

Breadfruit

by Célestine Vaite



About the Book

Not since Precious Ramotswe made her first appearance in *The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency* has a novel's heroine so immediately and completely won readers' hearts. Materena Mahi, "the best listener in Tahiti," is warm and generous, a natural problem solver, versed in the folk wisdom of her native island home.

When a drunken Pito proposes to Materena, she initially thinks it's just the booze talking. But Materena can't help starting to plan for a fabulous wedding. Right away she's off making inquiries on behalf of "a friend of her boss." From Cousin Moeata, Materena learns that the cake is the most important part of the wedding. From Mama Teta, she's given to understand it's the ride to the church that really counts.

Cousin Georgette insists that the real key to a wedding is the dancing. As Materena juggles all this helpful advice, she forges on with everyday life--her relatives, her new baby boy, church on Sunday, cleaning her boss's house?it never ends! Soon, though, Pito seems to have forgotten his proposal. Should Materena be fii of this heartbreaker?

Célestine Vaite's latest tale of big dreams on a small island will leave readers cheering.

Discussion Guide

1. Breadfruit is, fundamentally, a story about love - above all, the love between Materena and Pito. How did you feel about Pito and Materena's relationship? How did their respective views of love differ? What do you think it was that made Materena want to get married after sixteen years of never thinking about it? Why was Pito so opposed to the idea at first?

2. When Materena begins covertly gathering information for her wedding, did you share in her excitement, or worry she was going to get hurt? Why do you think the author detailed Materena's secret wedding research? Did Materena learn

anything (other than prices) when she inquired into Cousin Moeata's cakes, Mama Teta's car, and the seemingly excellent deal on the new bed?

3. In *Breadfruit*, Vaite set out to re-create the Tahiti she knew from her childhood - complete with an almost comically large extended family. What role did Materena's family, both immediate and extended, play in her everyday life? How would you characterize the women in her family? How would you characterize the men? Are their roles similar to or different from the gender roles in your family?

4. What did you make of the story of Loana and Materena's father? Why do you think Loana put "father unknown" on 33259 Vaite a-d,i-vi,1-358 r.ps 7/6/06 3:37 PM Page 347 the birth certificate, and why did she take so long to tell her daughter the truth? Did the story give you insight into Materena's relationship with her mother? Did it shine any light on Materena's relationship with Pito?

5. Materena lives in a small Tahitian town, with little access to the outside world and to the conveniences and luxuries we enjoy in many parts of America. And yet the characters in *Breadfruit* are acutely aware of the way the world is changing. In what instances do you see Materena and her family attempting to balance Tahitian tradition with modern beliefs? Would you identify any of the novel's characters as "traditional" or "modern"?

6. Vaite's characters face numerous difficulties in their lives, and yet no one in the novel is unhappy. Does this surprise you? Why do you think the author writes of hardship in such a jovial manner? With only a few overt political references, do you consider *Breadfruit* a political novel? Why or why not?

7. On one hand, Materena and her family are Roman Catholic. On the other hand, they find comfort in Tahitian beliefs that predate the arrival of Catholicism on the island. How do these two ways of thinking differ, and how are they similar? What role does spirituality play in the characters' lives?

8. Why do you think Célestine Vaite chose the title *Breadfruit* for this novel? Can you think of a particular passage or episode in the story that relates to the title? What does the title mean to you?

Author Bio

I came into the world in Tahiti, the first child of Hitiura Vaite and a French man who went back to his country after military service. My childhood in Faa'a, in a big extended family with hundreds of aunties, uncles, cousins and elders was typical Catholic Tahitian style. Posters of Jesus-Christ adorning walls along with magnificent quilts, statues of the Virgin Mary Understanding Woman glowing in the dark, mass on Sunday, breadfruit diet (barbecued, baked, in a stew, breadfruit full stop and be grateful), traditions, superstitions. And of course story-telling, the core of Tahitian culture for hundreds of years.

But I discovered reading at eight years old and was instantly hooked. Three years later, I was devouring French classics which my mother, single mother of four children and professional cleaner with a vision, bought at the second hand store. Story-telling was still part of my life though, my aunties made sure of it. Set to become the first indigenous lawyer after

winning a scholarship at the prestigious Anne Marie Javouhey College in Papeete, love/lust came my way in the form of an Australian surfer with a good looking face and nice manners. My plan to study in France, much to my mother's disappointment, radically changed. I will be a teacher instead and have children. At twenty two years old, I left my island to follow my Australian husband, the father of my two children, back to his country. I've been in Australia for almost twenty years now and have written three novels about the lives and loves of an extended Tahitian family from Faa'a. And I **will** be buried home. My sisters often joke that it is because I want my grandiose State funeral with the President of French Polynesia and the ministers present but they know the truth. Even my four beautiful children do. Faa'a is where I belong. In my heart, my soul, my head, my blood vessels. Since becoming an avid reader, my reading has gone through several stages. At eleven, I was hooked on the works of Balzac, Zola, Dostoevski. Novels thicker than the bible with pages and pages of description and countless characters coming in and out (brothers, sisters, cousins?), but I had all the time in the world for family sagas! Eight years later, a mother and uni student with very limited reading time, thick novels were out. I wanted to be entertained, fast, in between studying, breastfeeding, washing etc. I fell in love with Guy De Maupassant's short stories. He is a master of short stories and shows a deep knowledge of human nature whether he writes about paysans, courtesans, barons, abandoned children. By the time I moved to Australia at the age of 22 to follow my husband, the father of my two children, Guy de Maupassant was still my hero, but I felt that to survive in this foreign country, I best master the English language. So for about two years, I was a magazine reader. Mostly women's magazine such as New Idea, Woman's Day, and Women's Weekly with lots of recipes and cleaning tricks. As I grew confident, I started reading poems by Australian writer Banjo Patterson, short stories by Roald Dahl, and novels with short chapters - **The Color Purple** (Alice Walker), **Fried Green Tomatoes** (Annie Flagg.) Later, much more confident and missing my big extended family, I searched for novels about families and other cultures. **The Joy Luck Club** (Amy Tan), **Like Water For Chocolate** (Laura Esquivel), **The Color Of Water** (James Mc Bride), **Once Were Warriors** (Alan Duff), **Hannah's daughters** (Marianne Fredriksson) I'm still hooked on novels that give me an insight into another culture. I just can't get enough of them! I love the unusual way the characters speak, the settings, the family stories. **A kiss from Maddalena** (Christopher Castellani), **The Almond Picker** (Simonetta Agnello Hornby), **Mao's Last Dancer** (Li Cunxin), **Falling Leaves** (Adeline Yen Mah)

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