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Finding a Good Read: Islands

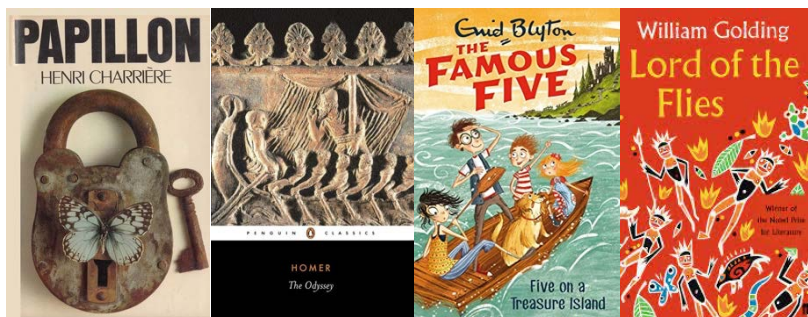
A regular column to help you find a good read.

What makes an island such an irresistible setting for a novel? Perhaps because islands can be such contradictory places: idyllic paradises to escape **to** or terrifying prisons to escape **from** – Enid Blyton's Kirrin Island or Devil's Island in **Papillon**?

In Homer's **Odyssey** islands are both. It is the ancient story of the Greek hero Odysseus and his 10-year journey home to the island of Ithaca after the Trojan War. Along the way he encounters monsters and gods, including the one-eyed Cyclops and the witch-goddess **Circe**. Her story is brilliantly retold in a modern version by Madeline Miller.

The first rule of most children's literature is 'Ditch the grownups!' and make way for adventure, freed from all the constraints of parents, school and bedtime. And this is just what Julian, Dick, Anne, Georgina, and Timmy the dog discover in **Five on a Treasure Island** where there's an old shipwreck, an ancient castle, a fierce storm and – or course – a buried treasure.

But William Golding's classic **The Lord of the Flies** tells a much darker story about schoolboys whose plane crashes on an uninhabited island. The novel was based on a much older book called **The Coral Island** in which the wrecked boys survive and triumph over the 'savage natives' and lawless pirates because of their unquestioned English superiority. Golding turns all this on its head. In **The Lord of the Flies** the savagery and violence come from within the boys themselves.



The isolation of islands makes them good places for all kinds of experiments. H G Wells is most famous for *The War of the Worlds* and *The Time Machine* but **The Island of Dr Moreau** (1896) is also a great read. Dr M is a kind of mad scientist who uses the island as a laboratory where he practises excruciating vivisection to create human-animal 'Beast Folk'. The narrator is so traumatised by what he encounters on the island that even after his rescue and return to 'civilisation' he remains convinced that *all* human beings are in fact Beast People.

More modern uses of the island as a horror setting include Dennis Lahane's **Shutter Island** (2003), about a US Marshal who goes to an isolated hospital for the criminally insane to investigate a disappearance. The book was later made into a film with Leonardo di Caprio and Mark Ruffalo.



Lighthouses can also be fascinating subjects. Robert Louis Stevenson was a writer famous for his classic adventure **Treasure Island** (1882) but he came from a family of Scottish lighthouse builders. In **The Lighthouse Stevensons**, Bella Bathurst tells the story of how four generations of the family achieved the stunning feats of engineering needed to build lighthouses on top of treacherous rocks in the perilous waters around the Scottish coast. Another gripping history is **Seashaken Houses, A Lighthouse History from Eddystone to Fastnet**, by Tom Nancollas.

Lighthouses are lonely outposts and perfect settings for haunting stories. There's Emma Stonex's **The Lamplighters**, a gripping whodunnit, ghost story, horror novel and psychological investigation all rolled into one. Or try C J Cooke's **The Lighthouse Witches** for a chilling gothic thriller.

The Light Between Oceans by M.L. Stedman is an unforgettable novel about love and loss. A boat washes up on the shore of a remote lighthouse keeper's island. It holds a dead man – and a crying baby. The only two islanders, Tom and his wife Izzy, make a decision that will have far-reaching consequences for everyone involved.



When islands are inhabited, it is often by closeknit communities in which people know each other well. This can make for a great crime fiction setting as in the **Orkney novels** of Ann Cleeves and the Icelandic books of Ragnar Jonasson, including **Snowblind**, **The Darkness**, **The Mist** and **The Island**.

The 2022 longlist for the Booker prize included two novels that used islands to explore political themes. Audrey Magee's **The Colony** is set off the west coast of Ireland during the height of the Troubles in the 1970s. The central character of **An Island** by Karen Jennings is Samuel, lighthouse keeper and sole inhabitant of a small island off the coast of an unnamed African country. A young refugee washes up unconscious on the beach. His presence triggers Samuel's memories of his life on the mainland: a life of colonial oppression, a fight for independence and then suffering at the hands of a cruel dictator. Samuel has to confront the part he played in that history and what is meant by the idea of home.

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