-of-horrors rot and all the rest of it. We don't like being misrepresented. We've got some feelings. Just tell the world how we really are in here."



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the History*

“Thoughts are wonderful things, that they can bring two people, so far apart, into harmony and understanding.”



From Katherine Fullerton Gerould, Hawaii: Scenes and Impressions (1916):

White magic seems to be at work at Kalaupapa. I can record it as solemn fact that once you are on the promontory all panic, fear, or disgust drops utterly away.... I got at Kalaupapa—and got it before five minutes were sped—the highest impression of social decency I have ever had.



And yet, as humane and civilized as the settlement had by and large become, the exiles were still exiles, a fact that weighed on some of them more than others. From Store manager Shizuo Harada to Ernie Pyle, 1938:

[S]ometimes I feel in good spirits and sometimes I get way down in the dumps....It does something to you after a few years here. I can tell it has done something to me, but I fight against it. You lose the spirit of—I don't know what you'd call it—the spirit of fraternity, I guess. That's the reason I've tried to keep busy and keep little activities going among the others. In school I was active in athletics, and in organizing things. Here I've got several leagues going—handball and things like that. I can't play myself anymore, on account of my hands. But it's hard to keep an organization going. There isn't enough permanence about it. You get some good key men, and the first thing you know they're gone. It takes the spirit out.



[Harada] said several times that if there was anything personal about the patients I could think to ask, he would try his best to give me the answer. But I ran out of questions, and then we talked about general things. He was interested in my job, and I told him of things I had seen in Alaska and other places. I shall always have a mental picture, to the end of my days, of us sitting there talking. Sitting in chairs, face to face, not three feet apart—one “clean” and one “unclean,” as Harada would put it. The truth would be: one lucky and one unlucky. But whatever our appearances, we talked and talked and talked. Thoughts are wonderful things, that they can bring two people, so far apart, into harmony and understanding for even a little while. —Ernie Pyle, *Home Country*



According to the World Health Organization, more than 400,000 new cases of Hansen’s disease were recorded globally in 2004. Almost 300,000 of those were in Southeast Asia with the remainder in Africa, the Americas, and elsewhere. But the incidence of new cases has been decreasing the last several years, and WHO still hopes to eventually eradicate the disease around the world. You can find more information at www://who.int/lep.

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Reading Group Questions

1. The book's opening paragraph likens Hawai'i in the nineteenth 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 Naho, 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 296–98, 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?

*Keep on
Thinking*