In 1995, off the coast of Kailua-Kona, Hawai’i, on a rare family vacation, seven-year-old Nainoa Flores falls overboard a cruise ship into the Pacific Ocean. When a shiver of sharks appears in the water, everyone fears for the worst. But instead, Noa is gingerly delivered to his mother in the jaws of a shark, marking his story as the stuff of legends.

Nainoa’s family, struggling amid the collapse of the sugarcane industry, hail his rescue as a sign of favor from ancient Hawaiian gods—a belief that appears validated after he exhibits puzzling new abilities. But as time passes, this supposed divine favor drives the family apart: Nainoa, working now as a paramedic on the streets of Portland, struggles to fathom the full measure of his expanding abilities; further north in Washington, his older brother Dean hurries into the world of elite college athletics, becoming obsessed with wealth and fame; and in California, his risk-obsessed younger sister, Kaui, navigates an unforgiving academic workload in an attempt to forge her independence from the family’s legacy.

When supernatural events revisit the Flores family in Hawai’i—this time with tragic consequences—everyone must reckon with the bonds of family, the meaning of heritage, and the cost of survival.
QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In *Sharks in the Time of Saviors*, Washburn writes in five distinct voices, one for each member of the family. What effect does this multiplicity of voices have? How are the narrative voices differentiated, and how do they function collectively?

2. Nainoa’s trajectory in the novel initially adheres to a familiar hero archetype: he reveals mysterious abilities at a young age and feels an immense and confusing desire to heal the ailments of his community. How does Washburn complicate or subvert this archetype? Is Nainoa’s characterization reflected in the novel’s title?

3. Hawai‘i plays a vital role, both contextually and conceptually, in *Sharks in the Time of Saviors*. While the Flores children all eventually attend college on the American mainland, Malia and Augie remain in Hawai‘i. How does each character’s relationship with Hawai‘i shift over the course of the novel? How is their concept of “home” impacted by Hawai‘i’s legacy of colonization within an increasingly globalized landscape?

4. How does the family’s experience of racial identity and foreignness differ across settings? Are there instances where race interacts with other facets of their identities? Why does the Flores family frequently describe white culture humorously and derogatorily?

5. The Flores children come of age on the precipice of extreme poverty. Working two jobs to support herself in college, Kaui rhetorically addresses her parents: “Look at me, Mom and Dad, I learned how to hustle through osmosis, all those years at home with both of you on the edge of economic cliffs” (236). How does Washburn illustrate the recurrent traumas and anxieties of poverty? Where in the novel does a lack of resources impede success or exacerbate conflict?

6. In adolescence, Kaui, Nainoa, and Dean all aspire to transcend their material circumstances. Dean refers to his hypothetical basketball career, claiming “I’m going to take us all away from this . . . Noa might be special but he’s not money” (61). How do these aspirations, and their financial potential, influence relationships and identities? In what ways are Kaui and Dean’s earthly talents treated differently than Nainoa’s supernatural abilities?

7. What role do mythology and spirituality play in the Flores family? When does mythology provide solace and guidance, and when does it deceive? How is spiritual mythology reflected or perverted by the American myth of meritocracy?

8. While learning to climb in California, Kaui claims to have “lived in the landscape”, having “slipped . . . into the veined cracks of sheer walls of limestone . . . .ceilinged by a thunder-brained sky” (155). Where else does Washburn dissolve the boundaries between characters and their surrounding natural environments, and to what effect?

9. Initially, Nainoa serves as the apex of the novel’s narrative and thematic tensions. How does his death impact the novel’s narrative structure? How does his absence disrupt the familial structure?
10. Neither Kaui nor Dean ultimately achieve their adolescent ambitions: What do the family members’ final circumstances suggest about the relationship between individual exceptionalism and systematic disenfranchisement? How does the Flores family remain subjugated by oppressive forces? How have they circumvented these forces, or found alternative modes of living?

11. Washburn excludes Augie’s narrative voice until the final chapter of the novel, after the return of his mental faculties. Why was Augie’s perspective omitted until the novel’s culmination, and why was it included then?

12. Malia and Augie encounter the legendary and ominous “night marchers” in the novel’s first chapter, on the eve of Nainoa’s conception. How do you interpret their presence in the final chapter? What does the novel’s conclusion suggest about the relationship between the spiritual and material worlds?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kawai Strong Washburn was born and raised on the Hamakua coast of the Big Island of Hawai‘i. His work has appeared in Best American Nonrequired Reading, McSweeney’s, and Electric Literature’s Recommended Reading, among other outlets. He was a 2015 Tin House Summer Scholar and 2015 Bread Loaf work-study scholar. Today, he lives with his wife and daughters in Minneapolis. Sharks in the Time of Saviors is his first novel.

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