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In search of a new adventure, Hippolyte Webb, quixotic spirit, modern-day explorer, and natural historian, sets his sights on the Auroras, a group of tiny islands in the middle of the South Atlantic. His destination wouldn't be so unusual, except that these islands were last spotted almost two hundred years ago.

Equipped with a centuries-old map, an inadequate sailboat, and an advance payment for a book about his quest, Hippolyte embarks on an unforgettable voyage, not just through unfamiliar seas but through the uncharted territory of his own mind and heart.

Lavishly illustrated with over forty illustrations and a fold-out map, this new novel by Barbara Hodgson is an enigmatic tale bridging the space that lies between what we believe and what we know.

Hippolyte's Island: An Illustrated Novel Details

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Author : Barbara Hodgson

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From Reader Review Hippolyte's Island: An Illustrated Novel for online ebook

Travis says

I wish I remembered how I came across this book. As far as I recall, it was sitting in my suspended hold list and I decided to read it since I was trying to clear some space on said list. But I have no idea how it got to that list in the first place. Of course, from its description it is something that I would want to read: an illustrated novel about finding lost islands in the Atlantic seems like a fun idea. Sadly it didn't really live up to expectations.

The illustrations are nice, but don't really add much to the story. Many parts are maps or illustrations of organisms with some cramped and perfunctory notes, perhaps just the scientific names; there is some effort in reading these notes, but little real reward in doing so. Other illustrations appear to be mock-ups of Hippolyte's ship log; in fact, one illustration exactly replicates text in the main narrative. Maybe if part of the book were just a fake ship's log it would have been interesting, but I found little appeal in merely hinting at the idea. Then again, Part 2 of the book features entries from the ship's log and they are tedious to read through; I lack the experience to easily make sense of the entries, so they mostly come off as lumps of awkward text full of details superfluous to the narrative, or sometimes downright contradictory (I'm not sure if the contradictions I saw were a case of poor editing on the part of the author, or deliberate mistakes to show that Hippolyte was doing a bad job).

I also intensely disliked Hippolyte. I'm pretty sure the author intended him to be charming, but I just found him irritating. This is especially true in the second half of the book when the viewpoint shifts away from him to other characters. He has a few good moments, but a lot more we are told how awesome he is supposed to be by other characters in the story, but I don't think he is every shown being awesome. Moreover, one of his strong points is supposed to be writing, but the samples of writing that are "written" by him is clumsy and inelegant. And he demonstrates such a disorganized and unprofessional attitude that it is impossible to believe he could have written all of the precise details in his ship's log, or even to quite believe he could have survived his trip except through sheer dumb luck.

The story did move forward at a decent pace, and it had some interesting ideas in it, but I ultimately didn't find it really worth reading.

Kira says

I read this book a few years ago, long enough that I couldn't remember much about it. I was looking for a book to recommend for a book group (the theme of which is "specific places") and found this in the annals of my Goodreads page. I picked it up for a re-read and enjoyed it enough that I felt it warranted a review.

First of all, let me talk about the book itself: the physical object of paper, ink, and cardboard. It is *awesome*. The cover is not lying when it says this is an illustrated novel; interspersed between the story are full-color pages that give further insight into the main character's cluttered (if brilliant) mind through the drawings, paper scraps, and map excerpts of his journals. There are pages that show typewritten missives on stained, lined paper; there are journal pages that show botanical samples clumsily secured with paper scraps and tape. There is actually a giant map that folds out from one of the pages. I'm telling you, even if the story was awful

I would recommend this book just so you could hold in your hands and flip through it. Luckily, the story is not awful.

Hippolyte Webb is the kind of character who is fun to read about but would probably be exhausting to spend time with in real life. The opening of the book shows him idle in his mouldering apartment, looking for a new direction (literally) for his travels. This stillness is fleeting; before long, he makes his first sighting of the Aurora Islands, three tiny dots on an ancient globe. This seems innocuous, but then he checks an atlas...and they have disappeared. Thus begins a journey through maps, old books, and finally through the waters of the South Atlantic as Hippolyte searches for a place that either disappeared or never existed in the first place. He must brave weather, loneliness, and eventually the questions of an incredulous book editor who thinks he is making everything up.

In short, the cover and design of this book will pull you in, but Hippolyte will convince you to stick around to see how it the voyage ends.

Beth says

This is an amazing book--definitely a 4-star, not quite a 5--about one man, himself a writer, and his quest to better understand his life. Admittedly this is an age-old theme that takes place primarily on a boat--certainly not an original setting--but it is told so eloquently and paced so masterfully that one can almost feel the rhythms of the sea and visualize its moods, no verbal description necessary. The truest beauty of this reading experience, however, is the book itself, which is filled with amazing reproductions of old, even quite ancient maps, of celestial diagrams, of biological and geometric illustrations. For anyone who likes a good story, I recommend this book; however, for anyone who loves the feel of a solid binding and enjoys turning high quality pages of mesmerizing graphics, I suggest (as I am considering, myself) purchasing this book.

Anna Mattaar says

Give me a book that includes letters, maps, sketches, and messy logbook pages, and I'm sold. Hippolyte's Island is full of them. Sometimes they mostly serve as illustrations (and it's a lot of fun to see Hippolyte's notes, drawings and calculations rather than just reading about them) and sometimes part of the story is told through logbook entries or letters. It's a gorgeous book, and the story is pretty awesome too, with a wonderfully eccentric protagonist, although I think it could have been structured a little better.

For me the best part was around halfway, where the mysteries surrounding the Aurora Island got more mysterious every page. I hoped to dive further into those mysteries in the second half, but instead Hippolyte chose to ignore them for the sake of credibility (which could have been a very interesting story if the author didn't choose to mostly ignore them too) and the book only comes back to them at the very end with a not entirely satisfactory conclusion.

There's a very interesting story in here that's just not told in the optimal way, with loose ends sticking out on all sides. Strangely, that sort of fits in with the format, so I'm willing to look between the lines for the things I'm missing. Despite its flaws I can't help concluding that this was an absolutely wonderful book.

John Lester says

What a nice stumbled upon book. I not sure you will say that after being introduced to Hippolyte Webb but then this is an ODD little book (illustrated) about a really ODD little man. The story begins just as confusing as it's main character, but that's a lot of it's charm. The man and his tale are like quicksilver - hard to pin down. But are they? They story quickly turns into a fanasty most, if not all, of us dream of. Discovery of lost lands and heroic deeds of Hippolyte. The heroic deeds are not of the movie kind but more of the kind you hope someone might notice while the lost lands consist of barren rock clumps covered in leavings of seabird and seals. Messy.

Hippolyte doesn't interact well with others and has troubles selling the story of his great adventure. This not a light book but is a fun read if you stick with it.

Wendy G says

Loved, loved, loved "Hippolyte's Island." It's a beautifully illustrated novel, and I really enjoyed the story. Hippolyte Webb is a traveler and a writer, quirky but not so much that he is an unbelievable caricature. He sets out, on a whim, to find the mysterious Aurora Islands, somewhere beyond the Falklands. The story follows his research, his voyage, and his subsequent attempt to publish his travels as a book. The editor assigned to his project, Mary, deeply doubts the truth of his story, hence the book's primary conflict. I really enjoyed the feel of the book, the maps and illustrations and diagrams of what Hippolyte discovers. Great book!

Marvin says

An illustrated novel recommended to me by Mary Coffield. It's an unusual book. An amateur explorer & map collector sets off in search of a group of islands that appear on 18th- & early 19th-century maps (here lovingly reproduced), but then not on later maps. He finds them under mysterious circumstances. In the last half of the book he works with an editor at a book publisher to convince her that his account is truthful. She keeps asking for more details, then objects when he includes too much irrelevant detail (all of which is reproduced in the book we're reading). With many old maps and the principal character's sketches reproduced in color, the book is much more interesting visually than most novels, but overall the book is more interesting as a concept than it is in execution.

Stephanie A. says

This book is simultaneously trying to be a solo adventure story and a story about publishing a book (with an underlying hate-at-first-sight romance subplot), and dividing the book in half between them didn't completely work for me, not least because the ending leaves so much room to expand and is just dying for a sequel that shows no signs of planning to exist. I think I just wanted each half to be its own full book, and then to have another book after that. (Ugh, look at me advocating trilogies like a publishing house.)

Anyway: it took a while to convince myself to read this, but once I cracked the cover I was immediately enchanted by our title character, eccentric Vancouver bachelor Hippolyte, with whom I may or may not have

fallen in love on the spot as it described his apartment crowded with stacks of papers and books relevant to his travel interests, his lack of interest in anything technological, and his minimal luck with romance because he would inevitably go back to being absorbed by reading for days on end.

And then there's the immediate introduction of the mystery of the lost Aurora islands: marked on ancient maps, but not longer acknowledged by the end of the 19th century. How does an island disappear? Did it ever exist in the first place?

Being a fan of Nick Bantock's work (published by the same company), the words "illustrated novel" were the reason I decided to read this book in the first place. While I couldn't make heads or tails of many of the maps and notations, I did greatly enjoy the sketches, reproductions of his notebook pages/collected specimens, and notes jotted on lined paper. The islands also introduce mysteries of their own, most of which are thankfully explained by the end, while leaving a tingling sense of wonder about why only some explorers who set out to find said islands accomplished their goal.

The second half of the book shifts to Hippolyte trying to publish a book about his journey, an idea generously backed by the publisher (a childhood friend) and roundly scorned by the editor put in charge of working with him. The editor and author have a very Mulder-and-Scully vibe, circa the very beginning of the series where Scully's mission is to debunk everything and Mulder's mission is to know perfectly well that he is right about everything alien/paranormal and be mildly amused by her frustration. The format shifts back and forth between standard novel and notes/emails about revisions and general progress on the project, and I must admit, it's interesting to get such a close look at how the editing process goes.

I have almost talked myself into giving it a 4, but the fact remains that all the sailing talk went right over my head, I did not get enough of the island adventure and there was not enough payoff on the second half. That said, if the rating is a 4 by the time you read this it's because the book stuck with me enough to earn an upgrade, and I would probably buy it if I saw it at a used book sale. I really do love saying "Hippolyte"...

Claire says

The premise of this book revolves around an island that it not what it seems, but what really propels the story is the character of Hippolyte Webb himself. He was at times sympathetic, frustrating, charming, and always passionate, and his character is what stays with one after the story is finished. The story has that particular quality, however, where the reader couldn't have seen Hippolyte without the rest of the events--the story and plot itself doesn't take a backseat to him, nor does it merely serve as a means to view him, but somehow embodies his character so he's that much clearer. That, I think, takes much more skill. Highly recommend it, not as an adventure (although it is that) and not as a mystery (because it's that too) but as an interesting story about an interesting person.

I also really enjoyed the illustrations, especially the fold-out map.

Sarah says

The first 100+ pages were absolutely brutal, and I seriously contemplating just giving up. I stumbled upon this on my friend's bookshelf and had no idea what to expect...and was sorely disappointed to find out that it

was becoming a book about being on a boat in the middle of the ocean, and finding a very boring group of islands. But then at about page 115, something kind of cool and puzzling occurs. Then it becomes a book about publishing a book about the island, and it gets pretty funny at that point, as Hippolyte is not really every publisher's best friend. And then it turns sweet, kind of, with a dash of mystery mixed in. All in all, it redeemed itself to enjoyable but average, and the illustrated bits really did not add anything interesting to the story.

Codex says

Actual rating: 3.5.

There are several aspects to this book that make it difficult to rate. The included artwork, maps, and notes were a great idea and contributed much to creating an atmosphere that tends to draw you into the story. The idea of the story and the enigmatic islands at the centre of the mystery (which at one time actually appeared on older maps), create a theme that is hard to resist. The story itself, however, suffers from weaknesses and could have been much better. The middle part (about the publishing process) was too drawn out, and the “worked-in” romantic undercurrents were rather annoying and misplaced. The last part was better, and the ending handled quite well. The book makes you come away wanting to know more.

Quote:

“Possibly once a tall man, Jonathan Runford had accordioned in on himself. His belly bore the brunt of the collapse, and shredded suspenders were his trousers’ only defense against gravity.”

Liz says

Hippolyte's Island tells the story of the eccentric Hippolyte Webb. Having been a traveler all his life, Hippolyte becomes restless for someplace new, someplace he hasn't seen before. Being a collector of old maps and atlases, he discovers three barely noticeable dots in the middle of the southern Atlantic. The Aurora Islands. They appear on no modern maps, and all geological authorities deny their existence. It is as if they have disappeared off the face of the earth. Hippolyte makes it his quest to find the Auroras and prove to the world that they still exist. He proposes to write about his adventures to finance the expedition. Here enters Marie Simplon, his editor. Down-to-earth, sensible, and conventional, she is constantly at odds with Hippolyte's scattered energy and unorthodox way of life. Can he convince her that these ephemeral islands are real after all?

I really loved this book, as you can see by the five-star rating. It is a breath of fresh air with its lovably idiosyncratic hero and unique plot. The writing is highly descriptive without being boggy and tedious; all around this is a very well-written novel.

Brian says

The book is like the main character sometimes whimsical, sometimes confusing, sometimes I wasn't sure if I liked him/it in the end well worth a read. Plus really great illustrations!

Erika Schmid says

I quite enjoyed the unique and adventurous nature of this novel. Though a bit eccentric and a little unbelievable, both of these elements somehow made the story better and gave life to the main character.

Hippolyte is an adventure magazine writer who has not had a story to sell in a while. In the confines of his Vancouver apartment, he stumbles across a startling fact: that a set of islands are displayed on some maps and not others. Intrigued, Hippolyte begins to dive deeper into the mystery of the disappearing islands and sets off on his own adventure. Traveling alone on a ship he had only learned to sail in the few weeks prior to his trip, Hippolyte dares the south Atlantic waters. Traveling from the Falklands to the mysterious Aurora Islands, so named by the few who had seen them before, Hippolyte knows that if he reaches the island of South Georgia, he's gone too far and missed his opportunity to find the unknown. Written as a series of first person journals and third person narrative, this novel offers a diverse way to go about a story. The interesting root of it all is Hippolyte and his absolute belief in the Aurora Islands. His charisma, faith, and daring are humbling in the sense of I can imagine few but him going on such an impossible journey. Even upon his return, with proof and logs of his traveling, he finds difficulty in convincing a New York City editor at a publishing house to believe what he has gathered for a book. Honestly, this was just good natured adventuring and showing that even if one person believes then anything is possible. I got annoyed at Hippolyte at times, his character got to be a little too socially dumb, but such served a purpose. I also found it senseless to have anything resembling a love interest or relationship, there was no reason for it. But it was well crafted and entertaining none the less.

This is the kind of novel that makes you want to explore the unknown. Though it left a lot of questions unanswered, such is the way of disappearing islands in the middle of the ocean.

Sarah says

This book has been sitting on my shelf for almost a decade now- a practically ancient recommendation from my dad who lauded its brilliance for several months before becoming distracted by other, more important books. Maybe it's because he built it up too much, but having finally read it, I'm not quite sure that I agree with his assessment.

Hippolyte Webb, our protagonist, is a scattered bibliophile and self-centered world traveller who claims to have re-discovered a set of islands that had virtually disappeared from mainstream maps by the mid 1800's. To fund the costs of his chosen lifestyle, he's decided to write a book about his experience and has recruited a worn out editor to help him get published. Unfortunately, she has some serious concerns about Hippolyte's credibility. The narrative is part adventure memoir, part love story, and I was initially drawn into this quirky world of historic maps and grandiose world adventures.

Of course I was drawn in- how could I not be? The fundamental question- how we define what is real vs what is imagined- is a fascinating product of the human condition. But for a concept with so much potential, the meat of the story seemed disappointingly bland and belabored. I'm not sure how or when it happened, exactly, but somewhere along the way I realized that I was actually bored.

Bored, folks! Seriously! That doesn't happen when I read books!

I do like the concept, but beyond the first couple of chapters and some select passages from later pages, Hippolyte's Island fails to do justice to an idea as awesome and captivating as the inevitable subjectivity of reality itself.
