

The Island of Always

Stephen Evans

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The Island of Always is a zany and unpredictable comedic literary novel.

Stephen Evans' funny *The Island of Always* incorporates environmental activism and mental health concerns into a back-and-forth romance between a former couple.

Environmental lawyers Lena and Nick used to be married and part of the same practice, but now they're divorced. Nick's "quirks"—he communicates his feelings through a puppet, for example—were eventually diagnosed as a delusional disorder, and they became too much for Lena to handle. As the story opens, Lena comes to Nick's aid nonetheless; he's been committed into psychiatric care for releasing lobsters into a pool as an act of protest.

As Nick begins community service at an animal shelter, igniting fresh passion around animal rights, Lena is forced to rethink their relationship; she is drawn back into her ex-husband's orbit.

The book moves ably between sharp, crisp dialogue and plot twists. Cliffhangers foreshadow each stunt that Nick pulls, and his story line holds attention. Flashbacks are introduced via unclear, abrupt transitions, and the narrative jumps over the periods of time in which Lena and Nick aren't in contact. The primary focus is on the times when the couple are in each other's lives; as the story moves in and out of the present, though, its timeline becomes cloudy.

Short chapters are a valuable attribute, given that much of the story relies on conversations. Chapter-title references to Shakespeare are elegant and connect to their content in amusing ways. Nick's more outlandish stunts evoke the possibility of surreal or magical realist elements, such as his undetected relocation of many animals to an island. Some are interesting; some are amusing. Some, including his use of the puppet, are merely odd. His tendency to repeat phrases becomes tedious.

Minneapolis, especially the Lake of Isles area, is vividly rendered; details about it, and about everyday settings, ground the story. In a story rife with chaotic choices, the text is held together by the outward order of its paragraphs and sentences. Allusions to other works are a distraction, though strong, poetic verbiage elevates the text's thoughtful environmental commentaries above the book's otherwise humorous content.

Secondary characters—primarily friends of the couple—are well fleshed out, if not focal. Many characters instantly like or dislike Nick and stick with that feeling; Lena's on-again, off-again feelings for him are comparatively hard to parse. Lena and Nick are developed with complexity; their relationship progresses with substantial personal growth on both of their parts.

The story maintains its ambiguity; for most of it, it is unclear whether Nick is uniquely unafraid of breaking with social conventions or if he truly has a mental health disorder. The ending is open-ended and uplifting.

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LAURA LEAVITT (June 21, 2018)

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