FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

General

Eccentric Islands: Travels Real and Imaginary
Bill Holm
Milkweed Editions
978-1-57131-245-7
(September 5, 2000)

John Donne said, “No man is an island,” but Holm is one to refute that statement. His name means “small island” in Old Norse, and that fact fuels this essayist’s wayward journey to five physical islands-Iceland, Madagascar, Molokai in Hawaii, Isla Mujeres off the Yucatan Peninsula, and Mallard Island in Minnesota-and three illusory, man-made islands of Pain, Imagination, and Music.

The essays on “real” islands are better at anchoring the reader, most engagingly when Holm visits tropical Molokai, “Island of Lepers.” There he unravels the history of Father Damien, a missionary who devoted his life to leprosy victims in the mid-nineteenth century, and uses it to discuss the fear humans create and propagate by banishing the ill, infirm, and lower class. In another essay, “The Island of Pain,” Holm touches on similar material when he writes about how physical and mental pain can island a person from those who offer help. Although Minneota, Minnesota, is Holm’s hometown, Iceland is the home of his ancestors, and the bulk of this book recalls his journey as a “backward immigrant.” He survives a ride aboard a freighter, labors with the language, discovers an Icelandic obsession with genealogy, and volunteers to work on a family farm in the countryside, always employing his merry sense of humor.

With a nod toward Henry David Thoreau, himself an islander in Holm’s sense of the word, this part travelogue, part treatise also explores the philosophy of man and nature in modern society. For example, upon returning to Iceland in 1999 as the leader of a student expedition, Holm champions his students’ disobedience when they opt to stay awake all night and bask in the arctic summer twilight. He favors the eccentricity island life seems to breed, and he warns, “Continents love prudence, the favorite virtue of puritans, but it is always overrated. It gains you nothing but a drudge job and a long slow death.”

Sprinkled with poetry and his musical musings, Holm’s essays pay homage to all the great island literature-that of Swift, Stevenson, and Defoe. Now a professor at Southwest State

University, he has amassed travel experiences by teaching abroad, filling up eight books, and this thoughtful collection.

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