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Maika and Maritza Moulite / Photo by Lydi'Ann

## Moulite Sisters Illuminate Haitian-American Culture in *Dear Haiti, Love Alaine*

SHANAE HARDY | NOVEMBER 19, 2019 | 9:30AM

She's savvy, misunderstood, and carries a weighty teenage angst that can prove explosive. And after a particularly powerful act of rebellion, she finds herself on a journey to resolve a centuries-old family curse while fending off superstitious activities and navigating questions of self-identity and young love.

Contrary to the description, this isn't Sabrina the Teenage Witch. Meet Alaine, a Haitian-American character who's dispelling all of the tropes surrounding her heritage.

Written by Miami-born sisters Maika and Maritza Moulite, *Dear Haiti, Love Alaine* is a coming-of-age narrative told through the lens of a 17-year-old protagonist straddling the worlds of her American birthplace and Haitian roots. The epistolary novel gives readers an intimate glimpse of Haiti's refulgent culture and history through a collage of letters, diary entries, postcards, and articles.

"There's always one narrative about Haiti: It's the poorest country," Maritza says. According to her, the nation's revolutionary history is often overlooked. "With Haiti gaining its independence first, so many countries in Latin America and even [the United States] were inspired."

Raised in a strict household where downtime was relegated to library visits, Maritza and Maika caught the reading bug at an early age, but they seldom saw themselves reflected in *Junie B. Jones* and *The Baby-Sitters Club* offerings in the children's section. As they matured, they embraced their formerly obscured Haitian roots as a source of empowerment rather than shame.

"When my mom came to the States, you weren't flaunting you were Haitian," Maika says. "Now I'm 30, and I'm superproud of being Haitian. It informs the way I view the world."

The complications involved in reconciling one's cultural heritage with the present are omnipresent in *Dear Haiti, Love Alaine*. Maika and Maritza address a litany of staples from Haitian culture, from tidbits of Kreyol to the imagery evoked by Haitian voodoo.

In the novel, the titular protagonist is sent to Haiti in an attempt at behavioral reform. Although she's dispatched to the island for her youthful indiscretions, she winds up researching her lineage upon arrival and soon unearths a family curse. She subsequently delves into witchcraft, a force that winds up animating the narrative.

"The way the magical realism presents itself is different," Maika says of the book. "We make a distinction in the novel when people from America say voodoo versus the Haitian vodou. It's a part of our culture. We wanted to talk about it. We wanted people to know that its beauty [lies] in the practice."

The Moulite sisters discovered some of Haiti's most influential historical female figures while researching and writing about *Alaine's* dive into the island's past. They resurrected hidden characters, such as Marie-Louise Coidavid, the queen of Haiti who was exiled to Pisa, Italy, after her husband's death; and Marie-Madeleine Lachenais, an influential Haitian politician who was an adviser and mistress to two of the country's presidents.

"So much of Haiti's present is tied to its past," Maritza says. "We decided to create a story that would celebrate their identity, so their power would be in [*Alaine*] as well." Rather than muddling the island's timeline, the revisionist history the Moulite sisters present in their book finds new resonances by weaving the country's legacies into the strands of *Alaine's* origins.

Besides standing in for the authors' embrace of Haiti, *Alaine's* character also represents the various internal conflicts with which most young adults should be familiar. Maritza says even though the novel was born from a specific perspective – a story by Haitian sisters about a black girl of Haitian descent isn't considered conventional fodder for young adult novels published in the United States – its themes are universal.

"You can have a book that centers a black girl that doesn't just talk about pain. It doesn't matter who you are – you become enamored with her," Maika says.

The Moulite sisters capped an 11-city monthlong book tour that launched at Books & Books in Coral Gables in September. This Friday, November 22, they'll take part in the Miami Book Fair, an eight-day international literary fair presenting an extensive lineup of workshops and events.

Sponsored by Miami Dade College, the family-friendly festival draws thousands of readers and authors to downtown Miami. Because of the diversity of fans eager to consume contemporary narratives, *Dear Haiti, Love Alaine* is sure to resonate with a sizable number of attendees.

Marci Cancio-Bello, a coordinator for the children, young adult, and poetry programs of the Miami Book Fair, says the Moulite sisters' distinctiveness is poised to inspire younger generations of a similar background.

"If we can see ourselves represented in books and authors, we can believe it's possible to also write books and become heroes in our own and someone else's story," she says. "If we don't see ourselves represented, it's up to us to do something about it and up to the rest of us to pay attention."

Maika and Maritza will present their book during several workshops, including [Remembering Your Roots: Not Just Your Average Rom-Com](#) this Saturday, November 23.

The Moulite sisters hope their spellbinding novel will mesmerize young readers. And just as Alaine uses her black-girl magic to curate her own fiction, the enchanting character has allowed Maika and Maritza to bask in a reality they once thought was a dream.

**Miami Book Fair 2019: Authors Maika Moulite & Maritza Moulite.** *Noon Friday, November 22, in MDC Live Arts Lab on the Miami Dade College Wolfson Campus, 300 NE Second Ave., Building 1, Miami; [miamibookfair.com](http://miamibookfair.com). Admission is free.*

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