

***The Last Island: A Naturalist's Sojourn on Triangle Island* by Alison Watt**
2002 Harbour Publishing, Madeira Park, BC, Canada
192 pp, Hardcover - \$ various online

Author Alison Watt has succeeded in melding memoir with natural history and given us an engaging and lyrical tale of self-discovery. *The Last Island* is a journal account of her four-month stay on Triangle Island as a young seabird researcher, her only companion Anne Vallée, another young biologist. The ruggedly remote ecological reserve sits thirty miles off northern Vancouver Island and is home to 25,000 pairs of tufted puffins and the world's largest colony of Cassin's auklets.

Language is often spare, yet powerful—"The puffin colonies were quiet;" "Today the tide was low"—and is used to lead in to more complex information, such as egg rearing and bird behaviour. Although Watt is a biologist, her language remains accessible and, without anthropomorphizing, she conveys the appealing characteristics of birds and animals.

The author cares about the birds she studies and her poetic descriptions convey this. If we did not already know Watt was a poet, it would be easy to guess. She is also an accomplished artist—readers are treated to her watercolour field sketches, and exquisite, scientifically accurate botanical paintings.

As with good fiction, Watt weaves tension throughout her memoir: the two women run low on water (and coffee!); Vallée is stiffly business-like but Watt needs a friend; Watt makes a critical mistake with a bird. The reader is also held by the unexpected, such as exotic teak and mahogany logs found on the beach, and by unexpected language: "[Seals] slipped beneath the water, pulling it over their heads like a sweater;" and the water is a "gauzy veil of salt mist." Watt's vivid similes and metaphor make for memorable imagery, and her musings on evolution and biodiversity add intensity.

The Last Island deftly chronicles First Nations lore and maritime history and in doing so brings a fullness to the story. Watt has reached a satisfying balance between personal events and natural history and has reconstructed dialogue in a believable way. We are transported to the cliffs and crags and the rocky beaches of Triangle Island in this vibrant coastal adventure.

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Catherine J Johnson is a naturalist, birder, writer, editor and teacher. She has been involved in three-spined stickleback pairs conservation; in West Nile Virus field research; bird counts; and interpretation for two coastal nature centres. But it's mostly about the birds...

Word Count: 342