



Island of Souls: Light Within the Dark

Milan Ljubincic

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Unique island-dwelling characters teach this tortured protagonist—and readers—how to cultivate positive thoughts through dark times.

In Milan Ljubincic's appealing *Island of Souls: Light Within the Dark*, an unhappy psychologist sails alone to an isolated tropical atoll. An inexplicable apprehension warns him that the solitude he seeks may be elusive. As the subtitle indicates, a theme of light within dark connects the characters and the lessons they offer.

Lucas Newell anchors his sailboat in a protected harbor of the Palmyra Atoll in the equatorial North Pacific to begin his vacation. During an initial exploration of Cooper Island, his dog, Blue, runs into a cave. Anxious not to lose his cherished pet, Lucas follows him into the cave and suddenly faints. As he regains consciousness, Edmund Fanning appears, introducing himself as a longtime island resident. Disappointed that he won't have the island to himself, Lucas reluctantly accepts Edmund's invitation to meet the other islanders. Each individual welcomes him and praises the island's beneficial effects on their well-being, a state of mind that Lucas decidedly lacks. Blue's quick acceptance of them reassures him, but he wonders about their old-fashioned tools and other antiquated relics.

The islanders' focus on cultivating positive thoughts helps Lucas recognize his own negative behavior, and they also teach him to respect the darker aspects of life. Edmund warns Lucas about a nearby island that "[feels] like it may be evil" and worries as darkness draws near, explaining, "Suffice it to say, it is just safest to get to camp before the sun goes down."

Written as a parable for Lucas's search for self-knowledge, the story features island settlers based on actual people who inhabited the atoll in previous centuries. These characters serve as Lucas's spiritual guides. Ljubincic writes in the present tense, which provides immediacy to this mix of fact and fiction. As an example, the elusive Shaman appears just as Lucas needs his help. The author writes, "He looks to be a hundred years old, with wrinkles in his bronze skin so deep he looks like a melting wax statue, but he is steady on his feet and his eyes are alert."

Ljubincic, a psychologist, successfully shows the stages of Lucas's progress toward self-knowledge. His explorations on Palmyra Atoll resemble wanderings through a maze, an apt allegory for his state of mind. The sojourn of psychological development is bracketed by his initial fainting spell in the cave and another scene in that location as the book concludes. At that later point, Sam, Lucas's only friend from his life in California, who is introduced earlier through their conversations by satellite telephone on his boat, comes to the island. Sam and Lucas come to life convincingly. The islanders convey unique personalities, but their conversations often resemble passive lectures. "ZZZZZ," used to describe Lucas's sleep time, is an unsatisfactory substitute for narrative. Additionally, some incorrectly spelled words and other typographical errors were found.

Nevertheless, *Island of Souls* offers a refreshing fictional account of the author's self-help message. Connecting Lucas's saga to the history of Palmyra Atoll provides additional interest.

MARGARET CULLISON (April 10, 2014)

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