ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

GENERAL

Hana-lani
Christine Sunderland
OakTara
978-1-60290-260-2
Five Stars (out of Five)

Christine Sunderland deftly illustrates universal truths about love, healing, culture, and family as she whisks readers away to the exotic setting of Hana, Hawaii, in her poignant new novel, *Hana-lani*, her fourth book from OakTara. Widower Henry wallows in grief at his wife's ancestral home, Hana-lani. As he struggles to finish the book that he and his late wife started, he leaves his wife's mother, Native Hawaiian Nani-lei, to raise his slightly wild six-year-old Lucy. While Lucy seems content to romp around the island, help her great-grandmother, and absorb stories of her Hawaiian heritage, Nani-lei wonders what will become of the pair. Meredith crashes into the trio's life, and everything changes. The lithe executive has buried her trauma deep inside, intent on perfecting her physical body and living for the moment. When her plane goes down near Hana-lani, Meredith is found by the trio and nursed back to health. As Meredith heals physically, she and the trio tend to one another's emotional wounds.

The four major players jump off the pages as well-rounded people. The author puts us in the heads of the three adults, giving them each unique voices. Fittingly, Henry's point of view is seen the least, adding to his reticence and mysterious depths. Each person is dynamic, each change realistic, and each character arc makes sense. Sunderland is especially skilled at making readers care about Meredith and Henry from the beginning, although she is initially self-centered, and he is anti-social. The pair's evolving relationship never loses credibility, despite an age difference and different interests. Sunderland adroitly bridges these gaps in believable ways, illustrating expertly how being damaged can drive people who are opposites to find common ground, and how the need for companionship can trump all else. Hawaii itself also emerges as a vibrant force.

Through Nani-lei's stories and dances, the author's vivid description of the landscape, and the use of Hawaiian vocabulary, readers gain a sense of Hawaii as a living entity, successfully straddling present and past. *Hana-lani* is the author's moving love letter to the state.

The novel is deceptively short; its simple prose belies a bittersweet, heartfelt tale.

Sunderland also adds an element of surprise and the unexpected to keep readers turning the pages. Truly, *Hani-lani* proves good things can come in small packages.

Jill Allen