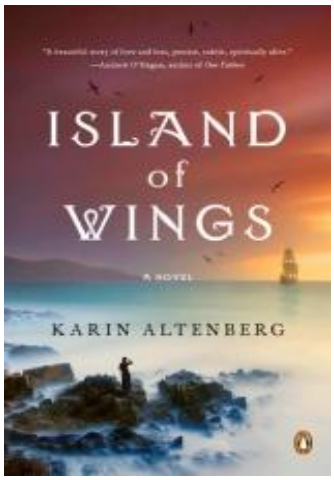
Island of Wings

by Karin Altenberg



About the Book

The year is 1830, and newlyweds Reverend Neil MacKenzie and his young wife Lizzie have just arrived at St. Kilda to set up a new home and begin a mission. While the three rocky islands, sixteen miles west of Scotland?s Outer Hebrides, are not as far-flung as other colonial destinations of the day, they?re equally remote, and their inhabitants are equally foreign to the Scottish couple. Neil speaks Gaelic but Lizzie does not, and neither can be prepared for the culture shock that awaits them.

At first, both Lizzie and Neil find the native way of life --- dwelling in bird carcass-filled caves; subsisting on the abundant gannets, fulmars, and puffins both for food and other supplies; and performing pagan rituals --- more than distasteful, but Neil is optimistic that he will bring God and progress to the society. Lizzie, for her part, is pregnant and looking forward to starting a family in her clean mainland-style manse; she stands proudly behind her husband?s vision. Soon, however, Lizzie loses the baby, and then two more to the so-called eight-day illness, in which local newborns mysteriously cease to thrive.

The MacKenzies? marriage is strained by grief, their increasing alienation from the outside world and the arrival of a shipwrecked sailor who Lizzie cares for. Neil, emotionally distant to begin with, becomes enraged and even more fixated on the gospel and his frustrations with the St. Kildans, who seem to cling to their own beliefs and culture, while Lizzie, craving connection, starts to develop empathy for them. Both their loyalty to each other and their religious faith is tested by the hardships of life on the exposed land where each new season brings new physical and mental challenges --- shortages of food, illness, grinding poverty. At the same time, the Scottish church is undergoing its own changes, and Neil must choose where he stands. As the years pass, the once-docile Lizzie begins to question her husband?s methods, her own happiness, and the meaning of the mission itself.

Based on records of an actual family and told with exacting historical detail, Swedish archaeologist Karin Altenberg?s debut novel is an insightful, arresting portrait of a marriage in isolation. St. Kilda?s unforgiving terrain, with its cruel landscape and bracing weather conditions, is described with lyrical grace and Altenberg fluidly moves between the points of view of her complex characters. Beautiful and harrowing, **Island of Wings** is an evocative exploration of what

it means to be human.

Discussion Guide

1. What is Lizzie?s attitude toward the islanders when they first arrive at St. Kilda? How does this change over the course of the story?

2. In what ways does the physical landscape of the island limit the MacKenzies in their daily lives as they?re accustomed to living them? How do they learn to cope with these conditions?

3. It seems that the mainland people who visit St. Kilda either condemn the people for their primitive ways or idealize the island for its peaceful, democratic society. Why are their opinions so extreme? How do you view the island? Do you see truth in either perspective?

4. The birds of St. Kilda are present throughout this book. What role do they serve in the lives of the islanders and what role do they serve in the story?

5. Long before the MacKenzies arrive at St. Kilda, the islanders established their own religion. How would you describe it, and how is it similar to or different from Christianity?

6. Neil MacKenzie is haunted by an event from his past. What is this event and what does his own interpretation of it tell us about him?

7. The ?eight-day sickness? haunts the island of St. Kilda. How does the death of newborns impact the characters individually and collectively?

8. Over the course of the book, Neil?s doubts about his place on the island and his relationship to God deepen. What causes him to question himself? How does he manage these doubts?

9. Neil and Lizzie go through some difficult times in their marriage. What causes their problems and how can they fix them?

10. How have Neil and Lizzie MacKenzie changed from their experience by the end of the book? Do you feel hopeful about their lives together?

Author Bio

Born and brought up in southern Sweden, Karin Altenberg moved to Britain to study in 1996. She holds a PhD in Archaeology from the University of Reading. Her thesis was published in 2001 and won the Nordenstedska Foundation Award. She is currently senior advisor to the Swedish National Heritage Board and is a Fellow of the Linnean Society of London. *Island of Wings* is her first novel.

Island of Wings

by Karin Altenberg

Publication Date: December 27, 2011
Paperback: 320 pages
Publisher: Penguin (Non-Classics)
ISBN-10: 0143120662
ISBN-13: 9780143120667