

Antonia's Island

Nick P. Maginnis

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Maginnis has uncovered an intriguing historical event upon which to base his first novel. Knowing that the individuals who make up this tale actually existed during the period after the successful Mexican Revolution, lends an intensity to the narrative.

The protagonist, Antonia Vallerdas, finds herself a member of the newly unpopular aristocracy in the years after Porfirio DiÁz lost control of the country to Pancho Villa and his revolutionary forces, circa 1914. Intending to transfer their comfortable lifestyle to another location, California, they quickly find the road to Hell can be paved with the very best intentions.

Events rapidly compile to lead one mishap into another, leaving the group of widely diverse passengers and crew shipless and stranded far from their intended destination. Adjusting to reduced circumstances; gravely limited food and water supplies, while trying to maintain their strictly regimented social order within the confined group, taxes each and every member of the party. Counts, merchants, masters, servants, and sailors struggle to adjust to their proximitous situation. Titles become irrelevant in the face of starvation and sudden violent death.

Included in the motley cast is the "Diablo of Chiapas" the exiled son of a nobleman from the state of Chiapas. Whether the man they encounter marooned on the island is truly El Diablo or the more genteel Lieutenant Maxilliano Perez of the pre-revolutionary Mexican Army, remains in doubt. The group divides over this cloudy point, among others. These are just some of the challenges SeÅ±ora Vallerdas has to face.

In addition to social anarchy, hunger, and a dwindling water source, she has a young son to protect and raise, and a distant and disinterested husband who had secretly sequestered his refined mistress upon the doomed ship, intending to take her along with his wife and son to his new homeland. His subterfuge also extends to the family's financial reality. Antonia finds herself forced to re-form her worldview (her trained dependence on a life based upon a tightly ordered social background) in several ways; from growing accustomed to daily rigors of life, i.e., obtaining food and water and laying out the dead, to re-defining her place as a capable woman in the newly formed political arena.

On her knees, wearing an impromptu mourning shawl of black uniform jerkin cloth, she realized she had never felt so human, so linked to past, present, and future—so humble.

The opportunity to contemplate her life, past and present, is one thing Antonia's Island has in abundance. As well as plenty of time to consider her future, if, God willing, she indeed has one.

Maginnis, a UCLA graduate who lives in Topanga Canyon, California, where he is a full-time writer, delivers this suspenseful story with tight and descriptive prose. Evocative language and a quick pace assures the reader's attention. "Fat bolts of lightning struck right and left and the sky loomed gunpowder gray, the color of sky to hurry children home."

GABRIELLE SHAW (May / June 2001)

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