



Where the World Ends

BY GERALDINE MCCAUGHREAN

REVIEWED BY BEN ELLIOTT & MR SLATER



Survival



McCaughrean takes a 'Lord of the Flies' style idea, but rather than succumbing to the darkness of the human condition, this group survive and triumph over the harshest of conditions and their tendency to despair.

There is great suffering but there is also hope and humour.

The plot

The author starts the story in August 1727, when a small group of men and boys living on the island of Hirta, an island in the St Kilda, go off to harvest seabirds and eggs on a stack, "Warrior Stack", a jagged pinnacle of rock.

They were due to be there for up to three weeks, depending on the weather being good enough for them to be picked up by boat, but due to a smallpox infection, wiping out most of Hirta, they get stranded on the stack for almost a year, but don't know why.

During the year they encounter numerous mental and physical challenges which play a key role in turning the boys into men.

We follow events mainly from the viewpoint of Quilliam, one of the older boys.



Characters

Quilliam

Quilliam was born and raised on the island; his parents were farmers and they farmed sheep. In this story Quilliam is portrayed as the “Good” guy, the guy that everyone looks up to.

He is intelligent but capable; by this I mean he can read and write which was quite a skill back then and he is a skilful climber.

He can also take care of himself as he did when he was briefly banished from the group.

Quilliam’s feelings towards Murdina are a constant source of strength for him and help him to survive.

Murdina

Murdina is the niece of Mrs Farris and is a mainlander, but she left the island when she was very young and learnt how to read and write.

She then learnt about the world and went back to St Kilda to visit her relatives.

She then bestowed all her knowledge on them and in return gained an admirer, Quilliam, who falls in love with her.



Some other characters

Mr Farriss – school master

Mr Cane – a sour, hypocritical priest. The book is critical of Col Cane's repressive religious ideas

Mr Don – a master craftsman

Euan – a deeply religious boy whose father died from a fall

John – who turns out to be a girl! John's siblings all died and when 'the eighth had been born a girl, [his] mother thought her husband might just die of disappointment: he was that set on having a son...The truth was even kept from John.'

Kenneth – a bully. Look out for the episode with his feet!

Themes



The importance of never giving up hope

The incredible adaptability of humans to endure



The importance of telling stories

The telling of stories as a form of hope and entertainment



The power of nature

and our relationship to it

Points of interest



Living on a coastal stack is fascinating. The descriptions of rock, caves, harsh weather and the birds are vivid.

The group was expecting to be picked up after a few weeks, but no boat returned. This mystery continues to the very end and causes the group tremendous suffering.

Through Quill's story telling the group are kept from despair. The power of stories to lift the human spirit is a moving theme.

Criticism

Some readers may find a stack a rather limiting location on which to base a story.

Some readers may dislike the way McCaughrean uses Cane Col's interpretation of Christianity to criticise religion, but some may identify...

The book may well lack realism in places. Is the story of John credible?
How do we feel about the ending?