

Malama Island

by David Walters

Book Club Discussion Guide

"Some islands don't appear on maps. Some souls don't stop searching until they do."

About This Guide

Malama Island is a novel that rewards slow reading and open conversation. Its surface is an adventure — a man's lifelong pursuit of a mysterious island, encounters in Iceland, mermaids, and prehistoric skies — but beneath it runs a sustained meditation on belonging, spiritual connection, and what it means to truly care for the living world.

This guide is designed to help your group move between the story's pleasures and its deeper currents. Questions are grouped by theme rather than by plot sequence, so feel free to move through them in any order or let the conversation find its own path.

Estimated reading time: 5-7 hours. The novel rewards rereading of the opening and closing chapters once the full arc is understood.

The Book in Brief

Kawika grows up with a Hawaiian name in 1950s rural Arkansas — already marked as someone who doesn't quite fit. From childhood he is drawn to a mysterious island visible from the river near his home, and to a series of people who seem to recognize him at a soul level: his childhood friend Annabel, the ethereal Princess who materializes from ocean mist, the solitary Icelandic woman Sigridur, and the impulsive young Vinkona.

As an adult, Kawika travels the world for work while carrying this longing he cannot name. The novel moves between his interior life and vivid external adventures —

horseback riding through Iceland's volcanic landscape, the discovery of an unmapped island teeming with creatures science insists cannot exist — until the two worlds finally converge.

At its heart, Malama Island asks: what are we responsible for protecting? And what happens when we finally arrive at the place we were always meant to be?

Themes for Discussion

1. Belonging and Identity

Kawika's Hawaiian name is the novel's first symbol — a marker of difference in a world that expects conformity. His mixed heritage (part Hawaiian, raised in Arkansas) means he belongs fully to neither world, yet everywhere he goes he finds connection.

1. Have you ever felt that your name, heritage, or background marked you as an outsider? How did Kawika's response to that experience resonate with you?
2. Kawika never seems to become bitter about not fitting in. What allows him to stay open? Do you think this is realistic, or idealized?
3. The novel suggests that people who feel displaced from the world they were born into are often the most capable of recognizing what is sacred in it. Do you agree?

2. Cosmic Connection and Entanglement

The Princess tells Kawika that they are "entangled" — borrowing language from quantum physics to describe a soul-level bond that transcends time and place. This theme of inexplicable recognition runs through every significant relationship in the novel.

4. Have you ever experienced an immediate, inexplicable sense of recognition with a person or place? How did the novel's treatment of this idea land for you?
5. The Princess, Sigridur, and Vinkona each seem to recognize Kawika in a way that ordinary acquaintances don't. What do you think the novel is saying about why some connections feel different from others?
6. Is the Princess a real entity, a spiritual presence, a projection of Kawika's inner self, or something else entirely? Did members of your group read her differently?

3. The Meaning of Malama

Malama is a Hawaiian word meaning to care for, protect, and illuminate. It is the novel's central value — embodied differently by each of the three women, and most fully enacted by Kawika himself.

7. Where do you see the value of malama enacted in the story? Where do you see it violated?
8. Arthur Jackson's decision to capture the mermaid is the novel's clearest moral confrontation. How did you respond to the different characters' reactions to this moment?
9. Vinkona leaps overboard without hesitation when the mermaid is captured. Is this heroic, reckless, or both? What does her instinct reveal about her character?
10. The title asks us to think about what we malama in our own lives. What — or who — do you feel most responsible for protecting and nurturing?

4. The Spiritual and the Rational

Kawika is a professional man who travels for business, has a loving marriage, and lives a recognizably ordinary life — yet he also communes with a supernatural princess and discovers an island that physics and geography say cannot exist. The novel never forces a choice between these realities.

11. How did you navigate the novel's blend of the realistic and the magical? Did you find it seamless, or were there moments where the shift felt jarring?
12. Kawika's faith — Catholic in childhood, more spiritual and open in adulthood — shapes his receptivity to the inexplicable. How does the novel treat institutional religion versus personal spirituality?
13. The island appears on no map and is not visible to everyone. What do you think determines who can see it and who cannot?

5. The Three Women

The Princess, Sigridur, and Vinkona form a symbolic triad across the novel — representing, respectively, the ancestral/spiritual, the soulfully present, and the instinctively compassionate.

14. How did each of the three women affect Kawika differently? Do you think he needed all three, or could any of them have provided what the others offered?
15. Kawika's connection to Sigridur is warm and intimate but unconsummated. How did you read that relationship? Was there something missing, or was its incompleteness part of its meaning?
16. Annabel, the Cherokee girl from Kawika's childhood, is the novel's great "what if." How does her presence shape the emotional arc of Part I? What do you think she represented to him?

Character Deep Dives

Kawika

Kawika represents a way of moving through the world more than a fixed idea. He is the novel's moral center — not because he is perfect, but because he remains spiritually open in a world that rewards closure.

- What single word would you use to describe Kawika? Did your word change between the beginning and end of the novel?
- Kawika is defined partly by what he doesn't do — he doesn't capture, exploit, or possess. Is restraint a form of strength in this novel?
- How does Kawika change between childhood and adulthood? What stays the same?

The Princess

She materializes from mist, knows Kawika completely, and warns him of arrivals before they happen. She is the island given human form — ancient, luminous, and ultimately beyond his keeping.

- Is the Princess a character or a symbol? Can she be both?
- She tells Kawika their time together on the island is ending. Why do you think the novel requires her to step back as the story reaches its climax?

Vinkona

Young, impulsive, and morally clear, Vinkona is the character who acts while the adults deliberate. Her name carries an island resonance, aligning her with Kawika's Hawaiian heritage.

- Was Vinkona's leap over the railing the right thing to do? What would you have done?
- What does it mean that the novel places its most decisive moral act in the hands of its youngest character?

Passages Worth Reading Aloud

These short passages work especially well read aloud at the start of a discussion session, or as prompts for individual reflection:

- The opening of Chapter 1 — Kawika placing roses at the statue of Mary and the nun's parable about the bird. Sets the novel's spiritual register immediately.

- The Princess's speech about entanglement (Chapter 34). The novel's most direct statement of its central philosophy.
- Vinkona's leap over the railing. One sentence of action that carries the weight of the entire novel's moral argument.
- The novel's final pages — Kawika's arrival and what he finds waiting. Best experienced without prior discussion.

Closing Reflection

"The island has allowed us these moments together. This place is as much a dream of mine as it is yours. We have been blessed with a wonderful gift."

Close your session by inviting each member to share: Is there a place — real or imagined — that functions as your Malama Island? A place that holds your longing, calls you back, and asks something of you in return?

You may find the conversation has only just begun.