



# An Outcast of the Islands

*Joseph Conrad*

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## **An Outcast of the Islands** Joseph Conrad

I have been called a writer of the sea, of the tropics, a descriptive writer - and also a realist. But as a matter of fact all my concern has been with the 'ideal' value of things, events and people. That and nothing else -  
Joseph Conrad

When Willems stepped off the straight and narrow path of his own peculiar honesty he thought it would be *a short episode - a sentence in brackets, so to speak - in the flowing tale of his life*. But Willems was wrong, for he was about to embark on a voyage of discovery and self-discovery that would change, if not destroy, the reset of his life. Marooned by his own people on the shore of a Malayan island, Willems is caught in the grip of his own vulnerability and corruption.

**An Outcast of the Islands** was only Conrad's second novel, but in its theme, in its impressionistic use of scenery, and, and over all, in the enormous richness and power of the writing, it predicts Conrad's position as a literary figure of the highest rank.

The cover shows a detail from *Old Boathouse and Riverside Vegetation, Sarawak* by Marianne North.

## **An Outcast of the Islands Details**

Date : Published January 1st 1990 by Penguin Books (first published 1896)

ISBN : 9780140180329

Author : Joseph Conrad

Format : Paperback 295 pages

Genre : Fiction, Classics, Literature, 19th Century, Adventure, English Literature, Novels, European Literature, Polish Literature, British Literature, Historical

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## From Reader Review An Outcast of the Islands for online ebook

### Thom Swennes says

Born in Rotterdam to an impoverished family, Peter Willems escapes that life and travels to Malaysia where he jumps ship and begs asylum. In later years, when he had worked himself up to a position of trust and importance, one stupid act brings his life and world tumbling down around him. Willems is a man, like so many, that doesn't recognize the kismet, luck and fortune in front of him and squanders it away without even realizing it. This makes the discovery of his folly even more painful. Seldom does someone see a book as filled with unlikeable characters as this one. The authors writing talent makes it nevertheless possible to love the story. Conrad uses a multitude of flowery words to create poetic phrases which, in turn, construct descriptive paragraphs that assemble emotional chapters. If one is looking for poetry in prose you need not look farther and the author has also added emotion, love, hate, lust, greed and stupidity in for good measure. Written in 1896, An Outcast of the Islands is Joseph Conrad's second novel and establishes him as a writer of unique abilities. I think this book would be readily enjoyed and accepted by a large audience and it has my warm recommendation.

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### Galicius says

The plot is thick from the start. There is a lot going on. This early novel is not as simply told as his later ones. There are the natives in their homeland, there are the White traders and fortune seekers, and there are Arab Moslems. Willems, the central figure, is playing a selfish role and taking advantage of all three groups, and is especially unfair to women.

This novel has a strong finish. I did see the 1951 film based on this story--though much embellished and changed--and wish they script writer would have stayed with the story as told in the novel--especially the ending. It may have made a more interesting film.

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### Henry Avila says

What makes a man evil, or good ? Family, maybe friends, the environment or your own nature ? This is what Joseph Conrad's novel, An Outcast of the Islands, tries to find out, Peter Willems , a Dutch born, poor boy, leaves his miserable, bleak home, to seek a better , more prosperous future, the Sea, will be Peter's salvation. Deserting his harsh ship, in colonial Dutch East Indies, (Indonesia) during the late 1800's, the British and the Dutch, compete for territory, in the area, it's the Imperialist Age, of "glorious conquest". He becomes a protege of the wealthy, adventurous, British trader, Captain Tom Lingard, who knows everything about the islands, and all the important people there. Later joining Hudig & Co., a trading firm, the intelligent man, travels up the ladder, quickly, becomes second in command, and confidential secretary, to Mr. Hudig, himself ... Marries the boss's mixed- blood daughter, (Willems, doesn't know that fact, apparently, he will be the last person to discovery it) . The generous Mr. Hudig, not a kind man, indeed, strangely gives Peter a nice home, a son arrives, paradise, right? But Mr. Willems, quiet wife, Joanna, (name should have just one n) has a lot of unmotivated relatives, shall we say , the descendants of Portuguese explorers and natives, they were the original European conquerors, here. He proudly supports all of them well, but soon loses money gambling, worse yet, his on the side, business scheme, goes belly up. No problem, for Mr.Willems, a very respectable man, he will "borrow" some money, from Hudig , return it before long, and no one ever, shall know. However, the arrogant Dutchman, has many enemies watching, and waiting, to destroy him... fired

from his job, he flees Celebes Island, alone, the ill treated Joanna , doesn't want to leave her nice home. With the great help of his friend Lingard, takes the fugitive on board the Flash, and settles in Borneo, in a secret, remote, trading post, of the captain's, up a river from the ocean, which only Lingard, knows how to navigate. The busy Englishman, leaves him in the care of fellow countryman, Kaspar Almayer, nevertheless, the two, immediately, hate each other, Willems, has nothing to do, the jungle depresses, the very ambitious gentleman, the small village, is not what his big dreams, were made of, and the only other European, there, does not trust him, either, he's a potential rival, in business, the once prosperous Willems, feels exceedingly humiliated. Months pass, the lonely, very bored Peter , meets the exotic, Arab daughter, named Aissa, of a now old and blind, man, a former bloodthirsty pirate, Omar ( who is not rehabilitated). An overwhelming passion, for the girl, commences, at first sight, later he perceives being abandoned there, in the primitive jungle, where is the captain? Willems, for his own sanity, needs to get out, and back to civilization... learning about conspiracies, on Borneo, to overthrow the established order, can and will the outcast, betray his friend, Lingard, (more like a father) for his own selfish desires ... What price glory?

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### **David says**

The narrative dragged for a bit, I've been reading a lot of Conrad lately; but the prose, the sense of isolation, the cross cultural love and lust, the tortured character of Willem... Brilliant. So many quotable moments, each as exquisite and uniquely 'Conradian' as the last. The old softie could have easily been the John Green of our days, with more darkness and existential angst :) Admittedly, though, that would detract from his observations about the evils of colonialism and racism of the time period. An amazing author.

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### **Marts (Thinker) says**

Firstly, you can read this online from here:  
<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/mod...>

Willems ends up in a scandal in Makassar, betrays those who do him good, and ends up as a fugitive...

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### **Matthew says**

It is curious to think that Joseph Conrad and Rudyard Kipling were both writing at around the same time, as they outline a view of colonialism that is entirely different from one another. The only thing that they have in common is their condescending and racist attitude towards the nations that are colonised.

However, while Kipling sees colonialism in a positive manner as the White Man's Burden, part of the task of civilising other races that are inferior to his own, Conrad has no such illusions. For Conrad, colonialism is a seedy and unpleasant business, carried out for profit and bringing little benefit to the colonialist or the colonised.

This is the backdrop for Conrad's second novel, An Outcast of the Islands, which once again returns to the Malay setting of his earlier novel, Almayer's Folly. Set earlier in time than the other novel, this one follows the fortunes of Peter Willems, a clerk in Macassar.

Willems is a talented administrator, but he is also a sordid and weak man, with an inflated sense of his own

importance. He loses his job after 'borrowing' work funds from his employer, and his native wife scornfully leaves him. For a second chance, Willems turns to his former patron, Captain Tom Lingard.

Lingard unwisely sets Willems up to look after his own concerns, and reveals to Willems the whereabouts of the river entrance that controls his own interests. The ungrateful Willems once again reveals his unworthiness, and betrays the whereabouts of the river to a number of native adventurers who wish to control the area. This is done in part due to his involvement with Aissa, the daughter of a local potentate.

With the help of Willems, a party of adventurers are able to overthrow Lingard's favoured ruler and establish themselves as a power in the area. Deprived of the source of his business, Lingard eventually returns to Europe. However, he avenges himself by abandoning Willems to live trapped on the island he is residing in, and with Aissa, who Willems now hates.

However, the story does not quite end here. Almayer, the other beneficiary of Lingard's patronage, is jealous that Willems will return to favour, and hatches a scheme to help Willems escape, with the help of Willems' now remorseful wife. However, Willems fails to take account of the jealous Aissa, who kills him.

This is the second of Conrad's reverse trilogy, featuring many of the same characters and settings. It is not truthfully a trilogy since the action takes place in the past, whilst the third novel, *The Rescue*, was completed much later and takes place even further in the past. No great knowledge of the other books is required to understand any of them.

The fact that this book before *Almayer's Folly* is of some interest in the story's development, and events here are darkened by our knowledge of what is to come. We see the moment when the ragtag of bandit would-be leaders do indeed become the local power force in the area. In the book's only moment of tenderness, we see Almayer behaving affectionately towards his little daughter, but we know from the earlier book that this will end in tears later.

We can also see the irony of Almayer understandably rejecting Willems' friendly overtures, realising that if Almayer had accepted Willems' offer, then Willems would not have turned to Lingard's enemies. This would eventually serve to destroy Lingard's influence in the area, and leave Almayer isolated and exposed, his predicament at the beginning of *Almayer's Folly*.

*An Outcast of the Islands* is closely aligned to *Almayer's Folly*, far more than to *The Rescue*. Indeed it could almost be said to be a rewrite of *Almayer's Folly*, but with a younger hero. Once again a weak man seeks to set himself up as an important face in the South-East Asian setting of the earlier book. Once more his plans come to nothing, and he dies miserable.

The themes of *An Outcast of the Islands* are also similar, including some of the more deplorable ones. The story once again is about the fallibility and essential aloneness of the human condition. Willems falls from grace, not once but twice. He is the victim of his own ego and ungrateful selfishness, since there is really no good reason to betray his benefactor.

The second fall is worse than the first one. He does considerably more damage, destroying the influence of Lingard and allowing a more crudely repressive regime under Lakamba to control the area. He also does more damage to himself. He degrades his personality by getting obsessively involved with a local woman who is half-savage. He betrays his own kind. He also suffers a worse fate for his actions this time, as he is abandoned by Lingard, an outcast from his own people, until sudden death overtakes him.

Aissa is also alone in the world, unable to ever understand or win the total love of the man she has become devoted to. We feel less regard for her, because Conrad has greater difficulty writing for women or non-Europeans. Indeed, Conrad has a certain distaste for Asians.

After Willems falls in love with Aissa, Conrad describes him drinking muddy water: “He drank again, and shuddered with a depraved sense of pleasure at the after-taste of slime in the water”. The metaphorical inference is clear. The locals are savages, and Willems has disgraced himself by getting involved with her.

This may seem strange given Conrad’s portrayal of the Europeans, which I will turn to in a minute. However, whilst the Europeans may be corrupt and hypocritical, there is no doubt in Conrad’s mind that they are superior in understanding to the Asian population. None of the Asian characters is especially interesting or sympathetic, and there is little attempt to make them so.

Perhaps this is why the constancy of Aissa and the returning affection of Joanna (the wife of Willems) is somewhat inexplicable to the reader. To us, Willems is a weak and unlikeable character, and the affection of these two women is somewhat unconvincing. However, Conrad seems to feel that even a poor specimen of European manhood is apparently more worthy than any member of the indigenous population.

As I said, the book is set against a backdrop of colonialism. While the book is not written for the express purpose of attacking imperialism, the interference of the Europeans in the area is portrayed in a negative light. Almayer and Willems are only out for their own interests. There is no concern among anyone for helping or civilising the indigenous population. This is a greedy grab for money and power.

The nearest we come to an exception is Captain Lingard, who controls the area in a bullying and benevolent manner. However, even this is not a good thing in the world of Conrad’s novel. Lingard interferes to preserve his own interests too. He is aggressive against those who threaten his interests.

His judgement is also poor, as can be seen in his choice of Almayer and Willems as his two right-hand men. Almayer also lists a few of his other mistakes in handling situations where he erred on the side of kindness, and got himself and others into trouble. Lingard’s empire is like the house of cards that he builds for Nina, getting bigger until the day when it collapses.

An Outcast of the Islands is a longer and much more ambitious book than Almayer’s Folly, but this is not always good. It is over twice the length, but in effect it merely takes much longer to say the same thing. There are many fine descriptive passages, but often they overwhelm the book, and greatly slow the story down.

Conrad shows great interest in developing the psychology of his characters, and there are plenty of passages showing their thought processes. There are mixed feelings among critics about his success, but the attempt is clearly there.

Overall though, the book is a fine piece of writing. Its faults may be written large, but it is written with much conscientious attention and thought. It is not one of Conrad’s best books, and even he did not feel too much enthusiasm for it. However, it is a valuable step in the development of his writing, and served to further ground him in his new career as a writer.

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## Lucy says

It’s a perennial mystery how one can enjoy a book when there are no likeable characters and the trajectory is relentlessly downward to tragedy. It can only be that Conrad is such a superb writer, with his ability to analyse and describe emotion and to reflect it in the setting. The raw misery of these lives, especially of the women, seeps out of every page but you can’t stop reading. If this book has a flaw, then some of the speech patterns, especially of Almayer, are a little stilted - just occasionally, you are reminded that Conrad was

writing in a foreign language. Which makes this an even more remarkable achievement. Don't miss it - it's one of those rare novels you want to go straight back to the beginning and read again.

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### **Bhavya Viswarajan says**

There's something very Dostoyevskian about Conrad (or maybe it was just me). Conrad doesn't simply draw his characters. He details them. Their forms are not only made visible, but are also distinct. From Willems to Lingard to Aissa, everyone has a story to tell. It seems surprising though that Almayer is the only one who has a separate work named after him. If you ask me, every one of the characters (down to Ali and Aissa's old female companion), deserve a book written on them.

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### **Sylvester says**

For some reason I couldn't get into this book. Normally I enjoy Conrad.

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### **Chris says**

No one captures Western man at the limits of civilization quite like Joseph Conrad. The looming antediluvial presence of Nature, the malarial rivers, the seething hostility of the colonized, the sweat-soaked ambition of Empire seeking and exploring the Heart of Darkness.

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### **Nick Jones says**

Joseph Conrad's second novel and my favourite amongst his early work – but that is partly a sentimental attachment: it was the first Conrad work I read. I have now read it for a third time, but as the three readings were over a period of almost 40 years I don't think I can be accused of overdoing it. It lacks the integration or sharpness of Conrad's finest, later work, but it is more than an apprentice work: Conrad's methods and interests are all there. Formally, for instance, while it doesn't change and juggle perspectives with the same exuberance as some of the later works, *An Outcast of the Islands* will relate its narrative from one character's view, but then, in a typical Conrad move, swap to another character, the same events now given a different interpretation: events are not established by the author, but the different versions must be weighed by the reader. *An Outcast of the Islands* is often accused of having too many purple passages and it can read as the work of a young author not fully confident in his abilities, therefore showing off with a bit of literariness, but with each reading I find this overheated literariness to be less distracting. It is one of Conrad's tales set at the edges of the European empires, in a world just beyond full Imperial control, where different civilizations and societies are in contention. There was, of course, a lot of Victorian literature extolling the virtues and brilliance of the Empire and the Imperial project: Conrad responds with sulky despondency. At the centre of the novel is the relationship between Willems, the disgraced clerk, and his old mentor, Captain Lingard – a relationship that will end in the betrayal of Lingard. It is typical for Conrad to provide the reader with a central character – Willems – who is morally dubious: there is no easy identification with a dynamic hero. But he must have been more shocking for the Victorian reader than the modern reader. The novel begins

with him being caught out as a cheat, but his central weakness is shown not in his act of theft, but in his ability to find excuses, of not taking moral responsibility, of being self-deluding. A modern reader, however, might be more understanding about his betrayal of Lingard. His motive is his overwhelming passion for the native woman Aissa – for a Victorian reader this is an expression of one of the worst scandals of the European Empires, an act that undermined the whole principle of racial difference and the idea of European superiority and rule: miscegenation. But the modern reader, hopefully, will not be scandalised, but view Willems' passion as a mitigating factor. (Aissa, the daughter of an old pirate, is both a figure of Eastern exoticness and a strong and dynamic woman – one who flouts the expectations of Victorian seamliness and womanhood. I'm not sure if she exists as a believable human being, but she is a fascinating symbolic character.) At the end Willems tries to denounce Aissa as a femme fatale, the cause of his corruption: I suppose a reader could accept that view, but it makes more sense to see it as another act of self-delusion, his denying his moral emptiness by blaming someone else. Lingard is one of Conrad's 'good' figures, but his goodness, his tendency to see the best in others, to even be optimistic about the potential of rouges (and here he contrasts with the novel's other European character, the whining Almayer), is also his weakness, the delusion that allows his betrayal. But today we might be less certain about Lingard's status as an exemplary man: Conrad doesn't seem to question Lingard's past as an Imperial trader who has gained his position through a ruthless and violent overthrow of his native rivals, but we might not be so convinced. As always in his Imperial adventure stories, Conrad dissects the dubious moral claims of the Imperial project, dismisses most of the self-righteousness of it all, while never quite managing to fully reject those claims. He seems to both see and not see the barbarity of the European Empires.

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## Greg Clough says

Conrad's novel "Outcast" is a good read for those interested in colonial literature about the Malay archipelago. I'd choose Lord Jim if I was reading the sublime Conrad for the first time. Conrad requires a bit of effort, but the pay off is well worth it.

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## Jim says

I first read this book many years ago and remember liking it somewhat. This time, I read it on a long flight from Reykjavik, Iceland, to Los Angeles and loved it. Joseph Conrad is one of your better Eye-of-God writers, and in *An Outcast of the Islands*, he rises to his subject of colonialism in 19th century Indonesia.

Peter Willems is a clerk in a Macassar mercantile firm who is cashiered for "borrowing" money without permission from Hudig & Company. As he haunts the docks, wondering whether to put an end to his miserable existence, he runs across Providence in the form of Captain Tom Lingard, a successful sea captain and trader who takes him in hand for the second time in his life. Lingard is the subject of a Conrad trilogy, consisting of this novel, **Almayer's Folly**, and **The Rescue**. As Conrad describes him:

The sea, perhaps because of its saltness, roughens the outside but keeps sweet the kernel of its servants' soul. The old sea; the sea of many years ago, whose servants were devoted slaves and went from youth to age or to a sudden grave without needing to open the book of life, because they could look at eternity reflected on the element that gave the life and dealt the death. Like a beautiful and unscrupulous woman, the sea of the past was glorious in its smiles, irresistible in its anger, capricious, enticing, illogical, irresponsible; a thing to love, a thing to fear. It cast a

spell, it gave joy, it lulled gently into boundless faith; then with quick and causeless anger it killed. But its cruelty was redeemed by the charm of its inscrutable mystery, by the immensity of its promise, by the supreme witchery of its possible favour. Strong men with childlike hearts were faithful to it, were content to live by its grace—to die by its will. That was the sea before the time when the French mind set the Egyptian muscle in motion and produced a dismal but profitable ditch. Then a great pall of smoke sent out by countless steam-boats was spread over the restless mirror of the Infinite. The hand of the engineer tore down the veil of the terrible beauty in order that greedy and faithless landlubbers might pocket dividends. The mystery was destroyed. Like all mysteries, it lived only in the hearts of its worshippers. The hearts changed; the men changed. The once loving and devoted servants went out armed with fire and iron, and conquering the fear of their own hearts became a calculating crowd of cold and exacting masters. The sea of the past was an incomparably beautiful mistress, with inscrutable face, with cruel and promising eyes. The sea of to-day is a used-up drudge, wrinkled and defaced by the churned-up wakes of brutal propellers, robbed of the enslaving charm of its vastness, stripped of its beauty, of its mystery and of its promise.

Tom Lingard was a master, a lover, a servant of the sea. The sea took him young, fashioned him body and soul; gave him his fierce aspect, his loud voice, his fearless eyes, his stupidly guileless heart. Generously it gave him his absurd faith in himself, his universal love of creation, his wide indulgence, his contemptuous severity, his straightforward simplicity of motive and honesty of aim. Having made him what he was, womanlike, the sea served him humbly and let him bask unharmed in the sunshine of its terribly uncertain favour. Tom Lingard grew rich on the sea and by the sea. He loved it with the ardent affection of a lover, he made light of it with the assurance of perfect mastery, he feared it with the wise fear of a brave man, and he took liberties with it as a spoiled child might do with a paternal and good-natured ogre. He was grateful to it, with the gratitude of an honest heart. His greatest pride lay in his profound conviction of its faithfulness—in the deep sense of his unerring knowledge of its treachery.

Lingard sets Willems up in his own secret trading post, to which only he knows how to sail across the dangerous sand bars. His agent there, Caspar Almayer, does not think much of Willems; and, soon, they fall out after Lingard leaves them to sail to other ports.

Ultimately, Willems betrays Lingard by showing one of his Arab competitors how to navigate into the port. He has fallen in love with the daughter of a blind sheik, and gives up everything for her. There is a moment of self-awareness as he faces his ruin as a human being:

He was cowed. He was cowed by the immense cataclysm of his disaster. Like most men, he had carried solemnly within his breast the whole universe, and the approaching end of all things in the destruction of his own personality filled him with paralyzing awe. Everything was toppling over. He blinked his eyes quickly, and it seemed to him that the very sunshine of the morning disclosed in its brightness a suggestion of some hidden and sinister meaning. In his unreasoning fear he tried to hide within himself. He drew his feet up, his head sank between his shoulders, his arms hugged his sides. Under the high and enormous tree soaring superbly out of the mist in a vigorous spread of lofty boughs, with a restless and eager flutter of its innumerable leaves in the clear sunshine, he remained motionless, huddled up on his seat: terrified and still.

## **Lara says**

Man, this was dramatic! It has a very different feel to it than Heart of Darkness, which makes sense since it's an earlier work. It didn't flow or hang together quite as well as Conrad's later stuff, and I kind of felt like every single character in this book was crazy, but I still enjoyed it.

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## **Cheryl says**

Abandoned after reading half of the book. The first few chapters were good, as was the writing. Then it seemed the author wanted to tell the story mainly through one character telling another character what had happened "off stage", which made for a lot of info dumps and confused this reader. I think the author should've just made the story into a novella, tightened up the plot, and let it play out in "real time" in front of the reader.

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## **Ape says**

Well, I have come to a conclusion: me and Mr Conrad don't get on. I did read Heart of Darkness all the way through. I remember trying to read the Secret Agent a few years ago and not getting into it at all. And I'm quitting this at page 58. It is drier than the driest bone in the desert, drivels on and I really couldn't give a monkey what happens to anyone or anything in this book.

Set in Malaysia in the 1800s, there's a Dutch guy who was a raggamuffin stowaway on a British ship, if I followed it right, who then settles in this colony, gets a job with a trading company and thinks he's the bee's knees. He marries a local, native woman, and essentially looks down on her and her family, thinking they're all dumb and lazy and he has to pay for them all, and that he is just so superior. Then he loses all his money and it turns out neither his wife nor his in laws liked him that much - what a surprise! And that's pretty much as far as I got. Life is short and I don't have the energy or patience to read any more of this.

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## **♥ Ibrahim ♥ says**

If anybody is a role model for me in writing and I can read everything he wrote and everything written about him, it would be Joseph Conrad. He compels my utmost respect and huge admiration. We are talking about a Polish who was taught French first and he mastered, but then later English to learn was a necessity and so he learns and masters it. This was a sea man and his heroes and heroines have a lot of who he is. In this book, Outcast of the Islands, the Malay Arab woman as he liked to call her, was more eloquent in her poetic diction in English in such a way as to put to shame the native speakers of the language. Conrad is the man who taught me that it is okay to be a foreigner and still be as loyal to the country as any of the subjects of the British crown, for Conrad loved being a British citizen while he resented its colonialism. Never get weary reading Conrad or about Conrad. The man in himself is a great inspiration as through his letters and words we sense how they are every bit as alive as possible.

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## Charles says

As a prequel to its predecessor, *Outcast of the Islands* can be read together with *Almayer's Folly* to form a larger saga of Lingard, Almayer, and the various denizens of Sambir. Indeed, both books contain many of the same elements - exotic, primitive locale; an enveloping natural environment that becomes a character in the story; distasteful brooding protagonists who are outcasts and/or fallen men; strong, scheming half-caste women. In *Outcast of the Islands*, Conrad's writing has matured greatly from his first novel, even though it's still a touch too long-winded at times. The story is really very simple, but Conrad's descriptive forays draw it out to three times its necessary length. Still, those lush passages are stunningly beautiful in their use of the English language. It seems to me that, overall, *Almayer's Folly/Outcast of the Islands* is about perspective (a major theme of "modern" literature). Each character perceives each event in his/her own way; each event affects each character differently. What is good to one is bad to another, and no one is self-aware. Various conspirators attempt to get what they want from and despite each other in this fecund yet fetid corner of the globe. In Conrad's world, everyone is scheming, and decay and death fester behind that verdant veneer.

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## Lukrezia Cosimo says

Surprised to discover that this is a kind of prequel to *Almayer's Folly*. Almayer and several other characters from that novel play important parts. For me, the most interesting character is Lingard. Sometimes kind, often cruel: Perhaps he enjoys his power over men? Like Dickens, Conrad doesn't seem to be good at creating heroines (all flashing eyes and heavy tresses).

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## Bettie? says

[except for *The Usurper*\*shudder\* (hide spoiler)]

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