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THE WHITENESS OF BONES

By Susanna Moore
Doubleday, \$17.95

Stretching from Hawaii to Manhattan and back, Susanna Moore's impressive second novel shows the ways we ourselves are islands adrift on other islands. We do not join the continent of humanity until we see the nature of our ties to those who matter most, including our earlier selves. Moore's penetrating observation of behavior and her artistic control over prose that stays unobtrusive make this a particularly rewarding book.

The novelist clearly sympathizes with her protagonist, Mamie Clark, who like Moore grows up in Hawaii and crosses the border of adulthood in Manhattan. Mamie, 12, with her younger sister Claire, soaks up her native island of Kauai, which seems to her mildly insular and confining yet which imprints itself in her psyche as a floral paradise never to be entirely lost. As in her richly praised 1982 novel, *My Old Sweetheart*, Moore evokes a strong sense of place as she describes the verdant lushness of her girlhood Hawaii where even when things rot they sweeten: "[Mamie] took the dirt road that ran through the camp. Piles of rotting mangoes, black with drunken fruit flies, lay under the big trees. The branches drooped low, heavy with fruit. The spoiled mangoes smelled like sweet jam." Kauai is the first, and remains the strongest, love of Mamie's life.

But that's partly through the default of all other likely candidates for her attachment. As the book opens, Mamie sits in the lap of her family's Japanese gardener, Hiroshi, who slips his hand under her shorts and panties. Mamie tells her parents, who fire Hiroshi. Both the fondling and the firing instill seeds of shame in Mamie which will grow throughout the novel, nor can she achieve peace about the incident while still a child, as soon a tidal wave kills both Hiroshi and Mamie's father, leaving Mamie alone with her restless, adventurous sister and a mother who seems to prefer tending plants to tending daughters.

Nine barely described years later, Mamie leaves for New York to live under the tutoring eye of her Aunt Alysse, where they are soon joined by Claire. Alysse proves an eager mentor in how to use others without caring about them, and she quickly sees social advantages in exploiting the girls' youthful prettiness at her social gatherings. As Dr. Johnson once observed of Alexander Pope, Alysse seems unable even to drink tea without a stratagem, and she offers Mamie lessons in manipulative wisdom and how to thrive in the rarified air of the Manhattan social climber: "Never sit on any toilet seat, anyone's. I don't care whose, besides, it's great for the thighs to pee three inches above the seat. . . . Do underdress, it makes the other women look older and vulgar; do, do flirt, with everyone, children, husbands, wives, especially wives as they're the ones who invite you back."

Claire proves an eager pupil of her kindred-spirit aunt, but Mamie grows increasingly repelled and isolated. She takes a saleswoman job in a department store but leaves it to work for a modeling agent who later sexually assaults her. His is a mild assault compared to the vividly described one she suffers shortly in a New York club at her birthday party. Both assaults, as the earlier fondling by Hiroshi, enable Moore to explore with insight and empathy the ongoing theme of Mamie's damaged

sexual identity as reflected in her perception of the role of women as helplessly submissive to the will of men.

While it contains at least its share of bitterness for the victimization of women at the hands of men, the novel is not an unrelieved diatribe against the male sex. Its willful and abusive men are largely, not completely, balanced by Alder Stoddard, a not-yet-divorced older and richer man Mamie meets at her aunt's. Stoddard proves sufficiently attentive, caring and passionate to enable Mamie to find both excitement and happiness in New York, if not enough to remain there. The purposeless hedonism of Manhattan is too debilitating, the call of her native island too strong.

What raises this novel to the level of masterful is how deftly Moore works on both the naturalistic and psychological levels at once. Whether describing tropical flora, ambitious people or the New York cityscape, the prose paints with stunning truth. All is filtered through Mamie's perception as she struggles to make meaningful connection with the world around her.

This is a book about learning, about the lessons we encounter when we step into the larger world on our own. Fittingly, it focuses on the unlearning that must precede independent adulthood. Mamie, deeply scarred, has much to unlearn, most of it the combined product of Hiroshi's breach of trust and her mother's perceived distance. From age 12 on, Mamie cannot think of herself as a sexual being without shame, or shame's more evolved cousin, guilt. Even when she is being brutally raped, Mamie feels, "This is my fault . . . my penance for the time I rode my bike too slowly past the boys in the workers' camp, and walked too slowly past the construction workers on Fifty-fifth Street. . . . I am a woman and I deserve no better."

In this novel, not only Mamie but all the women except Mamie's mother define their existence and self-image by how they are treated by or attractive to men. Consequently, having given men such vast power over their own existence, they seldom like them. Early in her New York stay, Mamie feels "an unexpected relief that men and women did not, after all, understand each other better. It is the only way the world can work, she thought. If they really knew, really understood, the fear and contempt, all of the women in this restaurant would be obliged to leap to their feet to cut off the penises of their lunch partners with the grape scissors." And men, Mamie knows, would be equally justified in strangling the women, for each continually uses the other, one satisfying lust, the other materialistic greed. Only physical strength makes the male side the more dangerous. The women stop short of bodily harm or death.

Mamie, however, who grew up with what she called a "white-bone fantasy," an image of herself washed upon the Hawaiian shore "as smooth and as white as a bone," must free herself of beliefs which would doom her to tragedy. The white-bone fantasy, which began at about the same time as the Hiroshi incident, serves as the image for Mamie's longing to escape her burden of mistrust of men and supine powerlessness as a woman. It emblemizes her deep-seated wish for purity, a condition which she finally realizes must be generated from within and need not be prey to the attacks of men nor forfeited to the cult of self-interest of women like her Aunt Alysse.

The islands of Kauai and Manhattan themselves become images for the island Mamie is until she can assimilate and establish control over the experiences and alienation shaping her view of herself. Susanna Moore shrinks back from nothing in this fearless and compassionate character study of how one

young woman comes to terms with who she is, what she was, and what she intends to become. Moore has written a contemporary quest novel where the treasure being sought is self-acceptance and peace. In the end, then, this story is about exploration, and coming back to where we started, able to know the place for the first time.