



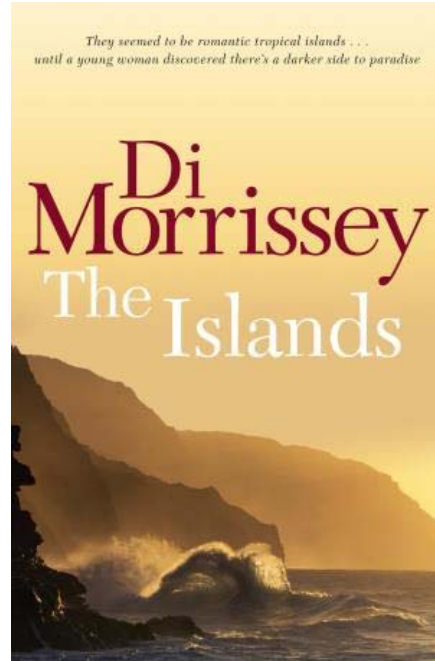
MACMILLAN

Macmillan Publishers Australia

NOTES FOR READING GROUPS



Di Morrissey



THE ISLANDS

Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

CONTENTS:

- Thematic & Plot Summary
- Writing Style
- The Author
- Questions for Discussion

THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

'Do what you want to do. Was that what she wanted? That was the crux of the issue - her freedom.' (p 372)

It's 1971 and the world is on the brink of many changes. This is the story of a young Australian who sets out to see the world and discovers far more than she'd expected to. Catherine Moreland, a country girl raised on a property in Australia, is given a round-the-world trip to London and Hawaii as a 21st gift from her parents. There she finds and loses love, discovers new skills, begins to question her own values, and later learns to appreciate another culture. Most of all, she discovers who she is, and who she would really like to become.

When Catherine meets Lieutenant Bradley Connor, a handsome US Naval officer, in London, they feel a mutual attraction, and are delighted to meet up again in Hawaii where Bradley is based. After a whirlwind romance they marry in a small ceremony attended only by their parents and Cath's best friend Mollie Aitken. She and Bradley have an idyllic honeymoon at Palm Grove Hotel, on Kauai, where Catherine is impressed by the owner Eleanor Lang's efforts to maintain cultural traditions in her resort program, and becomes friends with her and one of her staff, Abel John. On their return to Honolulu, the newlyweds settle into navy life, but Catherine soon discovers that her new Hawaiian friends interest her far more than do the naval officers and the wives whom Bradley is keen for her to mix with. She finds the expectations of the 'Wives Club' to be cloistering and begins to lead a secret life meeting her friend the beautiful dancer Kiann'e and an old waterman named Lester Manning, whose past fascinates Catherine. She also grows very fond of Kiann'e's Auntie Lani who lives in a delightfully warm and chaotic home with a constant stream of visitors. While on Palm Grove, she'd bought a camera from the resort photographer, and bored with her unoccupied days, she decides to take a photography course. Vince Akana, the editor of the local *Hawaii News*, invites her to take shots of a protest rally organised by a group led by Beatrice Lo'Ohouiki, Kiann'e's mother. Catherine's success leads to regular part-time assignments, and she also becomes more informed about the protests in aid of Hawaiian self-determination, and learns to respect her friend's fierce pride in their culture. Catherine and Bradley begin to lead rather separate lives and his first posting to sea exacerbates the growing rift between them. Meanwhile, Catherine has been taking surfing lessons from PJ, one of the local surfers. When she returns to Kauai for a holiday she meets the alternative women who follow the surfers around, and begins to realise that there are many possible lives to lead. A night of tempestuous sex on the beach with PJ leaves her confused, and when Bradley returns with news of his posting to Washington she realises that his life is not for her. But what life does she really want? And who will spend it with her?

Bradley's attitudes are typical of people who live their lives in the forces. He regards his workmates and their wives as members of a family who protect each other and share everything. 'So whom do we turn to for support, for help, for information, for fun? Our navy family.' (p 94) But Catherine finds the wives boring and shallow and that the commanding officer's wife has a controlling influence in all their lives: 'They're just all out of the same navy cookie cutter. Is that Mrs Goody-win, do you suppose? Cripes, I hope your next commanding officer's wife is a bit more liberal.' (p 336) She resents the lack of privacy, particularly after they move from their apartment to the base. And there's a sinister side to this community, too, for it requires absolute loyalty and demands a particular code of behaviour. When they visit the Pearl Harbour memorial (p 32), Catherine realises how much the navy's strict code of honour means to Bradley. During a visit to his parents for Thanksgiving, her father-in-law, a retired serviceman, presumes she's taken out US citizenship and praises US troops in Asia. Catherine, miffed by his insularity, responds by saying: 'And yes, we all hope the men fighting in Vietnam will be home soon . . . Australians have fought beside Americans in the Second World War, just as they have done in Vietnam,' she gently reminded everyone.' (p 136) Bradley, like his father, presumes that the US is superior to elsewhere and that the locals don't quite measure up. 'And there are local people who don't want to be part of our wonderful American way of life. But they are only a minority. So it is up to us to wave the flag and share and show what it means to be American and how proud we are to be part of the greatest country on earth.' (p 276) He has no interest in Hawaiian culture and 'scolds' Catherine for spending

too much time with the locals, and not enough with 'the wives', and for failing to show proper deference to navy expectations. She later discovers when she leaves Bradley, that if one steps out of bounds, one is quickly exiled from the 'family'.

The idea of social change is important in this novel too. 'Just remember, Catherine, nothing lasts forever, the good times and the bad times. Keep moving forward is the objective, don't stagnate, that's my motto.' (pp 134-5) Catherine is destined to develop different attitudes to those of her parents, given that the women's liberation movement is beginning to influence society. 'Times are changing compared to our mothers' day,' said Summer. 'Going on the pill, sleeping with anyone who takes your fancy, having children out of wedlock, or by different partners, getting high on pot, whatever. Didn't go on in their day.' (p 241) She's amazed to find that Sadie plans to travel alone to India: 'Transcendental meditation. A technique to relax, attain inner happiness and fulfilment,' Sadie explained. 'No drugs, no alcohol, no religion. Seven simple steps. Sounds good to me. I'm ready to travel again.' (p 282) Catherine begins to question Bradley's attitude as a husband: 'He wanted her to be a mature, sensible adult. But I'm not ready to be a sedate, sensible lady, she told herself. I want to do exciting things and be with interesting people. I want to get involved with rallies, surfing, take photos and write articles.' (pp 359-60) Like many women of her generation, she decides that she wants a more equal relationship in a partner: 'He was so dictatorial. Deep down she'd always known that this was so. Bradley made the decisions. He was always in charge and while he would explain what he planned to do, he never really asked her opinion. Consulting her was more a gesture of polite protocol after he'd made up his mind. She'd never argued with his intentions.' (p 355) Even though she doesn't want to emulate the hippie lifestyle of Summer, Ginger or Sadie, she also realises that there may be another path for her to tread: 'Driving back to her apartment after the long and stimulating conversation with Sadie, Catherine started to feel a bit trapped. She was tied to Bradley's life. She couldn't go to India or start to learn about so many things that were out there. Sadie believed the world was changing, this truly was a new dawn, old barriers, conventions, were crumbling.' (p 283)

A big turning point for Catherine occurs when she meets the surfer PJ whose laidback lifestyle and approach is so different to Bradley's and to hers. 'He was so good looking in his casual beachy way, yet PJ seemed unaware of his appeal. As well as his classical good looks, unlike Bradley's cleancut looks, PJ had a superb physique honed from surfing but there was a reserve, a mystery about him that was alluring. His smile held secrets, the intensity of his blue eyes always reminded her of the depths of the ocean. But she wasn't going to do anything other than look. She was married to another man and that had to be the end of it. It took Catherine a long while to fall asleep again.' (p 302) She learns surfing from him, a new skill which shows her the possibilities for change in her life. Later, while Bradley is away, she returns to Kauai, joins the hippie crowd on the beach, smokes pot for the first time, and PJ makes love to her on the sand (pp 252-3). Because she's been raised to believe in fidelity in marriage, she is horrified when she wakes the next day: 'She'd been unfaithful to Bradley. She tried to put the whole thing out of her head, pretend it had never happened.' (p 257) But the fact that it's happened makes her realise that her love for Bradley is not as strong as she thought it was. 'Lester gave her a long look. 'Life patterns change. You make changes.' He paused. 'Or you don't. Or you just go on as you always have,' he added enigmatically.' (p 273)

Catherine also develops as a person by learning to appreciate the richness of Hawaiian culture, and to acknowledge how much Hawaiian people have been influenced by the various colonial cultures and interests which have encroached on their country. Her understanding of their history leads her to respect the efforts of people like Beatrice, Kiann'e's mother, who campaigns for self-determination: 'Catherine, this is the local Kauai chapter of the Daughters of Hawaii,' said Beatrice in an explanation of the gathering. 'The organisation was formed in 1903 and all our members must be able to trace their lineage back to at least 1880. The seven founders of the organisation were all born in the Islands of missionary parents.' 'Many of our ancestors were missionaries who married into Hawaiian society,' added Verna, beginning to pour the coffee.' (p 262) She is given insights into the history of Hawaii, by Kiann'e: 'When you hear my mother and the old people talk of the Hawaiian kingdom, before Queen Liliokualani was overthrown, it makes me sad. The queen was setting up a constitution that protected the property of the local people.' 'What happened?' 'She was undermined by her government, known as "the missionary gang", which betrayed her to the rich white planters. Money always talks. So the foreign

businessmen and their overseas supporters took control. They plotted with the American government representative who sent for the marines and declared Hawaii a US protectorate and raised the American flag in 1893.' 'It doesn't sound very constitutional to me. But Hawaii became a state of the Union?' 'In 1959. But it was much earlier, when we became a republic in 1894, that the fate of the Hawaiian people was sealed,' said Kiann'e with a grimace.' (pp 140-1) Beatrice has passed on her fighting spirit to her daughter and is proud that she will continue in her footsteps: 'She's being groomed, you know. She'll be playing an important part in the future of Hawaii,' said Beatrice. 'Treasure her friendship.' (p 264) When Catherine returns in the 21st century, though, she finds that advances are still being hampered by bureaucracy: 'Senator Akaka introduced a bill in 2000 to establish a process for native Hawaiians to gain recognition similar to that of native Americans but it keeps going back to the drawing board for modifications and changes and being "reinterpreted",' said Kiann'e. 'But the bill is the "foot in the door", so we hope reparations and reconciliation will come after that.' (p 458)

Many Hawaiian cultural traditions have also been damaged or altered by successive invaders. The muu-muu which is now regarded as an Hawaiian dress was 'originally introduced by the missionaries to cover up all that decadent naked flesh. No more grass skirts and bare breasts.' (p 26) They also banned the hula because they 'found it too sensual, depraved even' (p 120). Later, Hawaiian dances like the hula (pp 119-120) were appropriated by tourism. Sacred sites, too, have been damaged or destroyed: 'It's a heiau all right. A very sacred place, which simply can't be disturbed,' said Beatrice firmly to Eleanor.' (p 407) 'I've heard stories from old watermen about stones that represent departed chiefs. They stand and face the sea, towards the land beyond the horizon.' (p 408) And the military bases in the area have also been blamed for such desecration. At the rally, Beatrice says: 'We call for a halt to the military misuse of Hawaiian land.' (p 160) Catherine is warned about such local feelings by Eleanor: 'In your case you're considered to be part of the military, which has lots of money and little understanding of what Hawaii is really about.' (p 219) When Catherine introduces some Hawaiian culture to the wives' club they respond with interest; but she soon realises that it's not as simple as it sounds when the idea of sharing culture in local schools is mooted: 'Mmm, basically it's a good idea, but these things can be tricky. It can't be called a school or have a teaching component, but you could call it Hale Pihana Kanaka - a shared gathering place - where they learn to appreciate that everyone is different and we're all special and that'd be a positive thing. God knows there have been enough problems from the forces. Our people hate having the military bases here,' said Kiann'e.' (p 212) Catherine begins to recognise how important Kiann'e's work is in preserving and passing on local traditions.

Such efforts have become even more vital as more recent global development has threatened not only culture, but also Hawaiian people's livelihoods, taken their land, and left many homeless. 'They came to Hawaii as indentured labourers to work on the plantations and were given this land for their houses. Back then beachfront land was worthless. Now, of course, it's very valuable. Developers want it for hotels and expensive houses, but Auntie would never leave it. Too nice. I think we should start to drive back, don't you?' (p 121) Many Hawaiian people no longer have the security of a home: 'It's a development planned along the beachfront where Auntie lives, they want to move people out. A group of haole businessmen have come in and want to put up these blocks to sell condos to rich people from the mainland.' (p 140) Many have been cut adrift by inadequate social infrastructure, and there is a yawning chasm between the wealthy, as evinced by the new development at Palm Grove, and those who are desperate for basic necessities.

Surfing and the history of surfing culture is another main thread in the narrative. The story of Lester Manning begins with him seeing a film starring the surfing legend, whom he later meets in the flesh. 'Duke Kahanamoku, the very man he had seen in that newsreel in Red Hawk.' (p 105) Lester proceeded to emulate him by learning to surf. He also became determined to refine the design of a board: '*The young man formed a plan: he was determined to recreate the boards and discover how these massive pieces of wood rode in the waves, how they could be adapted and changed. Suddenly his passion had a new edge and a thousand ideas began to bubble in his head. At night he sketched, measured and drew up plans.*' (p 286) Then, when Catherine meets Lester (who is a friend of Kiann'e), she becomes fascinated by his life story. Later she also meets PJ and the other surfers,

and realizes what an inspiration Lester has been to them. PJ also lives to surf and makes a living designing boards: 'Mmm. Cutting down long boards?' asked Lester with interest. 'Yep. Making a few guns. Trying a few new ideas. Like a lot of the good shapers around - Diffenderfer, Curren, Downing, Ben Apia.' (p 290) She begins to appreciate the almost mystical connections between these men and the sea: 'Soul surfers. That's what they call themselves now. These boys are in it for love and fulfilment, not winning and ego.' (p 182) 'Soul surfers like PJ surfed from the heart, not for money, not for the adrenalin hit, not for kudos, not for recognition. It met some primeval need, it was a drug, an addiction.' (p 421) And she realises how much Lester has lost in no longer being well enough to surf the waves: 'Catherine was about to ask Lester how he felt about his swim, but the expression on his face as he gazed at the ocean stopped her. There was an intensity in his eyes, but also a sadness and something else...' (p 209)

The inevitability of change is another thread in this story. When Catherine leaves Bradley and returns to Kauai, Abel John arranges for her to house-sit a gallery for Miranda, a very independent woman who is setting off on one of many regular trips to Europe. Catherine admires her paintings and her freedom. But she is still unsure what the next stage in her life will be. When PJ arrives, they briefly maintain their platonic friendship as surfing buddies until they become lovers again and she spends a few weeks believing in the fantasy of a life together. But PJ, as he's done before, sets off on another surfing odyssey with his mates and as the weeks pass she realises that he has no intention of returning to her. Then she is shocked to receive divorce papers from Bradley, and to see their life together reduced to a list of material possessions. Finally, the tsunami strikes the Palm Grove resort, devastating Eleanor and killing Abel John, and Catherine realises that a special time in her life is over.

This novel is about exercising one's individuality in life's journey, and in particular about how women have achieved more independence in the last forty years. 'You must start for think of yourself. Not be in the shadows, waiting for life to happen. You make things happen. For you.' (p 429) Although Catherine leaves her beloved Hawaii, she carries with her the things she's learned and loved about the place. 'Like many things, it is the intangible, the memory that stays with you.' Kiann'e smiled and held out a plumeria blossom. 'Smell and remember. Now each time you see and smell this flower you might remember being here, these moments.' (p 463) In the latter part of the novel (which is set some thirty years later), she returns to the islands, in order to launch her biography of Lester. She's settled happily on *Heatherbrae* with her former neighbor and childhood friend Rob Turner, and has two daughters. They've created an eco-friendly farmstay which has used some of the techniques she observed in Eleanor's resort; and her appreciation for local Hawaiian culture had offered her another important insight: 'She realised that, although she lived in rural Australia, she had had limited contact with and knowledge of Aboriginal culture.' (p 150) Hence, Catherine has involved local Aboriginal people in her farmstay development too.

Catherine has made choices in her life, and is contented with them. She's found a satisfying partnership with Rob, her equal in that he shares her goals and values. She's used her creative spirit to create a thriving business from a threatened property and has also written a tribute to a man, and a culture, which inspired her - to dream big dreams.

WRITING STYLE

1. The novel is structured in two parts. Catherine's story is the main narrative beginning in 1971, but interpolated within it is the biography of *The Waterman* (p 48) which begins in 1918, and which was written by Catherine based on Lester Manning's scrapbooks. Chapter 16 continues Catherine's narrative but moves into the future to find her a married woman on a property planning to go back to Hawaii. How did the excerpts from the biography inform your reading of this novel?
2. What contributed to suspense in the novel?
3. How would you describe the characterisation in this novel? What devices does the writer use to convey ideas about characters?
4. Were there any passages which were particularly evocative in the use of descriptive devices?
5. Di Morrissey's novels are each inspired by a particular landscape. How does this novel depict Hawaii?

THE AUTHOR

Di Morrissey is one of Australia's most successful writers. She began writing as a young woman, training and working as a journalist for Australian Consolidated Press in Sydney and Northcliffe Newspapers in London. She has worked in television in Australia and Hawaii and in the USA as a presenter, reporter, producer and actress. After her marriage to a US diplomat, Peter Morrissey, she lived in Singapore, Japan, Thailand, South America and Washington. Returning to Australia, Di continued to work in television before publishing her first novel in 1991. Di has a daughter, Dr Gabrielle Hansen, and her children, Sonoma Grace and Everton Peter, are Di's first grandchildren. Di's son, Dr Nicolas Morrissey, is a lecturer in South East Asian Art History and Buddhist Studies at the University of Georgia, USA. Di and her partner, Boris Janjic, divide their time between Byron Bay and the Manning Valley in New South Wales when not travelling to research her novels, which are all inspired by a particular landscape. For further information visit <http://www.dimorrissey.com>
Read: 'Interview with Di Morrissey' ABC Talking Heads with Peter Thompson, 2005.
<<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/talkingheads/transcripts/s1336300.htm>>

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The conversation between Bradley and Catherine (p 149) about the ethics of Hawaiian development reveals the complexity of the situation. With so many locals depending on tourism it's difficult for some of them to voice any criticism of development. Discuss.
2. What did the novel reveal about Hawaiian culture? Read further to discover more about the history which is suggested in Catherine's conversations with her friends.
3. 'I can't chat for long, there are others wanting the line. Please call or send a note to my folks, let them know you spoke to me and all is well.' (p 292) Communication in the 70s was much slower than it is today; imagine if Bradley or PJ could have rung Catherine every day; how might that have changed the dynamics in her separation from each of them?
4. 'Catherine looked at PJ silhouetted against the light rising behind Diamond Head and it seemed as though he was from another world. He was a creature of the sea, as if risen from it, or perhaps he had been always anchored here. Lester had mentioned the word 'waterman' and now she fully understood its meaning as she looked at PJ. He seemed to have a way of interpreting the sculpture of the ocean. Now she thought that this was how Lester felt about the bond with the ocean, with the waves.' (p 306) Did you find this idealisation of the 'watermen' convincing or persuasive?
5. The novel celebrates the idea of 'soul surfers' like PJ whose passion for the water allows no other commitment in his life. 'Don't you have a really close friend, someone you've known for ages or you grew up with? Someone you just click with? That's almost like family?' she asked him. He shook his head. 'No. Don't need them.' 'What about your surfing mates?' 'That's all they are. People I see in the water.' (p 323) Is PJ's lack of connection to anyone something to admire or pity?
6. Catherine's brief meeting with PJ suggests that he has remained essentially the same, is still enjoying his life, is healthy, and still bedding young women. But in the present day, could his lifestyle be sustainable? How could he still live like this, amidst the new world created by tourism and its associated costs?
7. 'It was such a cliché. And he wrote a card that was supposed to make me apologise and crawl back to the box of my marriage. You know, a tiny, inexpensive, thoughtful gift would have meant so much more.' (p 386) Was Catherine being too judgemental of Bradley? Was she generally too hard on him given that she knew how committed he was to the navy before their marriage?
8. 'That's because you're an only child, Cathy. You've been looked after and spoiled and Bradley is doing the same.' Catherine had not replied to such an unjust remark, but she did think about Mollie's forthright attitude to marriage.' (p 172) Mollie's words are salutary, for Catherine really hasn't ever looked after herself. Discuss.
9. 'Try everything. Never be afraid, never have regrets. The guy I adored was killed in Vietnam but that hasn't stopped me doing all the things we dreamt of doing, loving whomever I want. I love and walk away. Whatever it takes to get you through the nights, babe. There are guys that are safe and there are guys that drive you wild. For now, I'm choosing to walk on the wild side. Like John Lennon said, "Life isn't a dress rehearsal.'" (p 283) Discuss the implications of this quote.
10. 'Ah, there'll always be watermen,' said Catherine softly. 'The ocean is a great definer of men. Men will always challenge the power of the waves even though it is the sea that controls them.' 'Men trying to prove themselves,' said Emily. 'Only to themselves. The championships, the big money, the commercialism, that's new.' (p 452) Has the advent of professional surfing changed the ethos of those who participate?
11. Was there any character you would like to have seen play a more prominent role in the novel?

12. 'A floater? You mean a drifter?' said Catherine. 'That's how I feel at the moment. But that's okay.' (p 397) Do we all need time out, to become 'drifters' in order to identify our priorities in life?

13. 'When I lived here, the North Shore was deserted. Just surfers and a few locals lived out there. Now it's jammed with the homeless, thousands of them.' She shook her head at the memory of the rows and rows of tents, camps and makeshift shelters strung along the beachfront for miles.' (p 464) Catherine is shocked to find that Hawaii has been so degraded, when she returns. Discuss the impact of development on first inhabitants, with reference to some further reading online.

14. 'I'm pretty well anchored in my life,' she answered. Aunty Lani looked at her. 'Sometimes an anchor isn't what you need, but full sails filled with wind to travel through life. Don't get trapped in the harbour, dear girl.' (p 314) Does Catherine ultimately sail with the wind, or find a safe harbour?

15. Ironically, we discover that Catherine has travelled full circle to find herself at home at *Heatherbrae* and married to her old friend and neighbour Robert Turner. Did this surprise you? Did her adventuring suggest that she would return to her roots? Is the development of an eco-friendly property a celebration of such freedom? What is freedom, and has Catherine achieved it?

THE ISLANDS
Di Morrissey
Macmillan Australia
Trade paperback - ISBN: 9781405038560

These Notes may be printed or viewed for your own private, non-commercial use.
This material is copyright and may not be repackaged, resold or posted electronically on
networks without prior written permission from Pan Macmillan Australia.

Pan Macmillan Australia
Level 25, 1 Market Street,
Sydney NSW 2000

www.panmacmillan.com.au

©2011 Pan Macmillan Australia