



# Island in the Sea of Time

*S.M. Stirling*

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**Island in the Sea of Time** S.M. Stirling

**"Utterly engaging...a page-turner that is certain to win the author legions of new readers and fans."--  
George R. R. Martin, author of *A Game of Thrones***

It's spring on Nantucket and everything is perfectly normal, until a sudden storm blankets the entire island. When the weather clears, the island's inhabitants find that they are no longer in the late twentieth century...but have been transported instead to the Bronze Age! Now they must learn to survive with suspicious, warlike peoples they can barely understand and deal with impending disaster, in the shape of a would-be conqueror from their own time.

## Island in the Sea of Time Details

Date : Published (first published 1998)

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Author : S.M. Stirling

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# From Reader Review Island in the Sea of Time for online ebook

## Sara says

I give credit to Stirling for making such an accurate time travel story and for clearly doing his research, making it as realistic as possible. However, that's one of the only satisfactions I received. Eventually said research became overbearing, and instead of letting his readers learn and come to understand the world through the lives of their characters he resorted to info-dumping in excruciating detail, and often in the most annoying places. There would be numerous times in the middle of character interaction he would pause and proceed to explain in one to three long paragraphs things happening that were of no real interest (how a machine works, how a ship is built, what's needed to feed a couple thousand people, etc.), taking you briefly out of the story. There were also times where he would dedicate an entire scene to characters talking about how such-and-such works. No relevance to the story whatsoever.

You don't get a whole lot of feel for the characters either. They're all pretty much shadowed by this drivel. Except, perhaps, Marian Alston, which I found to be a likeable character. The rest of them were boring with no inner dilemma to make them seem more real and even less outer drama with each other. Unless, of course, you were a "bad person". The "bad people" were basically anyone who disagreed with the main characters, whether it was to an extreme and they wished for physical harm, or if they just had different beliefs. Please. I only buy into the black and white characterization with children's book because it's something children can understand. I let that pass. By the time you're writing adult fiction, however, I think you should have enough experience in life to be able to write characters who are not all good or all bad. People have faults and make mistakes, even if they do good things. And guess what, not all people who oppose them are evil.

It's sad because I think he could have done a lot with the story itself and the characters had it not been something of a "circle of friends" with a lot of unnecessary information crammed in.

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## Sarah says

This book puzzles me. The pacing is excellent, the action is quite frequent, the characters get into every conceivable terrible situation that could happen if you landed in 1250 BC, and yet I can only say that "I liked it" and not that "I really liked it". I feel like this *should* be a four star book. I would chalk it up to a bad mood but there's that little problem that I'm not in a bad mood... Also, I read this maybe five years ago and I ditched it around 75%. So apparently it's not the here and now, it's just that the book is decent without making me love it. It's so right up my alley, too! It's just a bit boring and a bit good.

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## Annette says

I loved this book, and the two that followed in the trilogy.

Quick synopsis - the island of Nantucket (and a wooden Coast Guard ship) are mysteriously whisked back in time several thousand years.

The only reason I didn't give this one five stars is that Stirling gets a bit carried away with some of the more ... unsavory sexual behavior of some of his characters. This seems to be a consistent trend of his in most of his books. He can't seem to write plain old vanilla sex - his sex scenes are either of lesbian and/or EXTREMELY brutal acts of sadism.

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### **E. Kahn says**

For a guy who makes such a point of writing characters against stereotypes, S.M. Stirling sure writes a lot ethnic stereotypes. Seriously, this thing reads like a collaboration between Andrea Dworkin and Sax Rohmer.

I have a lot to say about the plot, but honestly that would apply to the genre as a whole. If you think a bunch of modern first worlders with a representative (and extremely unlikely) cross-section of skills and understanding of modern technology inexplicably go back in time to impose middle of the road American values on those barbarians in the past is a super cool idea you might not hate this as much as I did.

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### **Valerie says**

In a word, terrible.

In several words, racist, sexist, and just problematic in more ways than one.

The ones concerned about having supremely negative effects on the current civilizations are the ones that are delusional, incompetent, and lead to failure.

The sole mentioned Asian-American character is a woman who gets her rocks off by torturing people.

The black woman who is in charge of the coast guard people stranded with the island and is part of the closest thing they have to a military is a lesbian.

One of the other few black people with the Nantucketers is so, so terribly obsessed with Black Egyptians and Black African Supremacy.

The two Jewish people are paired up with each other.

All of the unmarried and childless women are quickly paired off with someone for purposes of procreation.

There's also the fetish for martial arts and Japanese swords and armor that practically all of the characters, regardless of their background, possess.

I was hoping for something along the same lines as 1632, but instead I found an awful book filled with terrible fetishes, awful stereotypes, and characters that can do no wrong if they're the protagonists.

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## Chak says

I was completely hooked by the plot, but the writing and character development brought the rating down a few points. The Island of Nantucket (with all of the people, buildings, ships and technology within a certain radius) was mysteriously sent back in time to the year 1200 B.C. The most interesting parts of the book for me were the efforts to form a government and society and provide continued sustenance and safety of the people. Stirling reasoned through all of this very well, and when he stuck to logistics, he was brilliant. Also, I loved the character of Marion Alston, a formidable woman who goes from being a stoic, modern leader to a righteous and nearly invulnerable warrior. As a protagonist, she's easy to root for and clearly likable, though her stoic nature keeps her from dwelling on too much of her inner conflict, which is a bit regrettable since she could have been even more complex. The antagonist William Walker is one-dimensional and falls flat even next to the subdued dimensionality of Alston. Compare the simplicity of Walker to an almost perfectly complex villain such as (the reimagined) Battlestar Galactica's Gaius Baltar and the difference is clear. Waging war on a relatively effective (plot-wise) but otherwise shallow villain (and his ridiculously cliché sidekick Alice Hong) actually degrades the protagonist and she deserved a better literary experience.

Also, the characters and plot are subordinate to writer's conceit in that over-exposition and frivolous outpouring of unnecessary details are used in place of development (see ship-rigging, metal working, how much a human "voids" when he/she dies, etc.). Don't get me wrong, the details would have been fine if they were used in addition to development, instead of in place of it. Along those same lines, the sexual violence is a simple shortcut to outrage and procuring emotional investment instead of courting it with depth of character and good writing.

The "event" of going back in time is never explained or even really considered much by the characters in the book, which was odd, to say the least. This book is the first in a three-book series that follows the exploits of these characters and is loosely tied to a much larger series by the same author that starts with "Dies the Fire" and basically tells the story of the people who were not on the Island of Nantucket and who therefore did not go back in time. I believe it's in the sixth book in that series that the reader finds out what caused the "event." I read a spoiler and thought the explanation was a cop-out, so I decided to cut my losses here and not read further, as the explanation of the "event" was the only thing I was really curious about after being so disappointed by other facets of the story.

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## YouKneeK says

This is an alternate history in which the island of Nantucket is unexpectedly and inexplicably thrown back in time from 1998 to 1250 B.C. Nantucket is a real island, part of Massachusetts in the U.S. The story focuses on how they survive, considering Nantucket had relied mostly on outside food sources. They also needed raw materials that were limited in supply in order to make various goods, tools, and weapons, and politics are involved as they decide how to rule their island and how to handle the distribution of labor and supplies. A Coast Guard ship was conveniently near the island at the time of the event, so it was caught in the past too, providing a valuable resource for seeking trade among the natives of both North America and England.

Most of the story held my interest. I liked the political parts, and seeing what they had to do to survive, and I loved the parts where they met native cultures for the first time and learned about each other. There were times, though, when I started to lose interest and got bogged down in details that didn't interest me as much. The event that caused them to be thrown back in time is never explained. There's some speculation in the

beginning, but nothing remotely close to a real answer. I don't know if it will be addressed later in the trilogy, but my impression so far is that it was just the vehicle for the story the author wanted to tell and probably not something that will ever be dealt with in detail.

As a side note, the Kindle edition I have has erratic section breaks. Sometimes there were section breaks in the form of a little extra line spacing, and sometimes there weren't any breaks at all and it wasn't always immediately clear that the setting had changed.

I'm giving this 3.5 stars on sites where I can give half stars, and rounding up to 4 on Goodreads. I enjoyed it well enough to try the second book in the series.

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## **Brownbetty says**

This book is technically fairly well executed, but politically leaves me cross-eyed. Warning for sexual violence, weird race issues, and general ookiness. In order to discuss it, first, an overview of the plot:

One spring night, the island of Nantucket (with several miles of coastal waters) is inexplicably transported into the bronze age. Luckily for the islanders, the coastal waters include a Coast Guard ship, the *Eagle*, and her captain, Black lesbian Marian Alston, who is plenty competent to organize the transportation needs of the island (which, given the island is not agriculturally self-sufficient, are legion.)

The book covers Nantucket's efforts at self-preservation and adaptation to their new reality. This includes making contact and political agreements with the peoples around them, as well as their scramble to adapt their silicon-age technology to the bronze-age resources available to them.

The book is both a gleeful [Book:Swiss Family Robinson] style pipe-dream of how one might adapt modern knowledge to stone-age resources, and an imperialist fantasy in a slightly self-consciously progressive language. It occasionally does very well at not being fucking offensive, only to make it extra obvious when it falls off the wagon.

The one thing it does well at is not condescending to the Bronze Age inhabitants or their technology. Stirling acknowledges that their technology represents real and situation-appropriate innovation, and when they encounter the industrial technology of the islanders, quickly grasp its use and usefulness. A good part of the Nantucket islanders' technological advantage comes not from their modern technology, but from their libraries which allow them access to all the societies of history, and to pick and choose from their solutions to common problems.

On the other hand... Oh dear god, where to start. The islanders manifestly need a staple, and the island being too small for their agriculture to support their population, their only option is trade, and they decide to contact the tribal civilizations they expect to find in England, in order to do this. In the book, their reasoning is that an islander who speaks Lithuanian is expected to be able to quickly learn the language spoken there, but this surely is the author rather than probability; I would have rated odds of finding someone who spoke Classical Greek higher than someone who spoke Lithuanian, and both agriculture and trade ought to be more, rather than less advanced in the Mediterranean.

What about the near-by inhabitants of what, in the history they left, would have come to be called 'the Americas'? Wikipedia tells me the Olmecs had maize and sweet potatoes. In Stirling's books, however, the

first contact with the the peoples of the mainland leads to unleashing the common cold on them, and devastating a tribe. The second is when a delusional hippie, attempting to give the Olmec some protection against what she regards as the inevitable incursion of and devastation by arming them. She is captured, and ceremonially raped by a jaguar as a precursor to being used as a human sacrifice. Later, we learn that the Olmec have been infected with mumps and will likely be wiped out.

On what-would-be British Isles, the islanders come upon a conflict between the earlier inhabitants and the recent invaders (I think from what-would-be France, based on their names end with -ix, and Asterix) and find themselves sympathizing with the embattled locals, but trading with the victorious invaders, believing themselves to have no choice in order to survive. The invading people give the Islanders various treaty-gifts, included a captured slave-girl.

Which is where the lesbian pirate-queen romance takes off, awesome! (Not really pirates, but good enough!) Marion Alston is likeable, and her romance with young Swindapa, awkward, sweet, and the epitome of cross-cultural, is fun. But Alston as a character is occasionally jarring when she seems to be speaking for the author, as when she encourages another young Black cadet to stop thinking of themselves as Black, since in a few generations their skin differences will disappear into the island population like a drop of coffee in a glass of milk. She also tells him that their decision to trade in England rather than Africa is necessary, since in the Egyptian courts, she and he would be treated as just as sub-human as their ancestors had been Confederate America. What about West Africa, though? It's closer than Egypt, and agriculturally established. I would have bought someone speaking Swahili as easily as I bought someone speaking Lithuanian, and wikipedia confirms my memory of a western Bantu culture in the relevant time culture. I don't actually think contacting the people of the contingently-British-Isles is unlikely, but I don't think it's something that can be defended as a purely disinterested and logical choice.

The villains of the piece are also kind of icky, beyond mere villainy; Walker, a sailor, decides to take his knowledge of technology and use it to set himself up as an emperor in the Mediterranean. He takes with him a small party of like-minded people, including Alice Hong, a nurse who has been "Black-listed from every kink club on the East Coast", a sado-masochist who Walker dominates and who enjoys dominating the prisoners (slaves) Walker uses to build his civilization. It seems utterly gratuitous, a sort of dog-kicking to demonstrate villainy, and it doesn't help at all that she's the second most visible non-white character.

Actually, written like this, it seems far more clearly problematic than it did to me while reading. While reading, it was mostly a vague discomfort, which I attributed to raised mindfulness as a result of mammothfail.

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## **Carolyn F. says**

### **Audiobook**

Can I book about a modern day island on the American east coast (Nantucket) going back in time be boring? Yes. And for an isolated island with minimal supplies there is a lot of traveling going on - to Europe, to the Caribbean, South America. I know the author didn't want to bog down the book with descriptions of days and days of travel, but sometimes it seemed they were one day in Nantucket and then after waiting a week (no real sense of urgency - just we're going as fast as we can?!), it would take them about a day or so to get to the baddies.

And I'm sick of reading that every battle between native and more civilized forces being compared to the Anglo-Zulu War. Catherine Asaro did a much better job with a comparison of this conflict. The "final" battle was confusing because I kept thinking, "Are they with the Eagle people or the Wolf people?"

Anyway, I didn't enjoy this book much at all.

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### **Theresa says**

I couldn't finish this book; I kept trying but gave up about 4/5 of the way through. The characters weren't engaging, the options of dealing with native populations were not adequately explored while at the same time patting itself on the back for doing just that. Some of the characterizations were undeveloped and occasionally offensive.

Mostly I just found the whole situation not worth reading about. My review may be a little biased because I have decided that this genre is probably not my thing.

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### **Matty-Swylla says**

Now this book was just right for my reading taste - time travel, competent people pulling through, enough history to enjoy the differences, and some action. Not everything is smooth sailing, and some characters need more work to be completely fleshed out, but it's a solid 4 stars. Of course there some serious gore and overall shitty handling of women in the hands of past men, but there's enough of positive energy that things are going to change to be eager to read more.

Reading some of the more popular (negative) reviews, I'm slightly puzzled by all the contemporary feminism and social justice people nag about. Am I missing something? There's enough competent women and people of colour in this book to satisfy this demanding bunch. As to reasons why you don't want to sail to Africa right away - erm, ever heard of the nice tropical diseases over there? Maybe some issues with water and wind currents? But also - fresh water and food are a problem too, not to mention natural harbors in case of really bad weather. Why do you think even behemoth tankers go down these days?

So, I think the author did a splendid job for the first book in this series, and set up a fantastic basis for next adventures and culture clash. I do hope some bad characters meet their deserved end sometime soon, though. Really, Walker and Hong? World domination and torture? Go get them Alston.

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### **Richard says**

This is probably a pretty good book within the subgenre of time-travel/alternate-history, but that is damning with faint praise. There are so many pitfalls that have to be avoided that it usually isn't worth bothering to open the book.

*(The only one I can recommend: Pastwatch: The Redemption of Christopher Columbus. If you'll settle for just alternate-history, try the incredible The Man in the High Castle, or for just time-travel, maybe the almost-incredible Doomsday Book.)*



The biggest problem here is that Stirling wanted the intrepid Nantucketeers to survive and thrive, and that is absurdly unlikely. Take an island of roughly 10,000 folks and toss them a few millennia back in time, and most will be dead within a year. If any descendants survive, they'll be indistinguishable from the natives of that era within two or maybe three generations.

Why? Even if all of those 10,000 were highly intelligent and able-bodied adults, there are simply not enough to fill all the productive roles in any semblance of a modern economy.

To even *begin* to reverse those odds, Stirling has to give his doughty islanders an astonishing array of expertise as well as some world-class machine tools. But the trump, of course, is that one of the two Coast Guard *sailing* ships just happens to be training in the neighborhood and comes with them, along with its crew and 150 cadets. Yes, that would be the real-world USCGC Eagle. Also impressive is the fact that not one, but two! officers on board are experts at sword fighting.

Even with these advantages, their many bronze-age escapades are only possible with massive doses of luck and omissions of some hazards. Cross-cultural miscommunication turns out to be not a problem at all! Navigation to distant waters is a snap, even without GPS! One of the Coast Guard officers remembers — without notes! — everything necessary regarding how to design and build the kind of wooden sailing ship ideal for the situation. (Was it a carrack or a caravel? Can't remember).

And that is, of course, the problem. The author has to give all the important characters too much skill (or too many skills) so they can deal with the wide variety of problems they'd face. A few disposable characters are tossed in to try to disguise this, but it isn't a problem that can really be hidden.

On the other hand, the central character was a hoot. Hmmm, a black lesbian Coast Guard captain with advanced training with her beloved samurai sword? Honestly, take her out of this book and make her a movie action hero. Unfortunately, she was wasted here.

The villain, sadly, isn't memorable at all. Wafer-thin development, with nothing more to drive his nastiness than arrogance and glory-seeking. A little nuance might have helped — he could, instead, have wanted the islanders to benevolently conquer and rule the bronze age with the hindsight of three millennia, putting him conflict with those wanting to lead by democratic example. No such luck.

Oh, yeah: a number of other reviews here have lambasted this book for "deviant sexuality". I'm a San Franciscan, so I'm pretty hard to shock, but nothing here was *outré* enough to raise an eyebrow. One superfluous character goes in for extreme masochism amounting to torture, but the acts themselves are left to the imagination. That the author chose to add such an unlikely and grating aspect to the story was really no more than more evidence that the story just isn't very good.

Not recommended. Unless you're really into this kinda stuff, which means you already are pretty tolerant of many of these kinds of problems.

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### **Jennifer Connolly says**

When you start rooting for the bad guys to kill everyone else, you know something's gone wrong. I found this book intensely annoying.

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## Kim says

Wow. I had this book on my to-read shelf for some time as I'd heard it was a good alt history book but I never got around to reading it til one of my book clubs picked it as a series read. And I'm glad I finally read it.

A fascinating, thrilling story of an incident which send the island of Nantucket, MA, USA (plus a sailing vessel of the Coast Guard) back in time to around 1250 BC. The affected having to come to terms with the loss of everyone and everything they once knew and learn to live in the Bronze Age.

Now I will admit there is a lot of handwaving here. It seems to be amazing luck that they have fishermen, farmers, blacksmiths, historians, anthropologists, a vast array of people who know how to make or find everything required to get a society running at at least Industrial Revolution standards. But you know what? I didn't care. It meant the book kept moving and didn't end after two chapters with everyone dying. Which is what would happen if 9000 random people from my city were sent back to the past.

I loved the little details of the civilisations of the time. I wanted to see more interactions and explorations but I believe that will occur in the rest of the series. This book really was about getting the Islanders to a stable point from which they could be self-sufficient plus the breakaway groups.

There were times that I wish this book was written at a higher level though like Opening Atlantis or Foundation, spanning generations to see what changes the Event caused. Especially, and this ties in with something that bugged me, when they were getting close to year 0. So here's something I really disliked. After everything else going ok, yeah sure existing tribes and civilisations would be completely changed but they had to survive somehow, they decide to unleash Christianity on the locals. A religion based on someone who wouldn't even be "born" for over 1000 years. I guess they at least might get a coming of Jesus. But I wouldn't have thought the scientists who were helping oversee would have just allowed that through without some challenge.

Though they were all thrown thousands of years into the past by an unknown force. Maybe that's a good time to start praying to someone.

One of the other points I really loved was the questions and implications raised by such an event. Should they have tried to live a completely isolationist existence? They had to resort to whaling for oil and food and other by-products, but was that a bad thing in a time when whale populations would be immense and sustainable hunting could be enacted from day 1? (view spoiler)

This was a great book. History was always my favourite subject and I would love the chance to live it for myself. Though could I really give up all the modern luxuries? Who knows. I can't wait to read the next book.

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## Kat Hooper says

ORIGINALLY POSTED AT Fantasy Literature.

After a strange electrical storm, the residents of Nantucket discover that their entire island and its surrounding waters have been sent back to 1300 B.C. Now this society, which is mostly based on a tourist economy, must figure out how to establish a new identity in prehistory. This includes clearing and farming land, building ships, finding new sources of fuel, salt, and other necessities, and most difficult of all, developing a constitution and befriending native trading partners.

Fortunately, Nantucket has some citizens with valuable knowledge and skills who find themselves naturally rising to leadership positions: a brave and competent Baptist police chief, a widely-read and level-headed librarian, a black lesbian ship captain, a history professor, an astronomy student, the manager of the local grocery store, and a Catholic priest.

But of course there are also some citizens who cause problems: the church whose pastor teaches that sending Nantucket back in time was Satan's plan to prevent the birth of Christ, and the "flake-and-nut contingent" who want to arm the natives so they'll never be oppressed by future Americans. Then there's the biggest threat of all — the ambitious Coast Guard Lieutenant William Walker who sees all this confusion as an opportunity to set up his very own kingdom.

I have a thing for time-travel novels — especially the Survivor-style stories in which modern people are forced to live in more uncivilized and unsophisticated times. *Island in the Sea of Time* has the added fun of actually having modern conveniences but not having the power or fuel to run them. Thus, the people of Nantucket must disassemble their cars for sheet metal while raiding their museums for whaling and milling antiques.

There's more to this story than survival and industrial revolution, though. *Island in the Sea of Time* is full of characters who feel like real people — people you might actually know. For the most part their relationships and romances are believable and understandable as former strangers work together to create a new society. The villains, however, are over-the-top. It's hard to believe in the doctor's sadism, William Walker's vast knowledge and foresight, and the granola crowds' naiveté (their leader is shocked that the natives are "sexist," "patriarchal," and "abusive of animals" and that they don't immediately trust the Americans).

At times, *Island in the Sea of Time* becomes a bit teachy as characters discuss token economies, division of labor, ship building, linguistics, farming techniques, iron casting, steam engines, canning, the production of gunpowder, the use and care of firearms, etc. And it gets a little preachy as they discuss the creation of a new constitution. But generally I thought S.M. Stirling did a good job with this aspect of the book.

I read the audio version of *Island in the Sea of Time*, narrated by Todd McLaren and produced by Tantor Audio. The best thing I can say about it is that I mostly forgot I was listening to an audiobook — McLaren's voices and cadences were so natural that they never called attention to themselves. The only time I was brought out of the story was when McLaren used his "Boston" voice for the U. Mass astronomy intern. But that's not McLaren's fault...

*Island in the Sea of Time* comes to a satisfactory end, but most readers will be eager to continue the islanders' advances and adventures in the next book in S.M. Stirling's Nantucket series: *Against the Tide of Years*.

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