

Islomanes of Cumberland Island

Rita Welty Bourke

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An island's history is a metaphor for change in the historical novel Islomanes of Cumberland Island.

Infused with historical details, Rita Welty Bourke's novel *Islomanes of Cumberland Island* tells the story of a family's experiences off of the Georgia coast.

After their first visit to Cumberland Island, a woman and her daughter, Rhamy, are hooked—the elder by the island's stories, the younger by its wild horses. Each time they return, whether they're alone or with family members, they discover more about the island, and their story incorporates this background: its first residents were Native Americans, followed by farmers around the time of the Revolutionary War. Details about its use as a fort during the war between Britain and Spain, about its biggest house, and about the contributions of the Carnegie family are all included, as are those about the National Park Service administration of the island's conservatorship.

Rhamy and her mother are present on Cumberland at a time when the future of the island is uncertain. Their perspective as outsiders is used to tell the stories of the island's past but also to reflect the island's unusual appeal. They note that "nature has reclaimed much of what the Carnegies built"; in their era, island life "flows gently." They also reflect on the dunes that overtake buildings, and make note of snakes, bugs, and weather from which there is no shelter. It is an isolated, wild place—a natural sanctuary for the mother-daughter duo.

This is an anecdotal tale, flipping between historical notes and family stories, as about the horses that are reluctant to accept the apples that Rhamy holds out to them. She and her mother grapple with their family members' hesitation to make the trek to the island. Their descriptions flatter it: they highlight an island wedding, complementing it with tales of other island unions, including John F. Kennedy Jr.'s wedding, Carnegie elopements, and a ceremony gone awry. All of their experiences, in fact, are made to tie into historical events on the island: when the mother is caught in an undertow, gets lost, and gets stuck in rain, these events are juxtaposed to similar events in the island's past, as with Carnegie misfortunes and the misfortunes of Black Americans on the island.

In its efforts to vivify the island, the book ends up underdeveloping its leads, though. Indeed, Rhamy and her mother exist most as observers, seen enjoying the island but not fleshed out beyond this. They plumb the place's treasures through their yearly visits, resulting in a sense of an ongoing island tale; though their enthusiasm is infectious, they are visitors alone. Some of their stories are retold from books; others are shared via island tour guides. There are lively discussions of the island's food and sights, too, resulting in a guidebook flavor, if one with an easygoing pace. Artifacts—a car graveyard, the mother's shoes, and zippers—are also used as jumping-off points for incidental Cumberland Island stories.

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MARI CARLSON (November 29, 2022)

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