



Writer finds an island home

By Katie Macleod

“Ideas can just come at you out of nowhere, really, and I am very inspired by places.

In all my books so far, the place has been the starting point, I think, both in terms of a place that I would really love to write about, but also a place where I can picture characters of different walks of life coming together.”

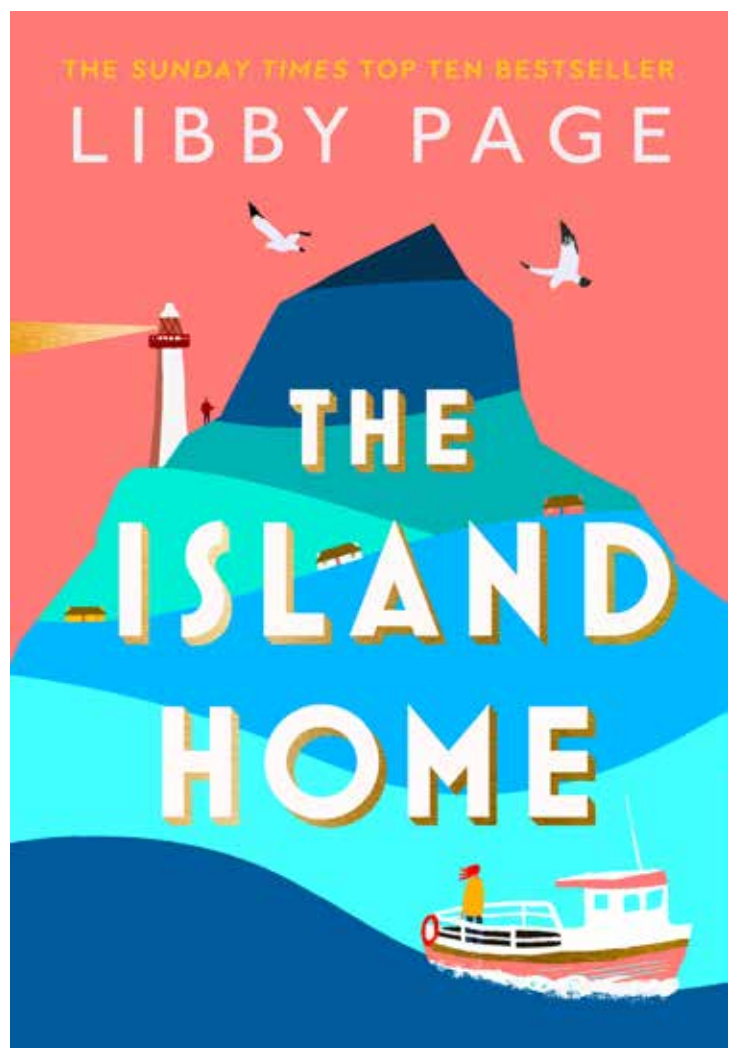
Libby Page is talking about her writing process in advance of the release of her third novel, *The Island Home*, in June. Set on the fictional Scottish island of Kip, the story follows islander Lorna as she returns to her roots after two decades in London, bringing her daughter Ella back to her childhood home, where family rifts and long-buried secrets await. Kip is beautifully drawn – “an island of grass, wildflowers, pine trees and a towering mountain” – and was inspired by one place in particular: the Isle of Eigg.



“I’ve always been fascinated by islands and have always wanted to explore more of the Scottish islands,” explains Libby. She became enamoured with islands as a child after reading *When the Whales Came* by Michael Mopurgo and visited Eigg for the first time in September 2018 with her husband. “We stayed in a little bothy with lots of chickens outside, and they tried to keep coming in! The whole thing was amazing, we did lots of walking, talking to people, going to the local pub. We went and visited the local shop to stock up on supplies, and the atmosphere in there I really loved, of people catching up when the ferry had just arrived. The sense of community, which is something that I so love writing about in my own work, definitely inspired me.”

It’s a mark of how effectively Libby has created the fictional world of Kip that I (a Scottish islander who hasn’t been back to the Hebrides in two years because of the pandemic) felt a longing for my own island home while reading the novel. But, of course, you don’t have to be an islander to appreciate it: from the landscape and the weather to the characters who make up the community, Libby captures the realities of island life on the page so well that you feel as if you’re there, transported from your living room couch to the shores of Kip.

“Because I’m not from an island myself, I wanted to do as much wider reading as possible to hopefully make it seem authentic,” she says, adding that she stocked up on piles of books about islands from the Highland Bookshop in Fort William after her time on Eigg. “And in terms of the community aspect, I did speak to quite a lot of people on Eigg about their experiences, a mix of people who had lived there their whole lives, and also people who had just decided to move there.” Libby’s research shows through on the page, as the novel doesn’t shy away from the more difficult aspects of island life, like worries over



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depopulation and school roll numbers. She also wanted Kip to flip on its head the idea that people may have of island life being isolated. “Yes, it’s a small community, but in a way it’s big, because the connections they have to one another are really strong.”

Libby returned to Eigg for a second visit in January 2019, to do more research for the book. “We were some of the only tourists on the island, but that was so nice because it felt like we got to see it as locals, in a way, and although there was so much rain, it was amazing... There were beautiful, crisp, sunny cold days as well. I went swimming in the sea, which I think the locals thought I was mad for doing – they were probably right!” It was also during that second visit that Libby’s husband proposed; eagle-eyed readers might spot the couple making a cameo in the novel. “Eigg will always be a special place for us because of that, and obviously the fact that it really inspired the book as well.”

She may not be from an island herself, but Libby did spend her childhood in small towns in the countryside of the south west of England, and like many young people was desperate to leave for “the bright lights and the big city.” After moving to London for university, she worked in journalism and marketing before becoming a full-time author with her Sunday Times bestselling novel, *The Lido*, which was published in 2018 and sold in 20 territories around the world.

“For me, writing is so instinctive, and it’s a real way of processing things,” she says. “Community is something I never realised was that important to me until starting writing. I think it’s only in recent years that I’ve realised the benefits to growing up somewhere small, where you feel like you’ve got roots, and even the landscape, the countryside, feels like a part of who you are.”

When we speak in early April, Libby is preparing to move back to the area where she grew up, a process that she thinks “partly influenced *The Island Home*, because I very much over the last couple of years have been thinking about where is “home” to me, and that feeling of being pulled back to your roots – even if you never imagined you would – that inescapable tug of the place that you’re from, and its familiarity, and the people, is definitely something I had been experiencing personally, and wanted to explore in the book.”

Community and connection are themes that weave through all of Libby’s novels, and *The Island Home* is no exception. “For all of us a sense of community is so important to us as humans, you know, to feel like we belong somewhere and that we’ve got a sense of connection to other people,” says Libby. “I wanted to explore the idea of what it means to be an island as a person as well. Lorna’s character, at the start of the book, she has turned herself into an island in which she doesn’t really have connections with friends and family, and I wanted to explore that. What does it mean to be isolated as a person? And what can we gain when we stretch out and build those connections with other people?”



While *The Island Home* doesn’t shy away from serious issues, it is ultimately a joyful, uplifting read. Libby describes herself as a naturally optimistic person, and it’s clear to see how that feeds into her work. “I like books that take me on an emotional journey, and sometimes that journey might be sadder or more difficult, but overall... I want it to be a positive experience. Having had readers get in touch with me and say how much they’ve enjoyed my books, and that particularly during the pandemic they’ve felt like an escape, that’s something I want to be able to provide for my readers.”

After more than a year without travel, reading *The Island Home* really does feel like an escape, one that takes you on virtual holiday to a Scottish island where the sense of place, that starting point for Libby’s ideas, is ever-present. “The places we come from stay with us,” says one character, and it’s a sentiment that feels fitting, because I’m certain *The Island Home* will stay with everyone who reads it this summer, long after they’ve turned the final page.

The Island Home
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