



## Wild Island

*Jennifer Livett*

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'My name is Harriet Adair, and forty years ago on that ship I was Jane Eyre's companion. That voyage also brought me friendship with another intrepid Jane: Lady Franklin. Her husband, Sir John, the Arctic Lion, was Lieutenant Governor of Van Diemen's Land during the six turbulent years when Jane Eyre and Edward Rochester had good reason to be closely interested in the island.'

Harriet Adair has come to Van Diemen's Land with Mrs Anna Rochester, who is recovering from years of imprisonment in the attic of 'Thornfield Hall'. Sent to the colony by Jane and Rochester, they are searching for the truth about Anna's past, trying to unearth long-buried secrets.

Captain Charles O'Hara Booth, Commandant of Port Arthur Penal Settlement, fears some secrets of his own will be discovered when Sir John Franklin replaces Colonel Arthur as Governor. Franklin and his wife Jane arrive in Hobart Town to find the colony is run by a clique of Arthur's former army officers who have no intention of relinquishing their power.

This dazzling modern recreation of a nineteenth century novel ingeniously entwines Jane Eyre's iconic love story with Sir John Franklin's great tale of exploration and empire. A brilliant and historically accurate depiction of Van Diemenian society in the 1800s, as well as a vivid portrayal of the human cost of colonisation, *Wild Island* shows us that fiction and history are not so different after all. Each story, whether it be truth or fiction, is shaped by its teller.

## Wild Island Details

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Author : Jennifer Livett

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## From Reader Review Wild Island for online ebook

### K. says

Trigger warnings: fire, mental health, incarceration, death of an infant, probably a bunch of other stuff that I didn't read far enough to get to.

DNF on page 175.

I honestly thought this book was going to be a slam dunk for me. I mean, Jane Eyre plus Tasmanian colonial history? Both of those things are 100% my jam.

And yet it took me 4 days to get through 175 pages.

Frankly, this book was just...weird. The concept was intriguing. Basically, Bertha doesn't die in the fire at Thornfield. When Jane returns to Rochester at Ferndean, Rochester has come up with a theory that a) his older brother married Bertha, therefore making Rochester's marriage to Bertha bigamous, and b) his older brother is still alive and living in Van Diemen's Land. So Rochester and Jane, accompanied by Adele, a comatose Bertha, St John and his wife, and Bertha's nurse Harriet Adair, jump on a ship and head off to Van Diemen's Land.

All of which sounds fine. And it was! So let's bullet point the weirdness, shall we?

- Bertha's name is actually Anna? Like, her name is apparently Anna Cosway-Mason. But she's known as Bertha?? Up until she comes out of her coma that is, at which point she's all "???? Who's Bertha?!" I just...whut.

- BerthAnna declares that yes, she and Rowland Rochester were married, and no one questions that the testimony of a woman whose recent history is a) madness and b) months-long coma???

- St John's surname, inexplicably, is Wallace. This change is literally never explained. Every other detail is the same. He still has two sisters named Mary and Diana. He's still a minister. Jane still meets her cousins in the exact same way. And yet when they go to Van Diemen's Land, St John (who goes with them) has just returned from doing missionary work in India. Uh. Was there a time jump in here? Or did St John (who's married to a random woman named Louisa???) go to be a missionary in India for like 5 minutes, then come back in time to make this trip to VDL? I DON'T UNDERSTAAAAAAAAND.

- The main character is Harriet Adair, Bertha's nurse. Except that when she's at Thornfield, she's known as Grace Poole. Why? Because Bertha's previous nurse was Grace Poole and when she died and they hired someone to take her place, it.....was just too hard for the other servants to remember another name???????? IDEK.

- There are a lot of real people from VDL's colonial history woven into the story. I...may be slightly picky about this, having spent two years curating an exhibit on colonial Hobart at a national level collecting institution. But if you're going to use real people? GET THEIR EFFING NAMES RIGHT. John Pascoe Fawkner's surname was not spelled "Fawlkner". G.T.W.B. Boyes' Christian names were not "George William Alfred Blamey" but George Thomas William Blamey. And so on. I honestly can't decide whether this was the author intentionally making little changes to history, or if they were errors that somehow made it through to the finished copy.

- Upon arrival in Hobart, Harriet and BerthAnna have lost all their possessions. Harriet has a note of introduction from Rochester, but the bank's all "The rumour mill tells me he's dying, so...nah". So Harriet just...drops nearly TWO HUNDRED POUNDS on clothes, plus another 43 guineas on shoes????? I mean, first of all, where does a servant get that much money? And second of all, where does a servant get enough

money that she doesn't think much of dropping nearly £250 without batting an eyelid??

So yeah. I had a lot of questions about this book.

Add in the fact that it crawled along at snail pace (the author says in her note that it took her 40 years to write it, and I felt like it was taking me that long to read it...) and I decided that I wasn't going to struggle bus my way through the remaining 260 pages.

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### **Felicity Gray says**

The (brief, confusing, sporadic, superfluous) inclusion of Jane Eyre and other characters from Brontë's novel in this separate novel was odd, and didn't really work, or add any value. I decided to disregard all of that - not difficult to do, as they don't really form any integral part of anything - and treat it as an entirely separate novel; an immersive historical fiction nod to colonial Van Diemen's Land, and on that level, I enjoyed it.

I'm Tasmanian, so I appreciated the (mostly - not completely; there are some "eh?" errors) historically accurate descriptions of my home island and its colonial settlers/invaders in the 19th century - albeit a whitewashed version that largely erases the indigenous people and the destruction of native flora and fauna during that period. I sadly anticipated that - it is a novel about VDL from the romanticised perspective of the white colonials. The invasion devastation is very briefly touched upon, but definitely not adequately explored.

I found the Franklins to be some of the most interesting characters. Overall, a good simple period drama read - if you can overlook the clumsy Eyre stuff and the other foibles. Probably best enjoyed by Tasmanians as we are more likely to emotionally connect to the descriptions of the places and history, which does allow us to overlook some shortcomings.

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### **Kali Napier says**

At first alternating stories of the fictional character of Harriet Adair, accompanying Bertha/Anna Mason (Rochester's first wife) to Van Diemen's Land to search for Edward Rochester's long-lost older brother Rowland; and of the historical figure Captain Booth, the commandant of Port Arthur Penal Settlement, who deals with the assignment and escapes of convicts while hiding a past secret shame that prevents him initially from marrying his true love Lizzie. Once Harriet and Anna land in Hobart, the stories become entwined and become a speculative history of the politics and society of it seems almost everyone who was in the colony in the 1830s. The through thread of why Rowland Rochester and whether or not he married Bertha before Edward did, is picked up sporadically to weave these tales together. There is a wealth of historical research presented in this story, and I think it would have been better served without the conceit and framing of the fictional elements from Jane Eyre. As speculative history, this book paints an intensely rich landscape of 1830s Tasmania.

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### **Tanya says**

A great historical read, the book was pretty good. i was just a bit disappointed when the main character leave

the story, and then the focus is on another couple of character and then they leave the story line... I would have liked more discoveries or focus on relationships with main characters... Maybe Lady Franklin could have been in the spotlight more with her shaping of a new colony.

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### **Tundra says**

Thanks to A&U and Goodreads for this proof copy.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. It provided a fascinating and tactile history of Tasmania (Van Dieman's Land) brought to life by vivid description of landscape and carefully drawn character portraits. If I could wish for one thing it would be the addition of a character list/map as there were so many important people connected in numerous ways and I found it difficult to keep track of who some of them were. This was apparent from the first few pages, which I found a bit overwhelming with detail. I really wanted to understand and keep track of all the players, it was like an intricate spiders web being woven. This book would make a fantastic mini-series and is a wonderful way to recount history. It definitely doesn't need to ride on the 'coat tails' of Jane Eyre as it is worthy on its own merits.

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### **Lisa says**

Just could not get into this one very convoluted not for me

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### **Christiana says**

I really liked the concept of this book - Jane Eyre meets convict Tasmania. And the historical detail was interesting.

However the book took me forever to read. It was long winded, rambling, and I'm still not sure exactly what the plot was. I felt like I was reading someone's diary - nice details but also painfully boring in places.

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### **Patricia says**

Wild Island is set in Van Diemen's Land in the middle of the 19thC. The story is told through two characters, the fictional Harriet Adair and the historical Captain Charles O'Hara Booth.

Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre ends with the revelation that Rochester has kept a mad wife locked in the attic with her drunken attendant Grace Poole. A fire breaks out in the attic and the women are killed, the house is destroyed and Rochester is injured. And Jane Eyre marries Rochester. Or that's how I remember it. It's a long time since I read Jane Eyre but it is probably due for a rereading.

Wild Island begins with an alternative ending. The mad wife's attendant Grace Poole is long dead and has been replaced by Harriet Adair. And they all survive the fire. In order to be free to marry Jane Eyre Edward Rochester looks for answers in his wife's early years in the West Indies when she was married to Rochester's brother. He was supposed to have died but there are rumours that he has been seen in Van Diemen's Land. If

he is alive then the marriage to Edward Rochester would be invalid.

So they all set off for Van Diemen's Land. The sea voyage causes Edward Rochester's health to fail and he and Jane Eyre turn back. But the mad wife Anna Rochester regains her sanity in the healthy sea air although she is always trouble. We are more interested in the mad wife than Bronte's readers were. She is troubled but interesting although she disappears on her own adventure for most of the book.

Harriet Adair arrives in Van Diemen's Land without her three companions and with the task of finding Edward Rochester's brother.

The historical Captain Booth is Commandant of Port Arthur prison. In Hobarton the fictional and historical characters mix naturally. It is the end of the 14 year rule of the hard line Governor Arthur and key positions in the colony are taken by the corrupt Arthurites. The new Governor is Sir John Franklin and he is accompanied by his dynamic wife Jane and other members of his family. He is no match for the machinations of the Arthurites and the political doings are fascinating. Such a lot of historical research and worn lightly. It left me wanting more and I have copied references from the back of the book to search for more information.

Harriet's chapters are related in first person. After she is separated from the rest of her party her attempts to return to England are constantly frustrated. She has a front row seat to the dramas being played out in Government House and the Franklin family and the Colony.

Harriet and Booth are both attractive characters. They are treated generously by the writer. I like it that they find happiness and fulfilment (separately) in Van Diemen's Land. We move through to the end of the Franklins time in the Colony to the repercussions of the disappearance of Sir John Franklin in the Arctic in the 1840s.

This is a first novel but Jennifer Livett tells us it was forty years in the writing. I would love it if there was another one in the pipeline.

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### **Elaine says**

I read in the acknowledgements that this novel was written over forty years and honestly I felt that it took me almost as long to read it. The premise was an interesting one. Jane Eyre meets Tassie....well not exactly but there is a connection. However as fascinating as some of the historical references and places were...places I actually visited and love in Tasmania the story just did not grab me. Whilst I liked some of the characters, overall I felt let down by what I think was a longwinded execution of this story, that at times didn't seem to be going anywhere. I think if it wasn't for familiar places like Port Arthur, Richmond, Hobart, St Clair, Huon Valley and the description of the Tasmanian countryside which really doesn't seem to have changed much since the mid 1800's, I probably wouldn't have persevered with this novel.

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### **Janine says**

Readers of Jane Eyre have met the main character of this book, Harriet Adair before, as Grace Poole caring for the mad Bertha Mason at Thornfield. But in this telling, Bertha did not die in the fire thus freeing Edward

Rochester to marry our Jane. The woman we knew as Grace Poole was really Harriet Adair, and Bertha was instead Anna – not Antoinette as in Wide Sargasso Sea, a model for this book in extrapolating and subverting Jane Eyre into a new story. . .

...  
There have been other books that have sprung from a much loved story – Wide Sargasso Sea is one; Pemberley is another- but in this book Jennifer Livett has added another level of difficulty. The opening pages have two lists of characters: the first a list of historical characters drawn from the real-life inhabitants of Van Diemen's Land in the late 1830s and early 1840s; and the second a list of fictional characters, some of whom have been taken from Jane Eyre, others created to mingle with the real-life Hobartians. The research for this book is exhaustive- and exhausting. In her acknowledgments at the rear of the book, the author mentions that this book has been forty years in gestation, and I believe it.

...  
It's a long book, but Livett has maintained Harriet's narrative voice throughout the alternating chapters which switch between Harriet's first person point of view and a third-person omniscient narrative. It is this high-wire act of playing out a twist on the Jane Eyre story, while maintaining such historical integrity that most impresses me about this book. But then I find myself wondering: is there such a thing as too much historical integrity? I suspect that there is; and I think that the book threatened to be engulfed by it, even for someone familiar with and appreciative of its fidelity.

And so, my praise for Wild Island is not completely unalloyed. Livett has aimed high, but much though I admire the accuracy and richness of her historical rendering of Van Diemen's Land, I wonder if it ensnared her in details and explanations that stopped this book from really soaring.

For my complete review, visit  
<https://residentjudge.wordpress.com/2...>

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### **CLT says**

I thought aspects of this book were good, but it was flawed in some other ways. You certainly get a good sense of the protagonist's journey from the Rochester household to Tasmania and her experiences there. The depiction of Hobart and life there in the 1830s and the petty squabbles involved is also compelling and convincing. However I felt there were problems with the historical characters. The author has included a very wide range of people and this is to the detriment of the main story. I spent a lot of time wondering "who was he again?" and "what exactly were they fighting about"? Also I wasn't sure quite why the author focussed so much on Booth at the beginning of the story when he became just one of many towards the end and Jane Franklin came to the fore. I was also a bit confused about the all Fairfaxes and Rochesters, which may be because I haven't read Jane Eyre, but maybe if there hadn't been so many other people that would have been clearer. Essentially I think the author went too much for historical accuracy and detail (as opposed to authenticity which was pretty good) at the expense of a strong narrative.

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### **Jennifer (JC-S) says**

'Reader, she did not marry him.  
Or rather, when at last she did, it was not so straightforward as she implies in her memoirs.'

This novel is set in the nineteenth century, in Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania). The narrative is split into two, alternating between Charles O'Hara Booth (the commandant of the penal settlement at Port Arthur during the 1830s) and Harriet Adair, who has replaced Grace Poole as the companion and nursemaid to Bertha Mason. Yes, Gentle Reader, Jane Eyre makes an appearance within these pages. And she does marry Edward Rochester – eventually – but not quite the way we readers of 'Jane Eyre' have come to believe.

It's an interesting juxtaposition: a mystery concerning Edward Rochester, Jane Eyre and Bertha Mason woven around historical characters in Van Diemen's Land. Those sections involving Harriet Adair provide a sequel to Jane Eyre, while the sections involving Charles O'Hara Booth introduce us to a number of historical figures including Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur, John and Elizabeth Gould, Sir John and Lady Jane Franklin.

Readers of Jane Eyre will need to assume that Bertha Mason survived the fire at Thornfield Hall, and that there are questions about her earlier life which can only be explored by travelling to Van Diemen's Land. And once in Van Diemen's Land, the distinction between the historical and fictional characters blur as Harriet Adair finds her way in Van Demonian society. There are plenty of twists and turns as Harriet Adair tries to find out more about the mystery of Bertha Mason's past.

For me personally, the search for the truth about Bertha Mason's past (no spoilers here) was less important. While it's the reason why Harriet Adair is in Van Diemen's Land and provides the impetus for much of her action, this part of the story was very much secondary for me. What I loved was the depiction of the historical characters, the description of society, the politics and machinations. Harriet Adair fits right into this world, which is a tribute to Ms Livett's writing skill.

'I thought of the rules men had made for us women to live by, and how sometimes we must ignore these and live by our own rules.'

Harriet Adair does as a fictional character largely live by her own rules. But Charles O'Hara Booth is constrained by both society and history. Running the penal settlement at Port Arthur is difficult (there's nothing new about politics in prisons) and while he falls in love and wants to marry, he worries about whether he can afford to. Sir John and Lady Jane Franklin have their own trials and tribulations. Life in Van Diemen's Land was never easy, especially for those who look to Britain as home.

If you enjoy historical fiction set in colonial Tasmania, I recommend this novel. The Jane Eyre connection mostly worked for me although it wasn't central to my enjoyment of the novel. This is Ms Livett's debut novel, and I'd certainly be interested in reading any other novels she might write.

Jennifer Cameron-Smith

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### Annette says

I received Wild Island as a giveaway from Goodreads. This was a fantastic read. The combination of one of my favourite novels with the history of early 1800's in Van Dieman's land was irresistible. It was easy to read and I was totally wrapped up in the story from the first page.

Jennifer Livett's descriptions of life in Hobart and Port Arthur were quite vivid. Her emphasis on the political

landscape still apply today, corruption abounding in those in power. The total unsuitability of Sir John Franklin for the position of governor was dealt with compassionately. Also Lady Franklin's desire to not be constrained by the conventions of the times highlighted the misogynist attitudes of that era.

Overall this was an informative and enjoyable novel.

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### **Heather Boundy says**

I was quite disappointed in this story. What was it trying to be? Was it a potted history of the early settlement of Tasmania? Was it a 'what if' moment about Jane Eyre and Rochester? The original premise was good, but it seemed to lose something in the telling. The number of characters and storylines that Livett tried to follow in the Hobart/Port Arthur/ Franklins section of the story just turned into a jumble for me, and became very difficult to follow. She had clearly done a great deal of research and just tried to fit too much of it into one story. For me, this complexity just didn't work.

I think that Livett would have been better to choose one part of the story and tell it in better depth - for instance, the story of Sir John Franklin and the wonderful Jane was fascinating, but lost in the mire of other subplots.

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### **Kathryn says**

I bought this book immediately I saw it advertised by my bookseller, on the basis that Jennifer Livett was one of my English lecturers at Uni and I was curious what she would do with the premise. Sadly I come away disappointed. As a Tasmanian, the exploration of the Franklins and their years in Tasmania was interesting but somewhat rambling. As a lover of Jane Eyre, the connection with that story was... bewildering. And the two stories wandered around side by side but never connecting. The invented 'female lead', Harriet, leaves me shaking my head. Either story would have been sufficient for a novel, and would have had the opportunity to be more coherent.

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