

USANNA MOORE

Author of *In the Cut* and *My Old Sweetheart*



The Whiteness of Bones



erly wonderful novel . . . I envy everyone who enters, for the first time, its world.”

—Jonathan Yardley, *The Washington Post Book World*

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T / H / E

WHITENESS
OF BONES

SUSANNA / MOORE



PENGUIN BOOKS



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P R A I S E F O R T H E W H I T E N E S S O F B O N E S

"Moore's writing, every bit as compelling as it was in *My Old Sweetheart* (1982), is even more sure-footed this time around, and so evocative you can almost feel the warm Hawaiian mud between your toes. . . . Moore makes her story as real and mysterious as any island legend, as powerful as the scent of the white ginger flowers."

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred)

"Ms. Moore possesses a finely tuned radar system for phoniness and pretension, and many of her cameo portraits glitter with a Waugh-like black humor. Indeed, she demonstrates in this novel that she not only has a gift for delineating the tragedies of domestic life—our loss of innocence, our discovery of the disparity between our public and private selves—but that she also has a capacity for comic invention, for showing what happens when our vanities run amok."

—Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

"Moore's controlled prose maintains her ambitiously serious intent. As much as women love Colette's and Virginia Woolf's portraits of adored mothers and their daughters, many will identify more with this wounded pair.

—*Ms.*

"This is an engrossing novel, profoundly disturbing in its message of feminine guilt, yet satisfying in Mamie's eventual recognition of how to 'purify' her soul."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"An engrossing, sensual novel whose characters seem to live from the moment of their introduction and whose plot is both believable and satisfying. In short, *The Whiteness of Bones* is the kind of book you'll read, re-read, and remember."

—*West Coast Review of Books*

PENGUIN BOOKS

THE WHITENESS OF BONES

Susanna Moore won the PEN Ernest Hemingway Citation and the Sue Kaufman Prize from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters for her first novel, *My Old Sweetheart*. Her latest novel is *In the Cut*. Susanna Moore is from Hawaii and now lives in New York City.

FOR ANNABEL DAVIS-GOFF



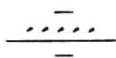
T / H / E

WHITENESS

OF BONES



ONE



It is still said, in those small towns on the island of Kaua'i that have remained unchanged for years, that if the legendary *menehune* do not finish a task in one night's work, they abandon it forever at dawn. Anthropologists tell us that this is because the *menehune*, the tiny men and women who lay hidden in the wet forests through the long, hot days, were afraid to return to the same good *taro* field or water ditch, night after night, lest they be caught and bound into servitude by the lazier, bigger, more ferocious Tahitians.

The *menehune*, who were the eleventh-century forebears of the more arrogant and more recent invaders from Tahiti, died out hundreds of years ago. They do not believe this in Waimea town. There are several sightings each year of *menehune* and many of the old people leave food out for them, papayas and 'opihī, and the yams that the *menehune* love so much. There are royal fish ponds and ancient roads and black lava-rock temple sites hidden all over the island and to the initiated, the children who are born there and live there, these locations are revered and kept secret from outsiders.

The irrigation ditches cut into the sides of the mountain

by the industrious *menehune* were eventually built over by the industrious white men who came long after them to plant the lovely sugar cane, to sell it and to ship it far away. In place of the *menehune* ditches, diligently made by hand of cut-and-dressed stone, there now were aqueducts, wooden half-barrels laid on their sides and elevated on rusty trestles, to rush the icy spring water down the mountainside to the fields.

This system of irrigation through flumes was simple, but effective. There were miles of flumes and, although they were difficult to reach and often hidden from view in thick stands of 'obe 'obe and *pili* grass, the children of the island used the flumes as water slides.

The location of certain especially fast and dangerous flumes was kept secret in families for generations and passed on in unquestioned solemnity. It was against the law to use the flumes as water slides, but since the land and the water were owned by fathers or mothers or cousins, punishment, if one were so careless as to be caught, was seldom very severe.

The children had been fluming all day in Makaweli. Mamie Clarke, twelve years old, sat on the front bumper of an old army jeep as Lily Shields, in the driver's seat, let the heavy jeep coast recklessly back down the winding mountain road. Tōsi, Lily's adopted brother, who was Japanese, held his muddy feet on top of the strawberry guavas careening back and forth on the floorboard to keep them from rolling under the clutch pedal. Mamie jumped off at the bottom of the mountain, where the dirt track met the highway. She was covered with dust and the *pakalana* lei she was wearing when she started out had only a few crushed green flowers left on its string.

"Meeting tomorrow afternoon," Lily yelled back into the

wind. Mamie held up her hand to show that she had heard. They belonged to a club.

Mamie walked home through the sugar cane. The fields had been planted by her father's grandfather. Sugar grew tall and pale green up the soft slopes of the mountains behind her. It swayed and bent over her as she splashed through the water in the bottom of a shallow ditch. The red, silted water was cool. The old, crooning sound of the cane came to Mamie. The cane knew different songs. That day, Mamie recognized "Tell Me Why" by Neil Young.

It had not rained in three weeks and some of the cane, the growth farthest from water, had begun to turn brown at the roots. The dust made the inside of her nose dry and tight. She could see the Filipinos in their straw hats coming back to the cane fields from lunch in the workers' camp.

The camp glinted suddenly as the sun struck a rippled tin roof. There was a flash of bright red, too, from the leggy poinsettias that poked along the peeling wood porches of the old camp houses. Giant ferns and allamanda pressed densely around the little ramshackle houses that were like the forts a child might build with odd pieces of wood and the corroded sheet metal of abandoned cars.

She 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.

Mamie's hair was cut very short. Despite her boyish head, her arms and back and neck had a tender, lithe refinement. She moved with the easy grace of a child who has been brought up under the sky. In the bright sunlight, her eyes seemed as if they were yellow, but inside her father's palm grove, in the shade, her eyes were brown. Her skin was the color of home-made taffy.

It was much cooler in the grove. Another song was serenaded there, "Waimanalo Blues," as the rushing, rustling branches creaked and groaned above her. She picked up two coconuts, two cents, and carried one under each arm.

The palm grove had been planted by the Chiefess Deborah whose land it once was, before she removed herself and her large retinue to the more convivial, more temperate, climate on the banks of the Wailua River. Long-horned cattle brought in sailing ships by Captain Vancouver once grazed in the palm grove. There were more than five hundred trees, and generations of workers had eaten the milky meat, plaited rope from the hemp, carved bowls from the shells, and woven prized floor mats from the green, sharp-edged fronds. Now McCully Clarke paid his children a penny a coconut to collect them. The Chiefess, when she abandoned the Waimea plantation, had tired of the heat and the muddy water. She weighed two hundred and forty pounds and ten young men were needed to carry her litter to the little dock. She took the long-horned cattle with her.

Through the palm trees, Mamie could see her mother, Mary, bending in the flowers at the side of the plantation house. She was transplanting the delicate Tahitian gardenias she had brought from Hanalei the day before and watering them from a big, square tin that once held soy sauce.

The house, long and low, sat on a wide expanse of lawn between the Pacific Ocean and the palm grove. With its damp, brown sand, glittering with mica, the beach hemmed the land like a bejeweled lace ruffle on an old green gown. The rich iron silt from the Waimea River one mile to the east and the irrigation runoff from the cane fields made the ocean the opaque color of coffee with milk. It was not a beautiful beach, with its slow, small breakers, and the children rode their bikes through the bending cane to swim

instead in the dangerous white surf at Polihale. Several people drowned at Polihale each year, usually young servicemen in tight nylon bathing suits. Cheap hotels, the children called the suits. No ballroom.

The house had a peaked, corrugated-tin roof and long verandas running the length of both sides, so that a fresh trade wind blew through the cool, open rooms day and night. On the veranda facing the ocean were rocking chairs and big *bikie'es* where guests would sleep at night. Leaning against the inside wall of the ocean veranda were canoe paddles made of *koa* wood, some of them one hundred years old. They were used whenever McCully and the boys took the outriggers to the reef, and during the months spent training for the canoe races. Some of the paddles had been won in races, and the dates of the victories were carved on their long, smooth handles: 1903, 1928, 1931, 1952, 1969, 1971, 1972.

The flowers that surrounded the house were white flowers. Mary had planted white ginger five and six plants deep under the bedroom windows so that you fell asleep and awoke to the heavy, narcotic smell of ginger. She had not planted them outside the dining room, as she knew that the odor would be too strong, so white oleander and spider lilies, only mildly scented, were allowed to grow there. The children could eat without getting flower-headaches. The faint smell of the deadly oleander always reminded Mamie of the afternoon that Hiroshi, the gardener, found a man, woman and two children lying dead in the sea grape. They were holding in their hands sticks of leaf-stripped oleander. Perfectly grilled hot dogs swayed on the tips of the sticks. There were several bites in each of the hot dogs, or so Gertrude, the maid, had whispered to Mamie. Gertrude's boyfriend was a part-time policeman. That the dead people were tourists was evident immediately. Not much sym-

pathy was felt for the visitors from Denver, so stupid as to roast hot dogs on poisonous sticks. In Waimea town, the strange deaths only strengthened the islanders' instinctive disapproval of outsiders.

Mary planted the white, trumpet-shaped datura that grew to fourteen feet along the grove veranda. It was another deadly plant, but the gardenia with its sturdy, shiny leaves did not seem to mind, for it grew happily alongside. Only the edge of the lawn, near the *naupaka*, was left unplanted, as Mary, after years of Hiroshi's warnings, had finally admitted that only the sea grape and the creeping purple morning glory, clinging to the sand, were able to withstand the spray from the ocean.

Mary worked in her garden all day long. She was from Oklahoma. Mamie wondered if there were any flowers or trees in Oklahoma. Mary worked in the moonlight, too, especially when the thorny, night-blooming cereus, on its three-winged stem, was opening on the lava-rock walls. She corresponded with the Horticulture Department of the University of Hawaii and botanists from the mainland came to visit her. Mamie did not fully understand, or appreciate, perhaps, just what her mother did, as it seemed to Mamie that the difficult task was to keep things from growing. If you happened to spit guava seeds on the path, it was not uncommon to see a guava shoot sprouting there a few days later. Perhaps if Mary had shown as much interest in her daughter as she showed in her plants, Mamie would have been less confused.

As Mamie stepped onto the thick lawn, she saw Hiroshi sitting in one of the folds of the banyan tree, eating his lunch from an aluminum *bento* box. Ever since her father told her that in India entire families, entire villages, lived in enormous

banyans like the one in their garden, she had been particularly interested in the tree. She did not like the smell of the banyan, a smell of rotten fruit and sap-stained leaves, but she liked imagining Indians tucked into clefts in the branches, taking sodas from an icebox wedged into a bend of the trunk, tying their turbans to air roots when it was time to sleep. She dropped the coconuts outside the laundry door and went to sit with Hiroshi.

He had been with her mother and father since before Mamie was born. After World War I, he had come from Japan when his father, working as an indentured laborer in the cane fields, had finally saved enough money to send for his family. McCully's father had recognized Hiroshi's gift for growing things and had given him to McCully and Mary as a wedding present.

She sat next to Hiroshi in the shade. He was eating cold cone *sushi*, *agé*, and he handed Mamie the damp, wrinkled end of it, the part that resembled an old woman's elbow. She ate it as he neatly repacked his box, folding the used waxed paper precisely into fourths, shaking out the last drops of *gen mai cha* from the bamboo thermos, burying in the hard dirt the big, hairy seed from the mango. The skin on his fingers was so calloused that it was cracked and split. He had a wispy white chinbeard that Mamie liked to comb. The tufts of hair were like thin ribbons of smoke. His face was very wrinkled from years of squinting in the bright sunlight.

Mamie watched him in adoration. He patted his lap. She slid over and sat on his legs. She noticed that someone, probably Orval Nalag from the camp, had scratched "I Fock Tiny" on the trunk of the banyan.

"We're going to Koke'e tomorrow. You coming?" Hiroshi

tucked Mamie's thick brown hair behind her ears. His old fingers trembled.

"For plants?"

"She like move down more ginger."

"No," Mamie said. She felt very comfortable leaning back against Hiroshi. He, too, had an odd smell, like camphor wood and *kim chee*.

He rested his hands on the elastic waist of her faded red *palaka* shorts. The water in the bottom of the irrigation ditch had rinsed the red dirt from her feet, but a henna anklet of dried mud prettily encircled her brown calves.

"You got *chawan* hair," he said, fondly stroking the back of her head.

"I don't like *chawan* hair," she said. She shook her head to push his hand away. *Chawan* hair was hair that had been cut under an inverted rice bowl. She could hear him chuckling behind her. She laughed, too.

He slid one of his old hands inside her faded shorts and moved it down inside her warm, white cotton underpants until it was resting softly on her labia.

She turned to look at him. She was not frightened of him. She was confused. There were tears in the wrinkles of his face. She took his big, hardened hand by the wrist and pulled it away from her. There was a little snap of the elastic waistband as both their hands came awkwardly out of the shorts. She placed his hand palm-down in the dirt.

She could see her mother, Mary, binding the straggling, willful shoots of a cape jasmine to a post of the veranda. Her younger sister, Claire, was standing on the veranda steps with her mongoose, Jimmy. She could hear Gertrude loudly singing a maudlin Filipino love song in the laundry room.

She lifted herself from Hiroshi's bow legs. She walked slowly