

# Dear Haiti, Love Alaine

## EDUCATORS' GUIDE

### ABOUT THE BOOK

**When a school presentation goes very wrong, Alaine Beauparlant finds herself suspended, shipped off to Haiti and writing the report of a lifetime . . .**

You might ask the obvious question: What do I, a seventeen-year-old Haitian American from Miami with way too little life experience, have to say about anything?

Actually, a lot.

Thanks to “the incident” (don’t ask), I’m spending the next two months doing what my school is calling a “spring volunteer immersion project.” It’s definitely no vacation. I’m toiling away under the ever-watchful eyes of *Tati* Estelle at her new nonprofit. And my lean-in queen of a mother is even here to make sure I do things right. Or she might just be lying low to dodge the media sharks after a *much* more public incident of her own . . . and to hide a rather devastating secret.

All things considered, there *are* some pretty nice perks . . . like flirting with *Tati*’s distractingly cute intern, getting actual face time with my mom and experiencing Haiti for the first time. I’m even exploring my family’s history—which happens to be loaded with betrayals, superstitions and possibly even a family curse.

You know, typical drama. But it’s nothing I can’t handle.

### PRAISE

★ “Sisters Maika and Maritza Moulite deliver a phenomenal coming-of-age story with this stunning novel... The authors deliver a smart and witty protagonist in Alaine... The setting takes on a life of its own, plunging readers into Haiti’s rich cultural traditions, breathtaking landscape, and vibrant people alongside Alaine, who will quickly become a beloved character amongst teens.” —*Booklist*, starred review

★ “The Moulite sisters’ well-conceived debut is an alternately funny and bittersweet story of loss, regret, love, and sacrifice... Seamlessly blending story lines and allusions to Haiti’s history and culture, the authors create an indelible, believable character in Alaine—naïve, dynamic, and brutally honest—who stretches and grows as her remarkable, affectingly rendered family relationships do.” —*Publishers Weekly*, starred review



Grades 8–12  
HC: 978-1-335-77709-6  
EB: 978-1-488-05133-3  
AU (P): 978-1-488-25719-3  
AU (D): 978-1-488-20719-8

## A LETTER FROM THE AUTHORS



We always said we'd write a book together.

Our parents were of the strict immigrant variety who took us and our two younger sisters to the library on weekends and forbade watching television on weekdays. All we had were our imaginations, our books and each other.

We wouldn't actually get around to starting and finishing an entire story—this story—until years later. (It took being locked in the house, removed from work and school responsibilities, and awaiting the arrival of a Category 4 hurricane.) That storm thankfully never made it to Miami, but the words to share Alaine's tale did.

Oh, Alaine.

She came to us so clearly. Before we knew exactly what her story would be, we knew her. Alaine was smart and sassy, quick-witted and sarcastic. A young woman with a lot to say who was just crying out to be heard. She used humor as a way to communicate with others as much as she used it as a shield to prevent them from getting too close. A first-generation Haitian American who didn't quite know her place as a member of either culture, Alaine had equal parts of us both but was also her own person. And as we wrote *Dear Haiti, Love Alaine*, the world that would shape Alaine's character fell into place around her.

We relished the opportunity to incorporate so many of the idiosyncratic experiences and superstitions that we grew up with. While we didn't include them all, the more we wrote, the more we realized that so much of our lives were made up of moments that people who aren't Haitian American would be able to relate to as well.

We couldn't wait to share parts of our culture with others who might not have been exposed to it before. But we especially wanted this story to be for the kids who grew up like us, the countless individuals who don't always see themselves reflected in stories that are not solely focused on suffering and strife. We wanted an adventure that hearkened to the specificity of our culture but also left room for Alaine to find a place that was all her own.

Writing with a sister has been a (mostly) seamless process. The only official rule we had was passion always won out. Though we were typically on the same page on what would, well, go on the page, there were times we would reach a creative impasse. In those cases, whoever was most passionate about her plot point and made the best argument got her way. We think *Dear Haiti, Love Alaine* is much better for it.

*Ayiti Cheri*, or "Dear Haiti," is a popular name of affection that Haitians use to refer to our home country. People will often first recall the destitution and sadness that resides within its borders. The pain and violence. But that is not the full picture and never has been. Haiti is the embodiment of strength and light and laughter and love. We set out to write a book that demonstrates this.

*Dear Haiti, Love Alaine* was inspired by our interests in the obligations of family, and our responsibilities to ourselves. So much so, that we created an alternate history where Marie-Louise Coidavid was able to return to Haiti after being forced into exile in Europe. How would the decision to follow her heart and not go through with her promise to Marie-Madeleine Lachenais impact her family (and specifically Alaine) all those years later? We wanted to explore what leads someone to believe the unbelievable and the power of women across generations. Those ideas may have been our starting points, but our minds roamed free. And while we pulled from lore to help create the framework for the Christophe family curse, we developed a magic and mysticism that was completely our own. We're so proud that we were able to tell Alaine's story and shine a small light into Haiti's intricate culture. But the beauty is that there isn't one single story that encapsulates the entirety of a nation. This was a love letter to our dear, dear Haiti. It won't be our last.

*Maika Moulite & Maritza Moulite*

## PRE-READING ACTIVITY

In the introduction of the novel, Alaine is writing a letter to one of her teachers, Sister Wagner, in which she lays out the contents of the novel: “The notes, articles, emails, and diary entries you’ll find in the following pages will take you on a twisty journey into both my family’s and Haiti’s past and bring you to the present day” (p. 8). In groups (using in-class or online searches), discuss what you know about Haiti’s history. Is Haiti a country that you’ve ever learned about in school? If you have, what have you learned? If not, why do you think that is? What other countries have you learned about? Consider why those countries and their histories may be more commonly explored in American schools.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Alaine is not one to hide what she is thinking, often to the detriment of whatever situation she’s currently a part of, and those who are with her. How does her bluntness and sarcasm get her into trouble throughout the novel? Does it ever benefit her? How does context affect the ways in which her no-nonsense approach is received? Think about this in relation to yourself and how you speak to others in different contexts.
2. When Alaine first submits part of her project to Sister Wagner, she is accused of a male-centric view of history (pp. 77–78). What does that mean to you? Can you think of other examples of how men are given a place of prominence in history even though others were even more central? Consider the history that you’ve been taught in school and think about how many women in history you learn about compared to men.
3. Discuss what you know about the concept of colonization. How does it apply to Haiti’s history as you’ve read about in the novel? How has colonization affected other countries in similar fashion? What did you learn about colonization and its effects through Alaine’s discoveries throughout the novel?
4. What do you think of when you hear the word *charity*? How is charity discussed and treated in the novel, particularly in relation to Estelle’s app, PATRON PAL? What did you learn during the interview with Tony Juste (at the peanut farm) about international politics and the implications of large-scale charity work as a disguise for big business decisions?
5. When Celeste slaps Venegas on live TV, a lot of people start accusing Celeste of simply being unhinged or overly emotional, but her reaction is brought on when he touches her arm without consent. What can the concept of consent highlight in this scenario that might have changed the outcome? Consider why consent is an important part of conversations in a larger social context.
6. “. . . I already walked through school having to dodge [Abigail] as she insisted that she couldn’t help but want to pat my ‘fluffy ‘fro, girl!’” (p. 36). Have you ever experienced, witnessed or heard about a situation such as this, where you were treated differently because of your appearance? Why do you think Alaine brings it up, especially in relation to her own cultural background?
7. “One of the things that bugs me about getting so upset with my mom is that I always feel strangely anti-feminist. Who am I to stop her from Leaning In?” (p. 35). First of all, what do you know about the concept of feminism? Why do you think Alaine feels anti-feminist by getting upset about her mother’s absence and her work? What do you know about the term *lean in*, and how do you think it fits into this conversation?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS *continued*

8. Minority Rights: Haiti's history, like the history of so many countries, is built upon progress for some people while others are still left behind. What did you learn about hierarchies of gaining rights? (p. 73) How do you see this in other areas of history you have learned about? How do you see this at work in the world today?
9. Throughout the novel, there are many instances of privilege that are exhibited. When visiting Labadie, for example, Alaine is witness to a conversation about working-class and underprivileged Haitians that disturbs her (p. 80). What other instances of privilege do you notice throughout the book? How do you see privilege at work in the world around you, in your school, government, the media, or other spaces and institutions?
10. "Words make us. They destroy us" (p. 261). What are your thoughts on this sentiment? How do you think it plays out in the larger context of the novel? How do you think this concept of the power of words works in relation to the family curse?

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

### Family History

In groups, create a family tree of Alaine's family and her various connections to many historical figures in the founding of Haiti. For each individual on the tree, provide a quote from the book, as well as a trait that you think describes the individual in question. Use this as an opportunity to explore bias and examine how Alaine describes various individuals within her family throughout the novel.

### An Epistolary Self-History

In the novel, one of the sections is titled "History is a compass if you just know how to read it" (p. 223). Create a journal in the style of the novel—use a combination of journal entries, photos, emails, messages and other documents, whether real or created for this activity—where you examine your own personal history. Use this activity as an opportunity to explore how your personal history impacts your own perspectives on current events, how you understand your own education or how you interact with those around you on a daily basis.

### Cultural Appropriation

Often what we know about different cultures comes from our knowledge of food or fashion or some other limited perspective. Take a moment to watch this video exploring the differences between cultural appreciation and appropriation: [youtube.com/watch?v=vfAp\\_G735rO](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vfAp_G735rO). How do you see appreciation versus appropriation around other cultures in your own life and in your own community?

### Mental Illness

Mental illness, particularly related to a parent, can be extremely difficult to accept and understand. There are many resources available, but it is troubling especially when your parent is a big name in the media. Consider the media you consume on a regular basis: How does it depict mental illness? How does Alaine come to a better understanding of what her mother is experiencing as her story continues? How does she learn to cope? What can you learn about coping with mental illness of a parent from the novel?



## INTERNET RESOURCES

### **Restavek Freedom: What you need to know about Haiti's history**

[restavekfreedom.org/2016/12/06/what-you-need-to-know-about-haitis-history](http://restavekfreedom.org/2016/12/06/what-you-need-to-know-about-haitis-history)

### **National Institute on Aging: Resources for children and teens about Alzheimer's disease**

[nia.nih.gov/health/resources-children-and-teens-about-alzheimers-disease#teens](http://nia.nih.gov/health/resources-children-and-teens-about-alzheimers-disease#teens)

### **Mental Health Foundation: Parents and Mental Health**

[mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/p/parents-and-mental-health](http://mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/p/parents-and-mental-health)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Maika Moulite** is a Miami native and daughter of Haitian immigrants. She earned a bachelor's in marketing from Florida State University and an MBA from the University of Miami. When she's not using her digital prowess to help nonprofits and major organizations tell their stories online, she's writing stories of her own. She also blogs at Daily Ellement, a lifestyle website featuring everything from diverse inspirational women to career guidance. She's the oldest of four sisters and loves young adult fantasy, fierce female leads and laughing.



**Maritza Moulite** graduated from the University of Florida with a bachelor's in women's studies and the University of Southern California with a master's in journalism. She's worked in various capacities for NBC News, CNN and *USA TODAY*. An admirer of Michelle Obama, Maritza is a perpetual student and blogs at Daily Ellement as well. Her favorite song is "September" by Earth, Wind & Fire.



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