



**RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA  
READING GUIDES**

## **The Secret of the Lonely Isles by Joanne van Os**

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Reading Level: 9+

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### **COVER BLURB**

**Four kids on a yacht, a seafaring aunt, and a hundred-year-old mystery...**

**Jem's world has been turned upside down by a family crisis, and then it gets worse. Just when it all seems too hard, along comes Ella, Jem's great-aunt, who's also a solo round-the-world sailor. She decides that what Jem, his sister Maddy and brother Tyler need is a sea change. But is seasickness the only thing that Jem adds to his list of woes?**

**What's the mystery that Ella is chasing?  
Why does Jem keep having strange and troubling dreams, and what could they mean?  
And who is stalking them all?**

## ABOUT THE BOOK

**Synopsis:** Jem Isherwood is the middle child in a family that's falling apart. His father lost a leg in a work accident, and is now in a wheelchair and angry. His older sister Maddy seems to be getting crankier and more unreasonable every day, his younger brother Tyler expects Jem to have all the answers, and his mother is barely coping.

Just when everything seems to be imploding, and Jem is worried his mother is going to leave, his great-aunt Ella turns up. She has just completed a ten year, solo circumnavigation in her yacht. Jem's parents have to go away to see his father's specialist for treatment, so Ella offers to take Jem, Maddy and Tyler on a sailing holiday.

Jem is afraid of the sea, he gets terribly sea-sick, and to make it worse he keeps having strange and troubling dreams. Life looks pretty miserable. But Ella has more than a holiday to offer them. She involves them in her search for the wreck of the *Gryphon*, a boat that disappeared around 1910 off the north coast of Australia. They're reluctant at first and can't see the point, but when the children discover the real reason for Ella's determination to find an old shipwreck, they get on board for the ride of their lives.

But they're not the only ones looking for the *Gryphon*...

**Characters:** The Isherwood family - Jem 13, Tyler, 12 and Maddy, 15 and their parents Karen and Steve. They live with Steve's mother, known to all as Neenie. She is quite old and has dementia.

Zac Martin is an Aboriginal boy who lives next door, and is Tyler's best friend. He has a younger sister Celie, and an older brother Ricky. His parents have recently separated.

Dr Ella Tremayne, Karen's aunt. She is a history teacher, a researcher and a solo sailor, and is 63 years old.

Professor Penhall, historian and old friend of Ella's.

Vincent Martin, head sea ranger at Maningrida, and Zac's uncle.

**Setting:** the story begins in Darwin, and then moves out to sea, heading east to the Lonely Isles, an imaginary set of islands north of Maningrida. The action is on board the yacht, and then on the island of Castor.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joanne van Os lives in Darwin, Northern Territory. She arrived from Melbourne in 1976 expecting to stay for 6 months but fell in love with the bush, and stayed. She has written about her experiences in her best selling memoir, ***Outback Heart***, which tells of her marriage to the “Real Crocodile Dundee”, and their life on Territory cattle and buffalo stations, as well as her former husband’s tragic end.

Joanne is married to Darwin barrister Lex Silvester, and they live on board their yacht in Darwin when not away cruising. Her other two books are ***Brumby Plains*** and ***Castaway***, both published by Random House, for the same age group as ***The Secret of the Lonely Isles***.

## ON WRITING “The Secret of the Lonely Isles”

### Author motivation

In 2007, I sailed from Cairns to Darwin with my husband and two of our children, on board our newly purchased yacht ‘Malaika’. It was my first proper sail, and I was as seasick as Jem for the entire month we were at sea. However I couldn’t fail to notice and be fascinated by the sheer remoteness of the coast, and the isolation of the few tiny towns and communities we passed.

We also stopped at several uninhabited islands, as well as those with communities or resorts on them. The uninhabited ones were food for the imagination, and the idea for a story about a hidden colony of people began to ferment in my brain.

### Writing process

Much of *The Secret of the Lonely Isles* was written during a seven-month voyage from Darwin to Thailand, via Ambon, the Moluccas, Manado in North Sulawesi, southern Borneo, Singapore and Western Malaysia. The actual writing happened when we were either at anchor or in port somewhere, but the fermenting was happening the whole time.

My background in the Territory has been steeped in the bush, mainly cattle and buffalo management, and this comes out particularly in the first two books. In *Secret*, I have used some of that experience to create the backstory for the Isherwoods, with their farm in the outer rural area of Darwin. Then I married this with my current life, which revolves around our yacht and sailing. I am also intensely interested in history, and couldn’t help but include the story of Port Essington, which is such an evocative and haunting place to visit.

I think it was the nature of Port Essington that prompted the somewhat supernatural feature of the book, with Jem's dreams of Jack and his abilities to know when something is going to happen, or when it's not right. A kind of feyness, which is shared by his great-aunt Ella.

I like to 'get rid' of the parents, teachers and other authority figures as soon as possible in the story so that the kids can get on with it. They are thrown onto their own resources, and have to make decisions for themselves. Relationships complicate everyone's lives, so they have to deal with the vagaries of these too. My background in the NT bush has brought me into contact with a lot of very resourceful children. I think the pinnacle was arriving at a buffalo station, and finding an eleven year old boy expertly handling a large bulldozer several miles from the homestead, completely on his own! The tricky bit is showing resourcefulness and not encouraging risky behaviour at the same time, so I keep this in mind when I'm constructing the action. Eg, when the three siblings go out at night to search for Zac, they could clearly get into trouble, narrowly avoid it, and have to deal with the consequences when they get home. But at the same time, the fairness of what they were trying to do is given consideration.

## THEMES

The themes of the book are:

Mystery and adventure

Family and relationships

Resourcefulness and bravery – bravery in being afraid of something but not letting it beat you

History

Sailing

Teenage dramas

Cross-cultural contact, although not a major theme of this book

## DISCUSSION POINTS

- having an older relative, eg a grandparent, with dementia
- coping with disability and sudden changes in family structure, eg Steve's injury and the move to town
- Why is Steve so angry all the time?
- parental discipline – should Karen have allowed Maddy to go to the party or was she too strict. Why?
- Should Jem, Maddy and Tyler have woken their parents instead of looking for Zac themselves?

- The use of green ants as a weapon! Non-violent resolution? Resourcefulness!
- How does Maddy sometimes act grown up, and sometimes not? eg when she goes to help Steve after he's fallen in the living room on the day Ella arrives, and the times she throws tantrums about not being allowed out to a party etc
- The notion of people leaving their own land for a better life somewhere else. Could compare with the failed settlement in Paraguay in 1893 "New Australia", and also with people escaping war torn places to come here, whether legally or otherwise. The colonists at the Lonely Isles were illegal too!
- Gryphons, and other mythological creatures. What do Gryphons, also spelled Griffin, Griffen and Griffon, represent ?
- Quakers? Who are they and what do they believe in?
- Facing your fears: How did Jem deal with his fear? Eg he didn't get upset, he tried to stop imagining what terrible things could possibly happen, and got his mind off the scary thoughts by reciting tables, making lists and so on.
- History – discussion about what life must have been like for people settling somewhere with only what they can bring with them. No infrastructure, electricity, policemen, water supplies, supermarkets, etc.
- Discuss the early settlement of a place like Port Essington, thousands of miles from the nearest other community of Europeans in Australia at the time, having to make do with whatever they brought with them, amidst difficult conditions of heat, extreme weather (wet season rains, cyclone). And how this was repeated all over the country at various times .
- What do you know about your own ancestors? Where does your family come from? Aboriginal people are the only people who "come from" Australia. The rest of us came from somewhere else from 1788 onwards.
- The colonists on the Lonely Isles wanted to escape the First World War which they could see coming. They were pacifists and didn't want to be involved in a war. Why do you think your ancestors – or your family - came to Australia?