

## Off Island

**Lara Tupper**

Encircle Publications (Jan 1, 2020)

Softcover \$15.99 (262pp)

978-1-948338-82-0

Lara Tupper's melancholy alternative history combines the romance of visionary, socially outlying artists with down-to-earth events that reveal them as fallible people. *Off Island* reimagines Paul Gauguin's final year and connects him to a descendant, Pete, a hundred years later.

In 1903, Gauguin is a tenant in a fishing village off of coastal Maine, far away from his wife, Mette. Between drinking absinthe and indulging his passions, he impregnates his landlady, who murders him. In 2003, Pete is a Maine artist, straying from his wife, Molly, with Karla, a high school classmate. A third act focuses on Mette in Copenhagen, lacing fragments of Gauguin's correspondence with accounts of the rift between them. The novel then returns to Molly, who considers how she met Pete and how she'll leave him.

With an art book on the Symbolists tying Pete back to Gauguin, the novel becomes an intricate character study. It draws subtle parallels and considers men's rootlessness and women's feelings of hollowness. Both Gauguin and Pete act on their impulses, though the latter is less assured in his thinking. Measured, interior portraits stop short of excavating root causes for their behavior.

Meanwhile, Mette's resignation involves a powerful and stark acknowledgment that it's necessary to "unlove her husband in increments." She's both practical and broken. Karla, a cruise ship entertainer who's not as far from Maine as she'd like, becomes like Gauguin's Polynesian "vahine," while Molly realizes that supporting an artist isn't what she'd imagined.

Dense with beautiful coastal imagery and thoughtful in its consideration of ill-suited connections, the novel picks at the seams of marriages and affairs with clarity. Though Gauguin's legacy is dark, *Off Island*, with its moody setting and vulnerable characters, is a novel to savor.

KAREN RIGBY (January / February 2020)

*Disclosure: This article is not an endorsement, but a review. The publisher of this book provided free copies of the book to have their book reviewed by a professional reviewer. No fee was paid by the publisher for this review. Foreword Reviews only recommends books that we love. Foreword Magazine, Inc. is disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255.*