A. Grove Day, *Mad About Islands: Novelists of a Vanished Pacific.* Honolulu: Mutual Publishing Co., 1987. Pp. x, 291, bibliography, index. US$13.95 hardbound. US$9.95 paper.

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If Marvin Bell wasn't the first to say it, we remember it his way:

> Everyone knows how many times
> a critic reads a book:
> less than once.

Mad About Islands makes statements that would make any critic, or any reader, want to read it over and over. It's a book of elegant design and the brightest of academic strategies. Author A. Grove Day has turned out an instant classic, a compelling and comprehensive survey of the literature of Oceania that should be included on every "must read' list of Pacific books.

The subtitle, "Novelists of a Vanished Pacific," suggests the focus of his study to be past island societies, historical and mythical, but his analyses extend to more contemporary delights, like detective fiction (recalling the old Charlie Chan stories and such obscure wonders as William Huntsberry's *Oscar Mooney's Head* and Max Long's *The Lava Flow Murders*) and the modern giants Michener and Mailer (stating the caveat on *The Naked and the Dead* that it is "a Marxist allegory hewing to the party line of the era").

The book is often beautifully written. It's clear that Day himself is "mad" about islands. His prose and the quotes he selects from his favorite authors reveal not only impeccable taste and a first-rate scholarship sharpened by decades of life and work in the Pacific, but also a profound love for this "ocean created when a mass of the earth was torn from it to form the primordial moon."

Day sets the scene in the first three chapters, giving us a brief overview of the history of Western exploration and subsequent literary interest in the region. Then he devotes chapters to major figures: Melville, Twain, Stevenson, Becke, London, Maugham, Nordoff and Hall, Frisbie, Michener. He concludes with a series of short reviews of worthy but lesser known books, and a useful but rather basic bibliography.

Perhaps the best thing a critic can do for a book as good as *Mad About Islands* is to quote liberally from it. Herein is a selection of some of the more interesting passages.

> James Albert Michener once, in a reflective essay, termed himself a "nesomaniac" --that is, a person mad about islands.

The Pacific was almost the last place left on earth where a writer could set a story in which almost anything was likely to happen.

Jean Jacques Rousseau can be praised or blamed for seeking the Golden Age among savages. In 1749 the Academy of Dijon offered a prize for an essay on the effect of the progress of civilization on morals. Sentimental and perverse, Rousseau took the negative side and tried to show that primitive societies were, paradoxically, more moral and happy. Primitive men, he argued, were on the whole freer than any others, because the equality intended by God was spoiled by social organization. The greatest advantage of primitive life, though, was that the physical and moral aspects of sex were not at war, so that neither love nor jealousy troubled the innocent pagan. Speaking of Rousseau's idea, one writer said, "It was hardly worthwhile for natural men to fight each other over natural women."

The South Sea myth is highly specific. Each of us has his own Bali-ha'i. Solitude becomes more precious as our population explodes. The dream comprises natural beauty and a perfect climate--there are breakers on the reef and shady nooks by the lagoon, and it is always afternoon. Food is virtually free; no need to punch a time clock or run to the supermarket . . . no telephones, no crowded freeways, no smog, no strikes. Most of all, the refuge-hunters expect complete sexual license, without remorse or alimony. The little brown beauty, a Gauguin girl come to life, is always bringing the tray of fruit to her beloved white stranger. Do not all these desires, unsatisfied for most Westerners, reveal some anguishing lacks in Western society?

The expectations of the newcomers in the South Seas are voiced in a passage in a novel by Robert Louis Stevenson: "Precipitous shores, spired mountaintops, and deep shade of hanging forests, the unresting surf upon the reef, and the unending peace of the lagoon; sun, moon, and stars of an imperial brightness; man moving in these scenes scarce fallen, and woman lovelier than Eve; the primal curse abrogated, the bed made ready for the stranger, life set to perpetual music, and the guest welcomed,

> the boat urged, and the long night beguiled with poetry and choral song."
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> An atoll could be detected many miles away, for its quiet inner lagoon would reflect itself on the clouds like a giant mirror.
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> Mana [the spiritual power of Polynesian chiefs] was something like an electric charge. It could be passed on, and it could be dangerous if uncontrolled. Somebody with a lesser amount of mana should not get too close to one with more of this power, or the weaker one might be injured.
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> Magellan made more raids ashore [on Guam]. . . . The Chamorro people tried to fight the strange beings who had appeared from afar. Their only weapon was a bone-tipped lance. Lead bullets and cannon balls of stone sent them skipping over their beach and into the reaches of their jungle. Arrows were unknown to them. The soldiers noted that when a Chamorro was hit by an arrow, he pulled it out and examined it in wonderment. The natives tried to propitiate the invaders by offering gifts of coconuts, pigs, and chickens.
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> The beings whose leaders wore shining metal carapaces and visored headgear and who arrived offshore in giant canoes with wings might well, it would seem, have dropped to their island from the moon.

The spirit of Day's book is best summed up in Mark Twain's prose poem about Hawaii:

> No alien land in all the world has any deep strong charm for me but that one, no other land could so longingly and so beseechingly haunt me, sleeping and waking, through half a lifetime, as that one has done. Other things leave me, but it abides; other things change, but it remains the same. For me its balmy airs are always blowing, its summer seas flashing in the sun; the pulsing of its surfbeat is in my ear; I can see its garlanded crags, its leaping cascades, its plumy palms drowsing by the shore, its remote summits floating like islands above the cloud wrack; I can feel the spirit of its woodland solitudes, I can hear the

> splash of its brooks; in my nostrils still lives the breath of flowers that perished twenty years ago.

There are, however, in addition to these literary harmonies, a few sour notes. The chapter on Michener, for example, seems to focus a bit self-servingly on the collaborator for *Rascals in Paradise.* And here is a sentence of such convoluted obfuscation that it defies interpretation: "The recital of a series of wondrous events performed by a being who cannot fail, however, and the subordination of ordinary people to magical power makes the reader feel a lack of literary motivation for all these achievements."

But generally speaking, *Mad About Islands* is a thoughtful, engaging, and readable study of Pacific literature. For armchair nesomaniacs perusing its pages in the confines of a landlocked library, it's the next best thing to being there. What Albert Bigelow Paine said in his biography of Mark Twain could refer to A. Grove Day: "He told of the curious island habits for his hearers' amusement, but at the close the poetry of his memories once more possessed him." Read his book more than once.