

Happy Returns

Erica James has been writing highly successful novels for more than twenty years. Her new book, *Coming Home To Island House* follows the lives of a family who return to their old home of Island House in the wake of their father's death. We caught up with Erica to find out more!

The novel begins in 1939, in the summer before war was declared. Did you do a lot of research into this period?

Yes, I did. Funnily enough, the whole subject of the Second World War crept up on me, in a way. If you'd have said to me ten years ago that that's what I'd be writing about, I'd have said, 'No, that's not my thing!'. But it all started when I was writing *Summer At The Lake*, which is set in Oxford and also Lake Como in the 1950s. What I found was that I really enjoyed doing the research, and writing about a different era. That book was well-received, so I thought, 'maybe I could try that again'. My next book was *The Dandelion Years*, and I ventured into Second World War territory, including Bletchley Park. Again, I thoroughly enjoyed writing it, and writing in a different way.

So then I did *Song Of The Skylark*, which is set in Suffolk, and goes back to the Second World War. But *Coming Home To Island House* is different again, because it's set entirely in the 1930s and 1940s, with no contemporary storyline.

I'd reached the point where I was enjoying writing the historical parts more than writing the contemporary parts, so I thought I'd go full-tilt at this one! So, I'd already done some research for previous novels, but there was more to do for this one, to get the history right. It's always a challenge, because you know there are people out there who will let you know if you've got anything wrong, so I try my best to get it right.

Is Island House based on a real house?

Well, it is, and I only just confessed, in the summer of 2017, to the owners of the house I based it on, what I had done! The cover had been decided, and I happened to be at a party, and the owners of the house were there. I hadn't met them properly before, but they seemed very very nice, so I thought, 'maybe I should make my confession'. I thought, what would happen if they say, 'How dare you, what were you thinking?', but luckily they couldn't have been nicer about it. Their house is not called Island House, there's another house called that, and every time I pass it I think, 'that's such a good name for a house, and

such a good name for a book'.

When you start writing a book, do you know what's going to happen in advance?

No, not at all. This is my twenty-first novel, and I've worked in the same way with each one. I might start thinking 'this is where I want it to end up, this is what I'm aiming for', and sometimes it works and sometimes it just goes off in a completely different direction. It takes me ages to do my first draft, and I always forget how difficult that part is. I sit in front of my computer every morning and stare it out until that day's chapter comes to me. So I make it up as I go along, it's seat-of-my-pants stuff. You'd think by now, it would be less scary, but it's just as scary as it ever was, if not scarier!

"I sit in front of my computer every morning and stare it out until that day's chapter comes to me"

Sibling rivalry is at the heart of the novel – do you think this is a big problem for a lot of families?

Potentially, it can be. Every family is different, which is why I love writing about them, because every family has its own story to tell. Even if you think that there's no sibling rivalry going on, I think that there sometimes is. It's all about miscommunication, it's all about imagining that someone else is having a better deal than you. I've seen among friends' families and their children, and yet there are other siblings who never seem to have any arguments. But it would be terrible to write about them – who would want to read about a family who all got on with each other?!

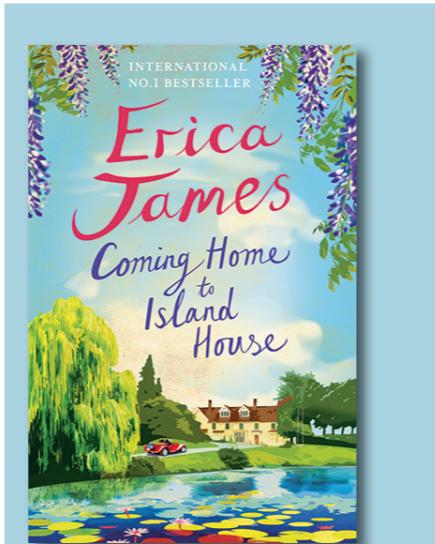
Arthur is the villain of the novel – but do you think that people have the capacity to change and reform themselves?

I would very much like to write a sequel, so I've deliberately left things with a few question marks here and there. I had great fun writing about Arthur, because he's so horrible, with no real redeeming

features. But, in a way you can understand why he's become the person he has. Losing his mother at such a young age, being sent off to school where he was bullied. Will he be redeemed? Who knows? I'll have to work on that! But in general, I think that some people can turn their lives around, and that's part of my theme throughout the many books. People can become good people, given the right circumstances.

So, do you think you will write a sequel?

When I started the book, I thought yes, I would like to write a sequel, I'd like to see where these characters end up. But when I finished the book I didn't have any answers, and I knew that I didn't want to ruin things by writing the wrong sequel. And so I'm writing an entirely contemporary story at the moment. But if I could come up with the right storyline for Romily and the family, then, yes, I would do it.



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