

Joanne Harris, *Coastliners*

Joanne Harris was born in Barnsley in 1964, of a French mother and an English father. She studied Modern and Mediaeval Languages in Cambridge and was a teacher for fifteen years, during which she published three novels: *The Evil Seed* (1989), *Sleep, Pale Sister* (1993), and *Chocolat* (1999), which was made into an Oscar-nominated film starring Juliette Binoche and Johnny Depp.

Since then, she has written eight more novels; *Blackberry Wine*, *Five Quarters of the Orange*, *Coastliners*, *Holy Fools*, *Gentlemen and Players*, *The Lollipop Shoes*, and *Runemarks*, and most recently *Blueeyedboy*, which was published in 2010; she has also published *Jigs & Reels*, a collection of short stories and, with cookery writer Fran Warde, two cookbooks: *The French Kitchen* and *The French Market*. Her books have been published in more than 40 countries and have won a number of British and international awards.

The following excerpt from *Coastliners* (2002), telling about the tiny Breton island of Le Devin, on which life has remained almost unchanged for over a hundred years. The ageing population consists of two communities: the wealthy La Houssinière, which covers the most habitable part of the island and which is favoured by tourists, and Les Salants, an impoverished fishing village with little to recommend it to outsiders. The main point of contention between them is La Houssinière's complete control over the island's only beach and the source of its prosperity.

A Primitive Look

Islands are different. The smaller the island, the more true this becomes. Look at Britain. Barely conceivable¹ that this narrow stretch of land should sustain so much diversity. Cricket, cream teas, Shakespeare, Sheffield, fish and chips in vinegary newspaper, Soho, two universities, the beachfront at Southend, striped chairs in Green Park, Coronation Street², Oxford Street, lazy Sunday afternoons. So many contradictions. All marching together like boozy³ protesters who have not yet realized their main cause for complaint is each other.

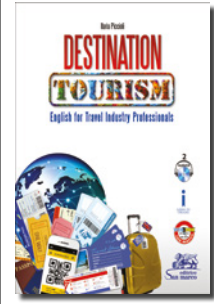
Islands are pioneers, splinter groups⁴, malcontents, misfits⁵, natural isolationists. As I said, different. This island, for instance. Only a bike ride from one end to the other. A man walking on water might reach the coast in an afternoon. The island of Le Devin, one of the many islets caught like crabs in the shallows⁶ off the Vendée coastline. Eclipsed by Noirmoutier on the coastal side, by l'Île d'Yeu from the south, on a foggy day you might miss it altogether. Maps hardly give it a mention. Indeed it scarcely deserves island status at all, being little more than a cluster of sandbanks with pretensions, a rocky spine to lift it out of the Atlantic, a couple of villages, a small fish-packing factory, a single beach. At the far end, home, Les Salants, a row of cottages – barely enough to call a village – staggering down through rocks and dunes towards a sea which encroaches⁷ closer at every bad tide. [...]

Its shape is rather like that of a sleeping woman. Les Salant is her head, shoulders turned protectively against the weather. La Goulue is her belly, La Houssinière the sheltered crook⁸ of her knees. All around lies La Jetée, a skirt of sandy islets, expanding and contracting according to the tides, slowly shifting the shoreline, nibbling⁹ one side, depositing on the other, rarely keeping their shape long enough to earn names. Beyond that is the total unknown, the shallow shelf beyond La Jetée dropping sharply into a rift of unsounded depth which locals call the Nid'Poule. A message in a bottle, thrown from any point on the island, will most often return to La Goulue – the Greedy One – behind which the village of Les Salants huddles against the hard sea wind. Its position east of the rocky head of Pointe Griznoz means that gritty¹⁰ sand, silt and general refuse tend to accumulate here. High tides and winter storms exacerbate this, building battlements of seaweed on the rocky shore which may stand for six months or a year before another storm washes them away.

As you can see, Le Devin is no beauty. Like our patron saint, Marine-dela- Mer, the hunched figure has a rough and primitive look. Few tourists come here. There is little to attract them. If from the air these islands are dancers with tulle skirts spread wide, then Le Devin is the girl in the back row of the chorus – a rather plain girl – who has forgotten her steps. [...] But the island has retained its identity. A stretch of land only a few kilometres long, and yet it has a character entirely its own, dialects, food, traditions, dress all as different from the other islands as they are from mainland France. The islanders think of themselves as Devinnos rather than French or even Vendéen.

GLOSSARY

- 1 capable of being imagined
- 2 a British prime-time soap opera
- 3 given to the consumption of alcohol
- 4 groups that have broken away
- 5 one who is unable to adjust to one's environment or circumstances
- 6 not deep waters
- 7 advances
- 8 hooked or curved part
- 9 wearing away or diminishing bit by bit
- 10 composed of or covered with particles resembling meal in texture or consistency



[...]

Which is not to say foreigners are unwelcome. Quite the opposite; if we knew how to encourage tourism, we would. In Les Salants, tourism means wealth. We look across the water at Noirmoutier with its hotels and guest houses and shops and the great graceful bridge which flies across the water from the mainland. There, the summer roads are a river of cars – with foreign plates and luggage straining from the racks – the beaches black with people, and we try to imagine what it would be like if they were ours. But little of it ever goes beyond fantasy. The tourists – the few who venture this far – stay stubbornly in La Houssinière on the near side of the island. There is nothing for them in Les Salants, with its rocky, beachless coast, its dunes of stones mortared together with hard sand, its gritty ceaseless wind.

ACTIVITIES

1 Answer the following questions.

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| 1 Why are islands different according to the narrator? | 6 Why does the narrator say that "Le Devin is no beauty"? |
| 2 Where is Le Devin? | 7 Does the island attract tourists? |
| 3 Why is it difficult to find it on maps? | 8 Has the island retained its identity? |
| 4 What is the island compared to? | |
| 5 What is the landscape like on this island? | |

2 List all the words relating to the semantic field 'coast'.

3 The motto of Le Devin is "everything returns". Try and explain in your own words the meaning and the implications of this motto.

4 Le Devin is a fictional place based on an island off southern Brittany where Harris used to spend her summer holidays. Using the information provided in the excerpt and adding details of your own, create a brochure to promote the place.