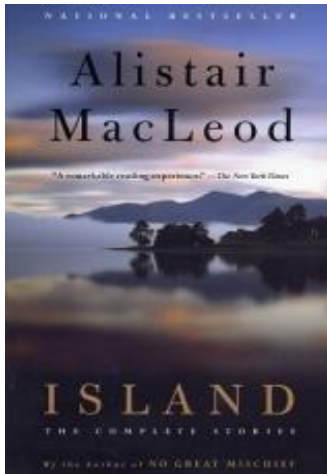


# Island: The Complete Stories

by Alistair MacLeod

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## About the Book

The sixteen exquisitely crafted stories in **Island** prove Alistair MacLeod to be a master. Quietly, precisely, He has created a body of work that is among the greatest to appear in English in the last fifty years.

A book-besotted patriarch releases his only son from the obligations of the sea. A father provokes his young son to violence when he reluctantly sells the family horse. A passionate girl who grows up on a nearly deserted island turns into an ever-wistful woman when her one true love is felled by a logging accident. A dying young man listens to his grandmother play the old Gaelic songs on her ancient violin as they both fend off the inevitable. The events that propel MacLeod's stories convince us of the importance of tradition, the beauty of the landscape, and the necessity of memory.

## Discussion Guide

1. The characters in **Island** share a great degree of pride in their heritage and their homeland. How do the stories convey their pride in their lives, their professions, their heritage, their landscape, and their families? Do they also experience joy and happiness?
2. The stories are characterized by thematic and stylistic paradoxes such as myth vs. reality, remoteness vs. nearness, destiny vs. free will, reality vs. romance, and the strange vs. the familiar. How is each of these paradoxes manifested in the stories? Does MacLeod reconcile these paradoxes? Do you detect other thematic or stylistic paradoxes in the stories?

3. In "The Return" the grandmother tells her grandson, "It is not that easy to change what is a part of you" [p. 92]; in "As Birds Bring Forth the Sun" the son realizes, "You cannot not know what you do know" [p. 320]; and in "Clearances" the old man muses to his dog about the life that each of them is currently leading, "Neither of us was born for this" [p. 430]. How do each of these statements convey the theme of fate in **Island** ? How do the characters cope with their sense of destiny?

4. What is the significance of MacLeod's frequent use of relationships to identify his characters (e.g., fathers, sons, mothers, grandfathers, etc.) and his sparse use of his characters' given names?

5. The majority of the stories are told in the first person by a male narrator. What is the effect of this style on the reader's perception of the events? How is the narrator both an active participant and an outside observer of these events? Does the "narrator" ever judge? Is it MacLeod's voice that the reader hears?

6. Does the description "entombed feelings" ["The Closing Down of Summer," p. 197] describe the feelings of many characters in **Island** ? How are emotions expressed in **Island** ? Does the physical landscape reflect the emotional isolation of the characters, or does it cause their isolation? Why might have MacLeod selected the word *island* for the title?

7. MacLeod compares "ivory white gulls" to "overconditioned he-men" in "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood" [p. 119], a ship that can save a drowning man to Santa Claus in "To Every Thing There Is a Season" [p. 210], and a memory to a scar in "Vision" [pp. 321-2]. How do these and other examples of MacLeod's original and often elaborate metaphors reinforce the themes of the stories in which they appear?

8. How do the earlier stories differ from the later stories in theme, tone, and style? Have the characters evolved?

9. The descriptions of the animals' life cycles in "Second Spring" conveys most directly the notion running through **Island** that the path of life is not linear but cyclical, and, moreover, that existence is not constrained to one person's lifetime but rather follows a continuum from one generation to the next. The narrator in "The Closing Down of Summer" muses, "Perhaps we are but becoming our previous generation" [p. 193]. Does this view of life give comfort, or is it stifling? Can one break out of this cycle? How does MacLeod's narrative style and method, particularly in "Winter Dog" and "Clearances," reinforce the theme of the intertwining of lives?

10. How is religion distinguished from superstition in the lives of the characters in **Island** ? What role does each play? Is it religion or something else that provides a moral code of behavior for the inhabitants of Cape Breton?

11. Despite their portrayal of a way of life probably foreign to many readers, on what level are the stories universally familiar? To which elements can the reader most readily relate?

## Author Bio

Alistair MacLeod was born in North Battleford, Saskatchewan in 1936 and raised among an extended family in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. His early studies were at the Nova Scotia Teachers College, St. Francis Xavier, the University of New Brunswick, and Notre Dame, where he earned his Ph.D. In his early years, to finance his education he worked as a

logger, a miner, and a fisherman. Dr. MacLeod is a professor of English at the University of Windsor, Ontario. He has also taught creative writing at the University of Indiana and the Banff Centre. He lives with his wife and six children in Ontario, and still spends his summers in Cape Breton, writing in a cliff-top cabin looking west towards Prince Edward Island.

## Critical Praise

"A treat for anyone who loves good writing."

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### **Island: The Complete Stories**

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