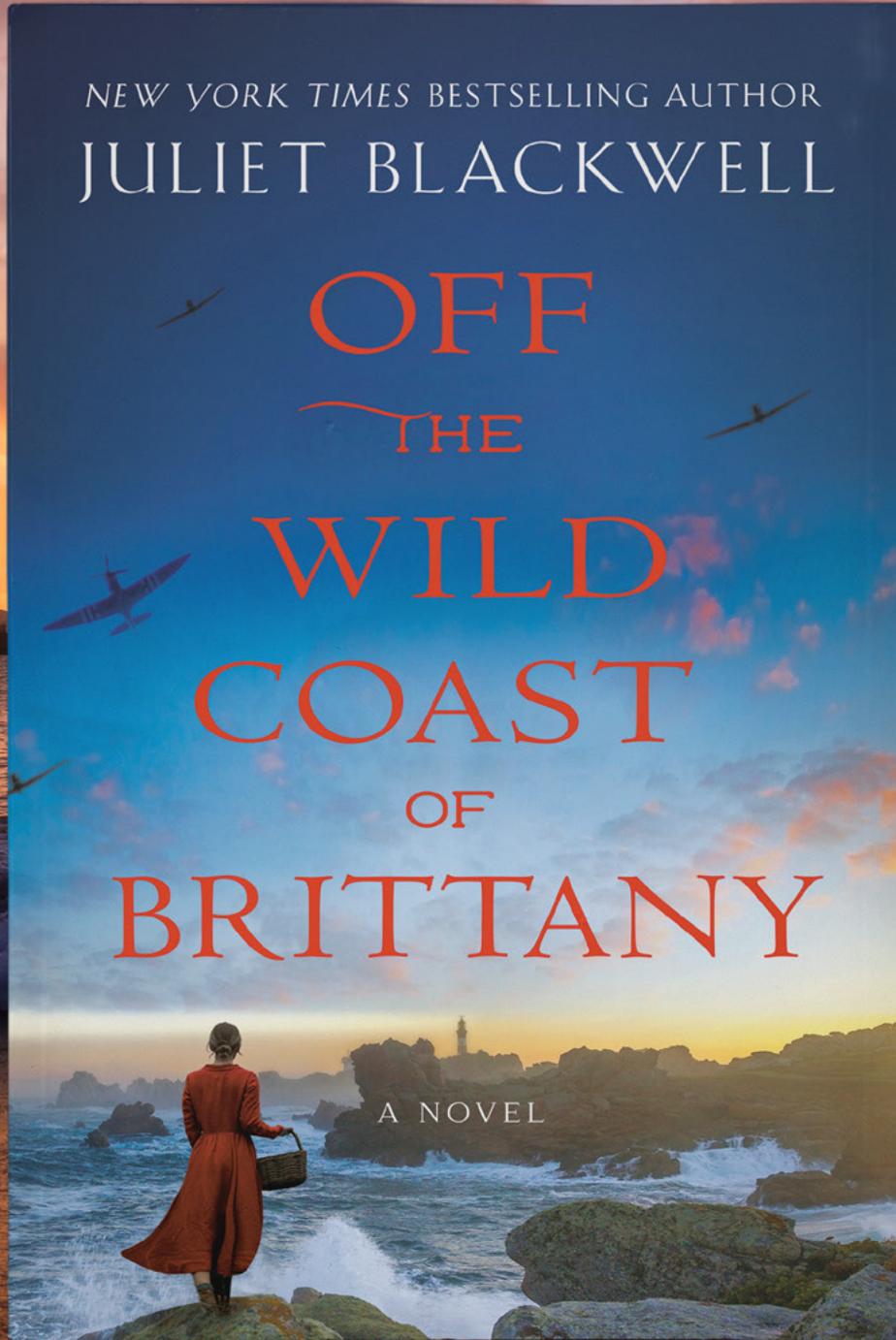


# BOOK CLUB KIT



## DEAR READERS,

When the ferry set off from the coastal town of Audierne onto the choppy waters of the Raz—the famously treacherous stretch of Atlantic Ocean separating France’s Côte Sauvage and the islands of Finistère—I had no idea what I would find. It was an expedition of discovery.

Warm croissant in one hand and a cup of hot espresso in the other, I hoped that the tiny fishing island called the Île de Sein might be the perfect setting for my next novel.

How did I find myself on that ferry? On a previous research trip, I had traveled to the southwest of England, to Cornwall and Dorset, and learned that Celtic traditions had been passed along via shipping routes, forging cultural connections long before the founding of the present-day nations of Britain and France. It was only then that I realized that Brittany, on France’s western coast, is considered to be culturally one of the Celtic nations, a tangible link between the British Isles and mainland France. I have always been drawn to the rocky, rugged peninsula of Brittany, known as Finistère, and especially to the islands, and lighthouses that dot the islands and the coast. So, I dragged my boyfriend and his twenty-year-old son up and down the Wild Coast, looking for inspiration.

One afternoon I was sitting at an unpretentious bar in the beautiful mainland city of Quimper, sipping a glass of pastis and jotting down travel notes while my boyfriend and his son went in search of a laundromat (we had been on the road for a while!). As the only woman in the café, and an obvious foreigner, I garnered a few odd looks from the locals. But once I started chatting with the bartender about what I was doing in the area, two crusty old men good-naturedly corrected my French and smiled when I attempted a few words in Brezhoneg, the native Breton language. By the time I offered to buy them each a mug of cider, we were like old friends, and they were eager to share a bit of their local lore.

They told me the legend of an enchanting and enchanted island, the Île de Sein. Nine magical women known as the Gallizenae once lived there, and transformed into mermaids at will to rescue a few lucky sailors from shipwrecks. In exchange for jewels or other treasures, they might be persuaded to

consult with passing mariners about miraculous remedies or stormy weather. At the outset of World War II, the island became famous when every man of fighting age sailed to England to join the Free French Forces fighting the Nazi invasion of France. Finally, the men informed me proudly that the island's only hotel, the Ar-Men, is famous for serving the best lobster stew in all of Brittany.

Magical women, mermaids, World War II, and lobster stew—I was sold. We booked passage on the ferry and took off to explore the Île de Sein.

While meandering the charming lilliputian pathways that lead through the stone walls of homes and gardens, climbing the steep steps of the lighthouse, picking our way through the rough stone outcroppings along the shore, watching pétanque battles and sipping cider—the island cast its spell. Near the ferry landing I spied an old and decrepit three-story stone house and began fantasizing about what it would be like to renovate it and open a guesthouse, to become an islander, myself.

A story began to take shape in my mind: what if two sisters—two very different women—arrived on the île, renovated an ancient guesthouse, and discovered a hidden story from World War II?

It is a literary truism that “each reader reads a different book”—that every story resonates with each reader in a different way. One novel might touch us on a profound level, while another, though it may be beautifully written, leaves us a bit cold. This is the magic of books.

It is my hope that while reading *Off the Wild Coast of Brittany*, you become as enchanted with the fictional Île de Feme as I was with the actual Île de Sein, the island upon which the story is based. And that you savor the sisterhood of Natalie, Alex, and Violette as their lives take unexpected, and challenging, turns.

Because, as the saying goes, life is what happens to you when you're busy making other plans. And often, if we allow it to, it unfurls exactly as it should.

*Juliet*

# *A conversation with* **JULIET BLACKWELL**

**Tell us about *Off the Wild Coast of Brittany!*  
What inspired you to write this story?**

From the moment I first went to Brittany, I knew I wanted to write a book set there—Brittany's such a beautiful, rugged, dramatic place, justifiably famous for its fabulous seafood and hearty (sometimes gruff) people. The region is known as the Finistère (literally: the end of the world) and is culturally very different from the rest of France, as the natives trace their history back to Celtic tradition, brought over from the early Bretons when the coast was part of the shipping routes from Ireland and Cornwall. The Côte Sauvage—or “wild coast”—reminds me of the coastline of my beloved Northern California: rocky and rough, peppered with lighthouses and small fishing villages. I enjoyed my time in Brest and Quimper and the Breton countryside, but the islands really called to me. When I learned about the Île de Sein, its history during World War II, and the ancient legend of the magical women known as the Gallizenae, I knew I had to visit. When I did so, I knew I would write a novel set there.

**What do you feel are the main themes/ issues that are addressed in *Off the Wild Coast of Brittany?***

Toni Morrison wrote: “If there’s a book that you want to read, but it hasn’t been



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written yet, then you must write it.” I often feel compelled to write a certain story, but what surprises me is that I’m never quite sure what it’s going to be “about” until I’m finished with a first draft! *Off the Wild Coast of Brittany* began as a story about the very personal search for authenticity. The first character to come to me was Natalie, whose (very) public persona no longer suits the reality of her life, and I thought her personal arc would be to learn to embrace her true self. To a certain extent her story does follow that story line, but when the other characters began to develop I realized the novel’s true theme is about how we often end up somewhere very different

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from where we had planned—and that can be okay, and even precisely what we need. Ultimately, *Off the Wild Coast of Brittany* is about resilience: how to embrace one's life, even when—or especially when—things don't go according to plan. It is also a story about sisters, of the mutual support and fierce loyalty that can help us face seemingly insurmountable challenges.

**Did the book require any special research? If so, please provide any interesting details about your research.**

A lot of (wonderful) travel! I dragged my boyfriend's twenty-year-old son with us, and apart from a bout of seasickness

during a rough ferry ride from the French mainland, we had a blast investigating the island: climbing the lighthouse, lingering in the museum, clambering over the rough rocks on the shore, drinking cider while watching local pétanque competitions. The animals roaming the web of tiny walkways, the beach full of sea glass, the cemeteries, and the World War II monument to the men who left to fight with the Free French Forces. One day, while visiting the island's largest cemetery, we met an old woman, Madame Louise, who told us that her father had joined the exodus and was killed off the coast of Scotland. As we walked her home, Madame Louise described what her father's absence meant for her mother and her siblings and of the overwhelming hunger the islanders had endured during the war. The curator of the island's fabulous museum later suggested we meet with the assistant mayor, Ambroise Menou. Monsieur Menou, who was fiercely proud of his island and its history, was initially gruff and wary of tourists who "came for the day, found the island boring, and left on the afternoon ferry." When he realized I wanted to write a book set on the island he was generous with his time and knowledge, telling us about the experiences of his parents and grandparents during the war. The next day he tracked me down at the hotel to give me a thick volume about the island's history he had found in his attic, as well as a regional cookbook to which he had contributed his mother's recipe for a fish pie.

Also, as a child I spent many summers

in a very humble cabin on a mountain in Northern California, and befriended a girl who lived in a survivalist compound not far away. Her harsh, fascinating childhood experiences have been on my mind ever since. When I saw a “prepper fair” advertised not long ago, I dove back into the fascinating world of the survivalist lifestyle, and was compelled to use it as a childhood background for Natalie and Alex.

### **How did your writing process change, if at all, while writing this novel?**

I believe I took more notes for this novel than I ever have! There was so much true history to draw upon, as well as personal experiences. The central relationship of the novel is the sister dynamic; I have two sisters, and our relationship is shaped in part by birth order and the different ways in which we experienced, and continue to remember, our childhoods. Furthermore, there is something very special about the environment of a small island; as I wrote, I drew upon sensory details, remembering the smells and sounds from when I was walking those pathways, imagining what it must have been like to harvest the seaweed for survival, the desperate sense that there is no escape, no other source for food, and the frightening beauty of being surrounded by the ocean, able to see the mainland but unable to get there without the proper boat. I wrote a large chunk of *Off the Wild Coast of Brittany* while under living under pandemic quarantine, and I experienced just the slightest sense of what the S nans—the women of the  le de Sein—

might have felt, given the isolation of the setting and the fear and anxiety of facing an unknowable future.

### **What do you hope readers will take away from this story?**

The importance of resiliency, the beauty of sisterhood, and the necessity of letting your path unwind the way it will. Essentially, rolling with the punches! Also the beautiful and intense sense of place, of the harsh but fulfilling life that can be had on a stark, difficult, yet enchanting isle.

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## **ABOUT JULIET BLACKWELL**

Juliet Blackwell is the pseudonym for the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Letters from Paris*, *The Paris Key*, *The Lost Carousel of Provence*, and *The Vineyards of Champagne*. In addition to writing the beloved Witchcraft Mystery series and the Haunted Home Renovation series, she also coauthored the Agatha Award–nominated Art Lover’s Mystery series with her sister.

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# Lighthouse Facts

For centuries, people built large bonfires, or beacons, at the mouths of harbors to guide ships seeking shelter from vast, dark seas. **But the first actual lighthouse is believed to have been Egypt's Pharos of Alexandria**, built in the third century BCE. The monolithic construction was renowned in the ancient world.

**Lighthouses originally were illuminated by open fires**, only later progressing through candles, lanterns, and electric lights.

**The oldest existing operational lighthouse is thought to be the Tower of Hercules**, which marks the entrance to Spain's La Coruña harbor. Dating from the first century CE, the lighthouse was known to the Romans as Farum Brigantium. It was renovated in 1791 and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

**A Roman lighthouse on the Cliffs of Dover, in the United Kingdom was constructed in 40 CE.**

**Modern lighthouses—the kind we are all familiar with—began to appear in the eighteenth century**, as the growth of transatlantic commerce expanded the role of lighthouses from marking the entrance of harbors to warning trading vessels of the dangers along rocky coastlines.

**Lighthouses in close proximity to one another have different flash patterns** to allow mariners to identify their locations at night; during the day, towers are differentiated by their distinctive colors and patterns, such as diamonds, spirals, or stripes.



**The height of a lighthouse is calculated to account for the curvature of the earth:** the higher above MHW (mean high water), the farther away the light can be seen at sea. But if the light is too high, local sailors will not be able to see it. Thus, lighthouses on the tops of cliffs are shorter and those near sea level are taller.

In 1822, French physicist Augustin-Jean Fresnel (1788–1827) invented the Fresnel lens, a compact, composite, lens that allows light to be super concentrated and widely reflected. **His lens became known as “the invention that saved a million ships.”** Although brilliant, Fresnel was not a good student and could barely read by the age of eight.

**The United States is home to more lighthouses than any other country: 700.** France has more than forty, most of which are along the rugged, dangerous coastline of the Peninsula of Brittany, known as Finistère (The End of the World). Today in France lighthouses are automated, but several are still staffed regularly, if not constantly, to train personnel in signal maintenance and maritime safety.

**The French word for “lighthouse,” *phare*, is reserved for larger coastal lighthouses; a smaller light or harbor light is called a *feu* (literally, “fire”).**

**Though the life of a lighthouse keeper may sound romantic, some posts were so harsh that keepers had to be rotated every six weeks.** Many keepers suffered from lack of supplies, died for lack of medical care, or drowned while trying to save stranded mariners.

These days, lighthouses are run by machines and remote monitoring. Automatic sensors note extra moisture in the air and activate the fog horns. **The last full-time lighthouse keepers left at the end of the twentieth century, and many mariners still lament the loss.** While at sea, they say, it was heartening to know someone was out there, tending to the light, watching the ships.



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. "It's an island; if you don't bring it with you, you won't find it here." Most of the full-time residents of the Île de Feme were born on the island, but others are debutants, or newbies. What do you think draws people to wild, unpredictable, remote islands like the Île de Sein, the real island that the Île de Feme is based on?
2. What aspects of living on the Île de Feme would you find most challenging? The isolation, the interdependence among neighbors, the climate, the tourists—or something else? Think about today, and then about during World War II. Would you have what it takes to survive and thrive?
3. Is *Off the Wild Coast of Brittany* a story that, with minor adjustments, could have taken place somewhere else? How does the landscape create and shape this story? In what ways is the isolation of the island woven into the fabric of the novel?
4. What aspects of Natalie's journey do you most relate to? What about Alex's journey?
5. What is it that each sister finds most dissatisfying about her life, and why?
6. Would you say that Alex and Natalie start the novel in different emotional spaces and end up at the same place? How would you characterize the journey of each?
7. Natalie's pursuit of education is an act of rebellion against her family and their values. How does her journey differ from her other siblings' acts of rebellion? How is it the same?
8. Throughout the book, Natalie works to challenge and sometimes dispel the "truths" that her father taught her, while Alex finds it harder to go against him. Was there ever anyone in your life whose views you accepted, only to find yourself later disagreeing with them? How do you know whether something is true?

9. How did Natalie's relationship with her father evolve? With her mother? Did your perception of her parents change as you read further? Did your perception of her relationship with them change? If Natalie and Alex had been mothers themselves, do you think their views of their upbringing would have been affected?
10. What did you think of telling the story from the alternating points of view of the two sisters? How might the story have been different if it was told from only one sister's point of view?
11. If you had to trade places with one character in the book, who would it be, and why?
12. What do you think the characters' zodiac signs are, and why?
13. What sort of influence did their father, The Commander, have over Natalie and Alex as children? As adults? Do you think The Commander is ultimately someone to be feared or someone to be pitied?
14. Natalie has one good memory of being with her father. How do you think the kite story illustrates their relationship?
15. Had you been brought up in the Morgen family, would you have reacted more like Alex or more like Natalie? Or maybe like neither?
16. Alex actually thrived under her father's harsh lessons, and excelled at being able to do things and take care of herself. How does she explain her life before she understands the harsh truth of her childhood?
17. Natalie's ex-boyfriend, François-Xavier, plays a key role in the story, yet he never makes an actual appearance on the page. If you can imagine a scene between Natalie and François-Xavier, what would Natalie say to him? What might François-Xavier say to Natalie? (Bonus round: What would Alex say to François-Xavier?)
18. During World War II, how did the women of the island exploit the sexism of their time and place to challenge and endure the German occupation?
19. Why did Violette decide to marry Marc? How did the loss of her baby change Violette?

20. What roles did Madame Therèse and Ambroisine play in their societies?
21. Whose approach to defying the Germans do you think was better: Noëlle's or Violette's? What determines when it is better to challenge an enemy openly and when it is better to find a way to coexist? How do you think you might have reacted under similar circumstances?
22. Had you been a woman on the island in 1940, would you have encouraged the men to go to Britain to fight? Or to stay behind with their families? And if you were a man in those times, would you have wanted to join the war effort in England?
23. Alex asks Natalie why there is no monument to the women of the island. Why do you think this is? Have you ever wondered something similar?
24. Not all German soldiers were members of the Nazi Party—many were conscripted into the military or, like Rainer, had little choice. How far do you think you would go to defy such a regime if you were a German at the time?
25. Were you surprised by Rainer's revelation to Violette? What attitudes and social forces at the time dictated how Rainer could, and could not, live his life? How do you think he might have experienced things differently in today's world?
26. Blackwell tends to use mysteries from the past to help her present-day characters understand and grapple with their own issues. What problems from the past do you think shed light on those of the present for Natalie and Alex? For Jean-Luc? For Violette and Rainier?
27. If you could ask each of the major characters in the book one question, what would you ask, and why?