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Isola

by Allegra Goodman

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Discussion Questions

1. ISOLA is inspired by the real life of a 16th-century heroine. If you could ask the real Marguerite one question, what would you ask?
2. "Everything we treasure has a price. And everything we have will slip away." Reflect on how this quote encapsulates the themes of loss and resilience in Marguerite's story. How does she cope with the continuous loss of her possessions and loved ones?
3. How does Marguerite's relationship with her guardian shape her journey and her perception of power and control? How does it affect her sense of identity and autonomy?
4. Where do different characters draw the line between loyalty and self-preservation?
5. "I cannot fly. I cannot swim. I cannot escape my island." How does Marguerite's sense of entrapment evolve throughout the novel? Discuss the physical and emotional aspects of her isolation.
6. What does THE BOOK OF THE CITY OF LADIES teach Marguerite --- and the other female characters? In what ways does Marguerite embody the qualities of these historical and mythical figures?
7. In what ways is Marguerite a product of her era? In what ways did she strike you as more modern?
8. How does Marguerite's faith evolve over time?
9. What scenes from the book will stay with you the longest?
10. What other themes did you notice in the novel?
11. Marguerite's bear claw is her "proof" that she survived on the island. What else does this totem symbolize for her?
12. Isola celebrates the power of the natural world. Share a personal experience where you felt the immense power or beauty of nature. How did it affect you?
13. Before her time on the island, Marguerite is constantly depending on others --- their knowledge, their patronage, their kindness --- for her survival. How does her situation compare to your own life, and the lives of the modern era?
14. "My own life was what I hoped he'd grant me," Marguerite thinks. Discuss the significance of this quote in the context of Marguerite's struggle for independence. How does her desire for control over her own life drive her actions and decisions?
15. Do you think Roberval was brought to any sort of justice? Why or why not?
16. Imagine you were marooned on an island like Marguerite. What three items would you want to have with you for survival, and why?

Author Interview

Allegra Goodman on the 16th-century castaway who inspired "Isola"

The acclaimed author of "Sam" turns to historical fiction with the shocking tale of a noblewoman fighting for love and survival.

Kat Johnson
January 27, 2025

Allegra Goodman writes stories that consume you—her previous novel, *Sam*, enraptured one of our editors to the point that she canceled her weekend plans to finish it, then headed to the author's next speaking engagement so she could tell her in person how much it moved her.

That kind of talent doesn't come along often, so we had our earbuds at the ready for Goodman's latest, which in many ways is a departure from *Sam*—but in its deep meditation on its central character and exhilarating emotional and philosophical depth, the two are closely entwined. *Isola* is a historical novel based on the true story of Marguerite de La Rocque, a 16th-century French noblewoman who was left stranded on a small island with her lover and who must find a way to survive the winter cold with next to nothing. Beautifully narrated by Fiona Hardingham and, for the author's note, Goodman herself, *Isola* is a feminist tale of love, faith, and what it takes to survive and thrive. Here, Goodman unpacks her inspirations and the true story behind the novel.

Kat Johnson: Your new book is based on the extraordinary true story of the French noblewoman Marguerite de la Rocque. How did you first encounter the real Marguerite's story, and how and when did that become the basis for your book?

Allegra Goodman: I stumbled upon Marguerite's story 22 years ago while taking a family road trip to Montreal. I'd checked out a stack of children's books on Canadian history to share with my sons, then 10, 7, and 3—but they didn't read them. I was the one who read them all while nursing my daughter, a newborn, in the middle of the night. The author of a book about explorer Jacques Cartier mentioned Marguerite offhand, literally in parentheses. I paraphrase here, but basically he said—on the third voyage a young noblewoman in a ship of colonists annoyed her kinsman the commander and he marooned her on an island in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. I read that and said, "Wait! What?" And I thought, "Now that would be a great story to tell." It took me a while to do it, but here I am now with *Isola*

KJ: How did you balance the research and writing of the novel—did the research come first, or were they intertwined? Was there a particular avenue of the research that really got your curiosity going?

AG: I did a lot of reading before I started writing. I was writing other novels, and I started looking into this story slowly. I spent a few years reading about France and chateaux and daily life in the Renaissance. I read the two 16th-century accounts of Marguerite's ordeal and noticed that they conflicted. There was no definitive story of her life, and all accounts of her adventure were brief. Let's just say the historical record is

scanty. This meant I had space as a novelist to imagine Marguerite's story. I loved that she was a real person and I was fascinated by her adventure. She seemed to me like a female Robinson Crusoe. That classic book is one I read as a child and read aloud to my own children. I reread it while thinking about Marguerite.

Eventually, after reading and writing lots of notes and doodling, I could not resist writing this novel. I was already writing my contemporary, very American novel *Sam*, but I began writing *Isola* at the same time. I'd work on *Sam* in the mornings, and then time-travel to write *Isola* in the afternoons. I'd never imagined writing two novels at once, but I had been thinking so long about Marguerite that I couldn't stop myself. If you are an audiobook lover you know that a great voice can capture your imagination. Well, if you are a writer, it works that way too. I began to hear Marguerite speak to me—but I was nervous about writing a story set so long ago. I didn't tell anyone about this project and I started by writing by hand in a notebook. I called the novel *Project M*—because I had no title and I didn't know if it would become a book. However, line by line, as I wrote, I heard Marguerite's voice coming through stronger, and my confidence grew. While writing, I kept reading and thinking about her world. I continued doing research, but I had a good foundation, and many years of dreaming to draw upon.

KJ: Here at Audible we are big fans of your last novel, the Rebecca Lowman-narrated *Sam*. *Sam* and Marguerite seem to share some similarities, not least because these novels allow you to deep-dive so intimately into their psyches. How did *Sam* lead to Marguerite, if she did? And what did each of these characters have to teach you?

AG: Writing *Sam* opened a door for me. *Sam* is a young girl growing up in the 21st century on the North Shore of Massachusetts. I wrote her story in a close, intimate third-person point of view. The reader is always inside her, seeing what she does, feeling what she feels. Writing in that intimate way prepared me for the first-person narrative I use in *Isola*. Equally important, *Sam* is a boulderer. She grapples with bouldering problems in the gym and in nature. As I wrote about *Sam* clambering on the rocks, I was able to envision Marguerite on her island, coming up against physical as well as emotional and spiritual challenges. *Sam* and Marguerite are survivors. They struggle but they do not give up. These characters taught me a lot about moving forward, enduring difficulties, and using frustration as fuel.

KJ: Can you share any favorite books, whether in audio or print, that you've been loving lately and/or any longtime favorites you think more people should know about?

AG: I love both print and audiobooks. If I particularly love reading a book, I like to listen to it, because I hear new things in the performance. Jane Austen, for example, is an author I have read and reread and also heard on audiobooks. Juliet Stevenson is my favorite Austen narrator. Stevenson is also my go-to for George Eliot. Her reading of *Middlemarch* is masterful. Yes, I like to listen to long audiobooks, especially in the car. My all-time favorite audiobook is *Don Quixote* read by George Guidall. I highly recommend it. *Don Quixote* was a print book I never finished because it's so long and discursive. I had no trouble finishing it as an audiobook. I found Guidall's performance hilarious and touching, altogether captivating.

KJ: Can you share any details on the backstory or process around the audiobook production? We'd love to hear any of your favorite highlights!

AG: My publisher allowed me to listen to clips of different narrators and to consider which voice sounded like Marguerite. I was drawn to Fiona Hardingham's expressive voice and delighted to hear that she was available. I love the way she reads *Isola*. She sounds like a noblewoman and she sounds like a castaway and she sounds like someone who has really been through it.

For my own contribution, I went into a studio in Boston to read my brief author's note. Through my headphones I could hear the voice of an encouraging producer in LA. Recording was a celebratory full-circle moment. I'd been writing Marguerite's story for such a long time. Now I had a chance to step out of character and add my author's voice to the end of the novel.

https://www.audible.com/blog/allegra-goodman-isola-interview?srsId=AfmBOoqPw6GMp-tiI3FNt1wKzCDZZ_5rDj5i7yVSqe8-OPg1FfBEgZlF

Author Biography

Allegra Goodman's new book *This Is Not About Us* will be published in February, 2026. Her novels include *Isola* (a Reese's Book Club selection), *Sam* (a Read With Jenna Book Club selection), *The Chalk Artist* (winner of the Massachusetts Book Award), *Intuition*, *The Cookbook Collector*, *Paradise Park*, and *Kaaterskill Falls* (a National Book Award finalist). Her fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker* and elsewhere and has been anthologized in *The O. Henry Awards* and *Best American Short Stories*. She has written two collections of stories, *The Family Markowitz* and *Total Immersion* and a novel for younger readers, *The Other Side of the Island*. Her essays and reviews have appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New Republic*, *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, and *The American Scholar*. Raised in Honolulu, Goodman studied English and philosophy at Harvard and received a PhD in English literature from Stanford. She is the recipient of a Whiting Writer's Award, the Salon Award for Fiction, and fellowships from MacDowell and the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced study. She lives with her family in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Reviews

The Noblewoman Marooned on an Island for Loving the Wrong Man

Allegra Goodman's novel "Isola" tells the story of a 16th-century Frenchwoman's extraordinary fight for survival.

by Joumana Khatib

Joumana Khatib is an editor at the Book Review.

Though noble and wealthy by birth, Marguerite de la Rocque de Roberval, the real-life 16th-century Frenchwoman who narrates Allegra Goodman's new novel, was cursed from the moment she entered the world.

"I never knew my mother. She died the night I was born, and so we passed each other in the dark." So begins "Isola," a work of tremendous imagination that draws on harrowing historical records to spin a story of self-determination, courage and faith.

The deaths of Marguerite's parents damn her to an uncertain fate; her finances are handled by a male relative, Roberval, whose primary interest is maximizing her wealth to his advantage.

Roberval spends months at sea, and every visit from him in Marguerite's childhood brings the specter of a new horror. He is a shrewd, unscrupulous guardian — a cruelly inapt term for the individual entrusted to guide her to a suitable future.

Even Roberval's capricious and opaque tendencies do not prepare Marguerite and her longtime nurse, Damienne, for his plans. Roberval has no intention of arranging a marriage: Instead, the women are to join him on a trans-Atlantic journey to help establish the colony of New France, in present-day Canada. Marguerite is 20.

Roberval's secretary, Auguste, is Marguerite's one balm on the filthy, turbulent ship. He is gentle and intelligent, prone to crises of doubt that intrigue her. Two truths are not in question: that he is not loyal to Roberval, and that he deeply loves Marguerite.

Their furtive meetings — the ship is packed with rats, in both senses — enrage Marguerite's guardian, though he is slow to mete out his punishment. "As always," she reflects, "he allowed me the illusion I was free."

The ultimate penalty is appalling. Roberval strands the couple and Damienne on an unsettled island in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, allowing them only what they can carry. They scabble together a shelter, and fashion a mattress made of peat. A flock of birds ensure they do not starve: "Ravenous, we sniffed flesh roasting and watched skin crackle in the flames, and when, at last, the bird was ready, we savored breast, wings, back, every bit."

Ironically, this exile affords the couple a version of the freedom they desired — a life that feels almost Edenic, despite its painful beginnings. "This place is a strange lesson," Marguerite concedes. "We ate fresh meat but slept outside, as beggars did at home. We had property and yet we were impoverished. On this island, we were rulers and our own subjects too."

Grief soon finds them. The marvels of a New World autumn give way to a ferocious winter. The castaways lament the undecipherable lessons God teaches them, and each is tested beyond what they can bear.

At least two historical accounts from Marguerite's time detail her two years on the island in the 1540s; had she not been rescued by Basque fishermen, she might have died there, her remarkable life forgotten.

In "Isola," Marguerite recounts her travails in an even, cordial tone. There is an elegance to her restraint, as if her narration were an opportunity to impose order on a life she did not design. Still, she keeps the extent of her deepest agonies private even from us. The business of shooting a polar bear with an arquebus, flaying its pelt and roasting the meat is relayed in a manner an acquaintance might use to explain his technique for beef Wellington: instructive, but I occasionally wished for a more visceral register. What does it feel like, truly, to massage bear tallow into your chilblains?

But Goodman is as resourceful as her heroine in developing Marguerite's interior life; she conjures sublime expressions of nature that sustain Marguerite even when her faith abandons her. I imagine the author shares the view of the queen in "Isola," who tells Marguerite, "Those who have endured the worst have most to teach."