

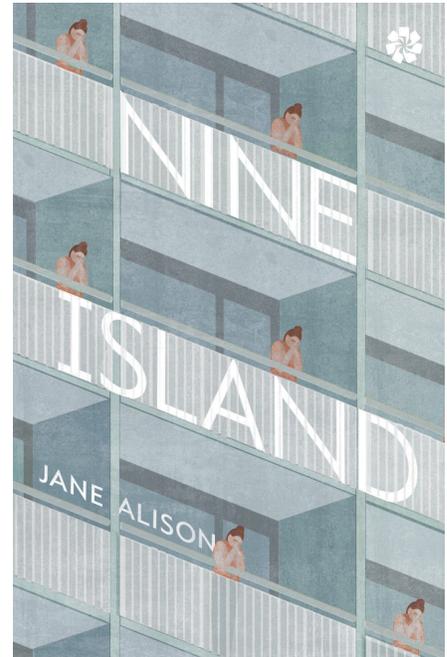
NINE ISLAND

by Jane Alison

A Reading Group Guide

Nine Island is an intimate nonfiction novel, told by J, a woman who lives in a glass tower on one of Miami Beach's lush Venetian Islands. After decades of disaster with men, she is trying to decide whether to withdraw forever from romantic love. Having just returned to Miami from a monthlong reunion with an old flame, "Sir Gold," and a visit to her fragile mother, J begins translating Ovid's magical stories about the transformations caused by Eros. "A woman who wants, a man who wants nothing. These two have stalked the world for thousands of years," she thinks.

When not ruminating over her sexual past and current fantasies, in the company of only her aging cat, J observes the comic, sometimes steamy goings-on among her faded-glamour condo neighbors. One of them, a caring nurse, befriends her, eventually offering the opinion that "if you retire from love . . . then you retire from life." Set against the backdrop of exquisitely beautiful flora, fauna, and seascapes, *Nine Island* culminates with a breathtaking gift, from one friend to another.



About the Author

Jane Alison is the author of a memoir, *The Sisters Antipodes*, and three novels—*The Love-Artist*, *The Marriage of the Sea*, and *Natives and Exotics*—and the translator of Ovid's stories of sexual transformation, *Change Me*. She is Professor and Director of Creative Writing at the University of Virginia, and lives in Charlottesville. www.janealison.com.

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Questions and Topics for Discussion

- 1 Do you feel kinship with *J*? Why or why not?
- 2 *J* reflects on being a middle-aged woman: “Once upon a time, when you were maybe fifteen, you didn’t even want to be seen, and all the same, out you walked, and honks, shouts, maybe even a crash caused by *you* as you passed. Now, not so much.” Have you experienced this change in your own life? How has it affected your perception of what it means to be a woman?
- 3 Do you think *J*’s frequent fantasies of erotic encounters are positive, in that they help her cope with solitude, or do you think they harm her by keeping her from fully participating in real life?
- 4 How did learning about *J*’s painful experience of fertility treatment in Germany, and her failed marriage, influence your view of her? Did you find that her willingness to withdraw from love and lust became more understandable? Share a life experience—positive or otherwise—that fundamentally changed your worldview.
- 5 *J*’s girlfriend *K* and her mother are always encouraging *J* to go out, be social, and have fun. (*K* even tells her, “Go get highlights. . . . I can tell from here the gray is showing. Men don’t like gray. Reminds them of their grandmothers.”) If you were a woman in *J*’s life, would you offer her similar advice, or would you disagree? Why?
- 6 How do the animals in this story—chiefly poor *Buster* and the stranded Muscovy duck, but also the baby possum at the restaurant, the shark spied from the stairwell, the iguana that slipped into water as our narrator approached, and so on—influence how *J* thinks about solitude, companionship, and care? How would she be a different person if she didn’t have these fellow beings in her life?
- 7 Did *N*’s fate come as a shock? How do you think it affected *J*?
- 8 How did the environment of Miami—the runners, the partiers, the lush greenery, the pool, the troubled condo building and the sea—help create the world of this book? How important do you think the place is to *J*’s story? Do you see *J* living differently if she lived in a different part of the country?

- 9 Have you ever been immersed in a transforming project like translating Ovid's stories? How did the experience leave an imprint on your life and on your relationships?
- 10 How does the fact that this is an autobiographical novel influence your reading of the story? How would it be different if it were a completely fictional account?
- 11 What are the classic stories you turn to in order to understand love and life? What have they taught you that you would like to share?
- 12 How did this book address the question of loneliness vs. solitude? Which have you experienced in your own life, and which do you value?



The Difference Between Solitude and Loneliness: a *Publishers Weekly* interview with Jane Alison

In *Nine Island*, Alison tells the story of a solitary woman living in a Miami high-rise apartment, who considers retiring from love and is obsessed with Ovid's poems.

The narrator of your book, J, spends a lot of her time looking out the window of her high-rise, yet her apartment is covered in mirrors. Is she more interested in looking outward than looking inward?

Interesting observation. She does spend a lot of time thinking about—obsessing about—pondering issues in her inner self, so it's a relief to cast herself outward. She is fascinated by how other people—or pelicans or iguanas— behave and almost loses her own sense of self when watching. She's also at an age when her own bodily reflection is more irritating than anything else. But those mirrors are good for expanding the sense of space, doubling the sky.

Like Ovid, the narrator is in exile. How does her solitude play into her affection for Ovid's love poems?

I hadn't thought of her in exile, strictly, but you're right—if by exile we mean isolation from any notion of belonging. (Big difference between belonging and longing.) The Ovid who wrote *The Loves*, *Art of Love*, and even *Metamorphoses* was still the man-about-Rome, though, not yet in exile (those sexual poems might well have sent him there). Yet the figures in his *Metamorphoses* prefigure Ovid's own exile from home, language, and culture in that these figures often transgress—by wanting or doing something very wrong—and as a consequence lose their form and human tongue. The new body (as a tree, a bird, a newt) is strange and estranging, something like the state of exile. In the case of my character J, the estranging transformation, the "exile," might be from youth, from loveliness in all senses of that word, and ultimately from the natural order of human procreation. She's an island.

You've written on Ovid before. Are there other parts of this book that are autobiographical?

The book is a nonfiction novel, or autofiction, or a semi-imagined memoir: the lines between fiction and nonfiction and poetry seem even more unhelpful. Ninety percent of the incidents portrayed here are based on experiences I've had, although I did compress the events of two summers into one.

What is it about Miami that the narrator finds alluring, or at least compatible with her life?

Maybe the nonhuman elements. The shifting sky, restless water, sea grapes, and anoles and gumbo-limbos and parrots. She feels a comforting affinity with other creatures, other bodies, that hold traces of the changeableness among forms, if only in imagination: an iguana that plops into the bay and suddenly looks like a fish with wings; a tree that looks like a girl who dove into the ground, legs swaying; a rock made of hundreds of petrified corals, their fans or labyrinths intact; metamorphic clouds drifting across the sky.

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